

## The Water Pressure Group: Lessons learned

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### Abstract

*This action note is a history of the Water Pressure Group (WPG) in Auckland, New Zealand. Founded in 1998, the WPG was made up of diverse community members who boycotted user charges with the aim of abolishing Metrowater Ltd, the new Auckland City Council water company. For about three years it was a non-hierarchical and fully democratic group, non-party-political, embracing a wide range of political and ideological viewpoints. The action note also explores the wider historical context around privatisation of local council assets in New Zealand.*

### Introduction

Why would a fire engine arrive at the Bolivian Consulate in New Zealand, in a posh Auckland suburb, and be used to hose the premises off *when there was no fire?*



It was April 2000, and in Bolivia soldiers were shooting at citizens – and one person had been killed – in the successful battle to oust Bechtel Corporation from its privatised hold over Cochabamba's water. In New Zealand, about

twenty Water Pressure Group (WPG) activists, described in Cochabamba as “friends on the other side of the world”, were extending their local struggle against commodified water services in solidarity with the Bolivian people. The Auckland protest received wide coverage, and within hours, WPG’s photographs were on the web with copies sent to contacts in Cochabamba. A tabloid daily there gave the story a three-page spread – front page and pages two & three – copies of which were sent to the WPG.

Between 1998 and 2001 the Auckland WPG carried out highly organised militant actions. It cannot be emphasised enough that this, given New Zealand’s conservative political culture, was a breakthrough. Never had such a sizeable citywide group – with up to 2000 members – openly engaged in defiant mass civil disobedience and sustained such an organisational structure over a lengthy period. The WPG also gave active support to water groups in NZ and around the world. The group purchased an old fire engine still equipped with a water tank and pump, flashing lights and horn-siren. A good sound system was fitted to make an instant travelling billboard, platform, tool box, and form of transport.

## **Background**

In 1997 Auckland City Council established a water company, Metrowater Ltd, and introduced unquantifiable wastewater charges a year later. After the company was formed there was a public outcry. In early 1998 several women collected an extraordinary 20,000-plus submissions calling for the council to scrap Metrowater. Also, unknown to each other, a number of residents across Auckland City were refusing to pay their Metrowater bills.

What brought these people together was the drastic action taken by Metrowater Ltd to deal with an unpaid account of a member of the Fair Deal Coalition. The Fair Deal Coalition was a progressive, Auckland-wide non-party-political umbrella for unions, churches, and a diverse range of community groups like Grey Power. The company dug up the pavement and removed the feed pipe between the street main and the meter point of its “customer”. This followed three earlier attempts to restrict or stop water supply at the meter, all of which were easily reversed.

Coverage in the local paper on 21 August 1998, of this first Metrowater disconnection of the kind, brought an immediate telephone and door visit response from about fifteen people who were also refusing to pay, offering support. A house meeting was soon held – bringing strangers together – and the WPG was formed to organise a mass bills boycott.

Informing the actions of the WPG was the premise of mutual aid and support. For the next three months the disconnected member was supplied water by a neighbour, also a bills boycotter and Fair Deal member. WPG began as it continued, defying the council and its water company openly and by issuing a media release publicising this rejection of disconnection. The group’s rapid growth increased confidence to boycott and risk disconnection – a very intimidating event when it happens to an individual. The movement snowballed

and within a year, experience and collective wherewithal had become incredibly strong.

Members came from all walks of life, and various plumbers, other tradespeople and specialists made vital contributions. Tools from blue tack to angle grinders were employed in the struggle. The turn-on squad was launched and a website conveyed information, such as diagrams explaining how to unrestrict and reconnect. Many people inexperienced in plumbing learnt to do this for themselves and their neighbours.



Apart from reversing what became hundreds of “normal” restrictions and disconnections, by 22 November 1998 the turn-on squad was confident enough to embark on a major street dig-up and reinstatement of the pipe to the meter at the address first mentioned in this Action Note. The turn-on squad grew to about 25 people and actions were invariably taken openly and in daylight.

At the height of the WPG campaign there were about 2000 people on the membership list, and a newspaper reported a comparable number of disconnections were taking place annually in Auckland City as in the whole of England, Scotland and Wales.

Ironically, at a time when the British Medical Association was successfully lobbying the British parliament to outlaw disconnections altogether, the then Auckland Health Officer called for legal reprisals against the WPG and damned the street dig-ups as “dangerous and un-hygienic”. Similarly, all other “public watchdogs” proved useless to this people’s cause.

The largest public turn-on was at Chaucer Place – a cul de sac in the suburb Blockhouse Bay – in June 1999. Several households in this small street were boycotting and their water had been disconnected at the meter. Metrowater had

excavated and removed the pipe to the meter of one of the residents, who was a pensioner and WPG member. As well as the boycotters, the WPG education sub-committee met several times with a senior member of the School Trustees Association (STA) – responsible for operating schools – who explained that Chaucer Place Primary School was withholding payment too.

