

# A Brave and Startling Truth: Solidarity after Helen

Rachel Mackintosh © 20 November 2016

"Nothing wondrous can come in this world unless it rests on the shoulders of kindness."

This is a quote from the Barbara Kingsolver novel, *The Lacuna*. The context is Leon Trotsky's last day, in Mexico City, where he was living in exile, studying, writing and being part of a local community. One of the things he did was to mentor young people, and a young man had come to him with something he had written. The writing was shallow, derivative, unimaginative. Trotsky took the young man and his writing seriously. He spent time with him discussing his thoughts. Because nothing wondrous can come in this world unless it rests on the shoulders of kindness.

Then the young man killed Trotsky with an ice pick.

In the last TV interview she did before she died on 14 October this year, Helen Kelly - former President of the New Zealand Council of Trade Unions - said she just wanted people to be kind. She said, "It would make a hell of a difference."

There have been a couple of hell events since Helen died.

Trump got elected to be President of the United States and a week later we let a United States warship come and visit us.

In between those two events we were visited by what insurance companies are pleased to call an act of God.

I don't intend to be swamped by those things, and I will reflect here on Helen's work, her story, and our story.

In November 2011 a young man called Charanpreet Dhaliwal was beaten to death while working as a security guard on a construction site in Henderson.

Helen Kelly stood up and she spoke up. She knew that the construction site was controlled by a large New Zealand construction company, Fulton Hogan. She knew that Fulton Hogan had contracted out the security work. As the months wore on she would know more of the story

Charanpreet was a student from India who had been in New Zealand for about a year. A few days before he died, he had asked the security company for work and was told there was none. But on 17 November, a staff member who was supposed to be guarding the building site asked for the night off because it was his birthday, and so the security firm contacted Charanpreet and asked him if he wanted to work. He was given no training and had only a cell phone for contacting his employer. There was no alarm button on his cellphone. He didn't know that he wasn't supposed to approach the group of four drunken people who came on to the building site in the early hours of the morning.

He was found dead in a pool of his own blood.

Helen Kelly worked to get justice. She talked about how the people running a large corporation - Fulton Hogan - had outsourced their security work, and outsourced their responsibility for the welfare, and for the life, of the person who was there to protect Fulton Hogan property. She called this practice for what it was. Unjust.

Outsourcing was and is common practice. Helen Kelly pointed out that this common practice was - and is - part of a design. We design our society like this. Charanpreet's death was by design.

The security firm was prosecuted but not convicted of failing to provide a safe work place. The firm no longer exists. Its owner, who admitted not training Charanpreet, described training in the security industry as being a farce and a box-ticking exercise.

There was an unsuccessful prosecution for murder of one of the four people Charanpreet had approached on the site.

Fulton Hogan received no sanction other than having their practice exposed. But this practice is commonplace.

In early 2015, I helped to organise a gathering at Te Pai Park on Lincoln Road to unveil a memorial plaque to Charanpreet Dhaliwal. It became apparent then how much solidarity work Helen Kelly had done. She had made contact and developed relationships with Charanpreet's family and with the Sikh community in Auckland. She had worked with the council and West Auckland Labour MPs to get the memorial. She had worked with the police as they attempted to secure a prosecution for Charanpreet's murder. She had rallied unions to support the call. All these communities were represented that day in the park. All of us had a deeper understanding that Charanpreet's death was about more than the tragedy his family was experiencing, more than the injustice of one person killing another. It was about these things and it was about the unfair - and conscious - design of commercial and employment law and practice. It was by design.

Charanpreet's story is unique and particular. There are many other stories about Helen Kelly's work and her solidarity. Each is unique and particular. There are also many stories about her leadership. For example, when the Meatworkers Union members were locked out by the Talley family who owned the meat works, she engaged the iwi leaders, whose stock supplied the meat works and whose people were the meat workers. It was the iwi leaders' pressure that led directly to the Talley family making an offer that was enough to settle that dispute.

Another thing Helen said before she died is that she wished people were less focussed on leadership. "Who is the leader?" "Who will be the next leader?" She said that the work is more important.