After invitations to city councillors and media, a protest of about 150 people greeted the arrival of a WPG motorcade following the fire engine, and members proceeded to dig the street up. Two councillors attended – one against, and one strongly for the action. The street was dug up, new pipes installed from the main to the meter, and, as a finale, concrete was poured to encase the entire pipework and make any future disconnections virtually impossible.

Metrowater workers on this and other occasions provided information as to where the valves were to isolate the street main. It's worth noting that while the WPG received support from more than a few Metrowater workers, the relevant union offered no solidarity and refused invitations to discussions.

Two street dig-ups like this were publicised and mass-attended, of about 40 done in the following year. The culmination was a resounding victory, renowned by WPG members as "The Blitz". Working flat-out, in only two days, the turn-on squad re-laid and cemented-in 19 pipes mass-butchered by Metrowater at homes across the city. Metrowater attempted no more cut-offs at the mains after this campaign action.

Hands-on direct action was the order of the day — involving people as diverse as pensioners and solo mothers, firefighters and professors. This was the period when the greatest number of people were involved in the WPG, not only collecting signatures on pro-forma submissions (after thousands of petition signatures had been counted by council as a single submission), but deciding upon, planning and carrying out a myriad of actions ranging across:

- boycotting bills
- digging up streets and reinstating removed pipes
- marching against APEC
- organising numerous public meetings, rallies and fundraising events
- production and distribution of countless leaflets across Auckland City
- organising around the trial of a WPG member for daring to display signs. (Others were arrested and taken from their jobs and homes to undergo debt collection proceedings, and High Court injunctions won by Metrowater are still in place to this day).

Of course, there was also much, much more. All activities were financed through donations and fundraising and there were no membership fees.

What gave the WPG its political edge was its horizontal organisational structure

and grounding in non-hierarchical politics. A treasurer kept the books, and there were one or two media spokespersons, but no formal leadership structure as such. There was no particular "chair", "executive" or special "leaders". The WPG deliberately avoided becoming an incorporated society and was organised upon a simple set of progressive principles and objectives, rather than embracing any corporate-like "mission statement".

Another strength of the group lay in the continuity of weekly meetings, with often 50 - 70 members attending. These forums were where initiatives and ideas for actions and tactics, and any other matter, were put forward. Further, sub-committees were formed as necessary to research, develop, or organise particular areas and events. They had no powers and were open to all members to be part of, reporting back to weekly meetings for their suggestions to be considered, approved, modified, and/or rejected. Sub-committees were recallable. Continued argument and debate took place in weekly meetings and this was a crucial factor in maintaining the shape of the group. Significantly, at one point a small business and landlords sub-committee was formed. This group decided to enter into direct contact and negotiations with Metrowater. The next weekly meeting voted the sub-committee out of existence, first for the reason that it hadn't sought group endorsement for their actions, and second because the WPG had a firm policy to deal only with the council's politicians on the basis that they were the only ones with the power to disband the water company.

## **Attrition**

From late 2001 and early 2002, as the campaign passed its peak, the group's politics began to change. The WPG adopted more conventional leadership-driven "managed campaign" methods used typically by NGOs around the world. A number of members unsuccessfully resisted these changes.

Consequently, the mass character and visibility of the WPG was diminished and outsiders saw the organisation as carried by a leader. This exacerbated decreasing participation, as divisive electoral attempts took place and democratic vitality shrank. Meanwhile, a dwindling number of stalwart boycotters maintained a determined stand for about five years more. This is not noted to attack any individual WPG members, nor is it meant to detract from the positive outcomes the WPG has achieved in recent years or might still in the future. Rather it's to record the process by which autonomous resistance by a community can be diverted towards inertia.

In modern capitalist society it has become almost expected that people will rely on individuals, lawyers, dignitaries and publicity agents to represent them – who are often personally ambitious or have other agendas. However, this tendency was not the deciding factor in the WPG shrinking and succumbing to a more traditional style of leadership. One could argue that a slow-motion defeat came about by some of the elected councillors betraying their undertakings to the public that Metrowater would be abolished. One senior politician from the

New Zealand Alliance, in visits to several homes, used his reputation to persuade some boycotters to abandon their stand.

WPG actions were timed around the council's annual plan political cycle. Late in 1998 a new council was elected on a promise to scrap Metrowater, including some members from the political Right. Yet three years of vote betrayals in relation to the annual plan followed, including from some supposedly progressive councillors comprising the City Vision ticket on Auckland City Council (from the "centre-left" Labour Party and "left" Alliance Party). This led to disillusionment and burnout in increasing numbers of WPG members. Predictably a large majority of right aligned councillors won the next election. We note however, that several councillors held true to their positions and one in particular maintained an exceptionally firm stand.

It's reasonable to argue that the media was another pressure on the group adopting more conventional leadership-driven methods. The WPG faced many challenges in relation to publicising itself and its actions. Mainstream media promotes a concept of individuals being of greatest importance in the public arena, and therefore usually want to interview and take photos only of prominent people in order to compose profiles about leaders. Such offers can be seductive and can serve to eclipse a group's aims and actions. One way to address this challenge, which WPG members consistently attempted, was to implement a liberatory media strategy based on emphasising the movement's goals, values, and collective effort.

### **In the climate of the times**

In retrospect, it might have seemed the only substantial change coming from WPG protest action was the higher business tariff being levelled down to the user charges of ordinary people – not at all a win for the community. But time has shown a largely unrecognised victory, which is that the process of commercialisation, privatisation, and user charges for water services throughout New Zealand has been interrupted.

In Chapter 10, *"Towards privatised services"* of Tony Garnier's *Business Auckland* (1998) he states:

A 1995 review of Auckland's water supply requirements has recommended full integration of all Watercare and territorial water and wastewater activities to form a single entity. Decisions on integration are due to be made in the year 2000...

The Auckland region often shapes municipal governance and funding priorities before they are extended throughout New Zealand. Neoliberal measures always impact harshly on the working class, while favouring business interests and the wealthy. User pays regimes for water were already in place in some municipalities in the region, but the extension of these charges to include wastewater (sewerage) could only be legally achieved by a local body either

privatising the service (by franchise contract) or establishing a council-owned water company (then called Local Authority Trading Enterprises (LATEs) and analogous to State Owned Enterprises). Greater Auckland was the theatre for this to play out.

Throughout the region municipal revenue raising had been converted from traditional property-valued taxes (rates) into various flat or user charges, especially rewarding the owners of the most expensive properties. And as intended, this also increasingly impacted on tenants who were unable to afford their own home. By these means, user charges are – still – transferring a large slice of the burden of council funding from the wealthy onto the poorer section of the community, especially large families and people on fixed or single incomes.

The process continues. It is of enormous significance that NZ's 2007 Local Government Rates Inquiry was conducted on a nationwide scale, while the Royal Commission on Auckland Governance, in 2008/2009, was looking at ways to amalgamate and restructure the seven Council areas of this region. Its terms of reference dictated that the Royal Commission had to take into consideration the 96 main recommendations of the Rates Inquiry, most of which touted user pays, privatisations and regressive taxes.

In other words, once that a general model for council "rates" had been installed throughout the Auckland region the ruling class wanted it spread throughout New Zealand. The next stage locally – un-mandated by the electorate across the seven municipal areas – was the 2010 Auckland so-called super city, again as the model for eventual application nationally. (Legislation to restructure combined council regions to create such "super city" areas right across NZ was announced in early 2012 by the National Party government.)

Another major part of the brief for the Royal Commission on Auckland Governance was vertical integration of water services – precisely that *single entity* urged in 1995 as vital to advancing privatisation. It was imposed in the legislation that established the new Franklin-to-Rodney Auckland Council.

But what obstructed this for more than 10 years? Firstly it was the chilling effect on politicians of prolonged mass civil disobedience against Metrowater. Secondly, that the 2001 Auckland Water Review, which aimed at vertical integration, saw overwhelming public support for The People's Option. This framework for non-commercialised water was written and promoted by the WPG and sister groups WPG Papakura, Citizens Against Privatisation in Waitakere City, and activists from Manukau and North Shore cities.

## **The Fair Deal Coalition**

1997 was a crucial year in terms of Auckland region water politics. Papakura District Council, in southern Auckland, decided in February to privatise its water services by franchise to multinational United Water. This followed a consultation process over the 1996 Xmas holiday period, which effectively kept



people in the dark. Last minute resistance came from local residents, a group called Water for All, and the Fair Deal Coalition which organised a packed public meeting in March.

Also, from the Fair Deal Coalition the west Auckland group Citizens Against Privatisation (CAP) was formed in 1997 and organised successful civil disobedience and direct action to prevent Waitakere City Council forming a LATE for water.

A year later, Fair Deal Coalition initiated the Community Support Network, a non-hierarchical united front, when the Fire Service came under threat. Professional firefighters saw planned restructuring as not only jeopardising their industrial conditions and efficiency of service, but also a step towards privatisation. The Community Support Network concentrated on mobilising ordinary people behind the firefighters and also held several public meetings – including one at the University of Auckland – working alongside other groups and political parties, and liaising closely with the Firefighters Union. The firefighters' wide-ranging campaign peaked on 26 June 1998 with large marches in the four main centres throughout the country. Concurrently, the union sought specific ideas from some Fair Deal members as to how the Community Support Network could augment their contribution to the struggle. The suggestion of fire station occupations was formulated and the union agreed with the plan, which was put into effect on 5 July 1998 in defiance of fire service top brass.

The union counted roughly 700 citizens taking part throughout greater metropolitan Auckland, which saw Community Defence Teams (CDTs) form around some local fire stations. These CDTs organised on-going public meetings at stations and took part in weekly Support Network meetings as autonomous parochial elements on a non-hierarchical fully democratic basis. Again, Fair Deal successfully argued for this organisational model. The Community Support Network was maintained until court action by the Firefighters Union succeeded in derailing the restructuring three months later.

## **Other histories**

For the sake of historical accuracy, that some political parties made significant contributions in support of the Fire Service cause needs mentioning. One such party was the Alliance, a parliamentary coalition largely consisting of elements disenchanted by the aggressive free-market measures introduced by the Labour government between 1984-90. The introduction of the multi member proportional electoral system in 1996 saw the entry of Alliance into parliament, and they enjoyed relative success in government ranks until their virtual demise a decade later.

The Fair Deal Coalition, although prepared to work alongside the Alliance, found that its basic approach of mass public action was the very opposite of that of a party which in classic style placed emphasis on representative parliamentary dynamics centred around career politicians. The concept of fire station occupations especially was anathema to the Alliance, resulting in an



hysterical attempt to prevent them happening by branding them “nothing but a left sectarian dream”.

In December 1998, within two months of the successful culmination of the campaign against restructuring, an Alliance MP produced a book that literally wrote Fair Deal’s contribution out of history. In this publication, the occupations were described as: “Members of the public and union leaders also became involved and organised weekend meetings at local fire stations. The Auckland Chief Fire Officer banned the meetings but the public decided to ignore him”. Then in 2009, a substantial history spanning more than 60 years, written by a well known fire service character, further distorted that description by paraphrasing: “Alliance and Labour members had organised a stream of public meetings in support of firefighters at local fire stations. In Auckland, the Chief Fire Officer was placed in the invidious and embarrassing situation of endeavouring to ban those meetings, but the public elected to ignore him”.

Fair Deal’s earlier contribution through Citizens Against Privatisation met a similar fate. In 2008 an erstwhile Alliance MP and cabinet minister claimed at the *Privatisation by Stealth Conference* in Christchurch, that 1997 Waitakere City Council plans to form a water company were stopped when the Alliance “did a very simple thing” and “wrote a single letter” to the council.

## Conclusion

Non-hierarchical organisation inspires internal strengths, where know-how, experience and practical creativity of members flourish. The result is not the chaotic outcome the public is conditioned to expect.

This structure is, arguably, not unlike the world of academia where particular knowledge is practised in a relatively autonomous and free way, within a milieu of peers – notwithstanding that some academics have noted that neoliberalism is undermining those conventions. And incidentally, the Water Pressure Group’s campaign might have been strengthened by a greater presence of politically progressive academics, joining with ordinary citizens.

As well, an important lesson is that the ability to accurately record the history of any non-hierarchical group should never be neglected. In a relatively loose (horizontal) structure, there is likely to be no immediate access to professional researchers and writers – unlike parliamentary parties who employ such minions as government-funded personnel. As with all other practical matters, this becomes a particular organisational imperative.

What’s of paramount importance is the future organising the working class community does, and how past experiences might contribute to collective struggles against the capitalist system and its on-going anti-social – deadly – free-market madness.

*NOTE: This history is by no means comprehensive, but is part of the people's history of Auckland. Names have been omitted because it is an account of a collective struggle against Auckland City Council and their company.*

## References

Garnier, Tony 1998. *Business Auckland*. Auckland, NZ: Nahanni

## About the authors

**Jim Gladwin** was born in 1945. He was raised in a working class public housing suburb in Auckland, New Zealand, and has lived almost his entire life in that city. He became politically active in opposing the American War in Vietnam and has identified with the left movement since. He has participated in various progressive causes like anti-apartheid, indigenous land rights, anti-nuclear and prisoner solidarity. He was a member of the Communist Party of NZ from 1974 to 1983, and Chair of the Fair Deal Coalition at the time of the events covered in this article.

**Rose Hollins** grew up on a small poultry farm in Henderson, west Auckland, New Zealand, later moving into the city. She was born in December 1949, one of five children of English immigrant parents. Her earliest protest was on a Hiroshima Day march as a schoolgirl, before taking part in actions against the war in Vietnam and in many other left causes since the late 1960s. She is a poet, wage worker, and sometime proofreader. For many years she has worked alongside Jim Gladwin and others on the left in music and writing, as well as on workers', prisoners', internationalist and community initiatives.