The primary school teachers and support staff - members of NZEI, the primary school union - who stood on the bridge in Wairoa in solidarity with the meat workers when they were locked out again by Talley's, were doing something just as important as the work Helen did. Their solidarity was holding the community of Wairoa together and showing the meat workers that they are not alone.

Solidarity is kindness and it is more than kindness. Solidarity is not taking action for people, though it can involve that. Solidarity is taking action with people. Solidarity is making space for people to stand and raise their own voices.

The women of Pike River, who have been staging an occupation on the West Coast demanding that John Key honour the promise he made to recover the bodies of the dead from the mine, are having their own voices heard.

Helen Kelly had a vision of unions as public institutions and as the voice of all working people in society. So that we can change the design. So that no more Charanpreet's get killed.

She didn't just make it up. The whole world had that vision after World War II and the horrors of fascism in Europe. (Imperialism in Africa, the Pacific and elsewhere hadn't got us there but when these horrors happened in the midst of the comfortable we finally woke up.)

The International Labour Organisation recognised that unions as public institutions were essential to functioning democratic societies. Because unions give people a voice and we must

be part of designing the world we choose to create. And unions must act in solidarity beyond our own current membership. For example, with this congregation.

This congregation itself acts in solidarity on many fronts. When Kate Todd organised a cooking bee at Te Puea Marae, it was an act of solidarity. When Kay Parish and others organise fundraising events for the Living Wage movement, when David and Jos join the peace flotilla, when we offer hospitality to visitors at morning tea, when the peace and social justice committee organise a literacy project, these are all acts of solidarity.

We will continue these acts of solidarity, with each donation, each event, each time we stand with other people for justice.

And to ensure that these acts of solidarity go beyond the small things in front of our eyes, to ensure that we are working for a radically new and transformed design, we need a vision for the world we wish to live in.

I finish with a vision from poet Maya Angelou. I contend that we must strive for nothing less than this:

### **A brave and startling truth**

By Maya Angelou

We, this people, on a small and lonely planet  
Traveling through casual space  
Past aloof stars, across the way of indifferent suns  
To a destination where all signs tell us  
It is possible and imperative that we learn  
A brave and startling truth.

And when we come to it  
To the day of peacemaking  
When we release our fingers  
From fists of hostility  
When we come to it  
When the curtain falls on the minstrel show of hate  
And faces sooted with scorn are washed clean  
When battlefields and coliseum  
No longer rake our unique and particular sons and daughters  
Up with the bruised and bloody grass  
To lay them in identical plots in foreign soil

When the rapacious storming of the churches  
The screaming racket in the temple have ceased  
When the pennants are waving gaily  
When the banners of the world tremble  
Stoutly in a good, clean breeze

When we come to it  
When we let the rifles fall from our shoulders  
And our children can dress their dolls in flags of truce  
When land mines of death have been removed  
And the aged can walk into evenings of peace  
When religious ritual is not perfumed  
By the incense of burning flesh  
And childhood dreams are not kicked awake  
By nightmares of sexual abuse

When we come to it  
Then we will confess that not the Pyramids  
With their stones set in mysterious perfection  
Nor the gardens of Babylon  
Hanging as eternal beauty  
In our collective memory  
Not the Grand Canyon  
Kindled into delicious colour  
By Western sunsets

Nor the Danube, flowing its blue soul into Europe  
Not the sacred peak of Mount Fuji  
Stretching to the Rising Sun  
Neither Father Amazon nor Mother Mississippi  
Who, without favour,  
Nurture all creatures in their depths and on their shores  
These are not the only wonders of the world

When we come to it  
We, this people, on this minuscule globe  
Who reach daily for the bomb, the blade, and the dagger  
Yet who petition in the dark for tokens of peace  
We, this people, on this mote of matter  
In whose mouths abide cankerous words  
Which challenge our very existence

Yet out of those same mouths  
Can come songs of such exquisite sweetness  
That the heart falters in its labour  
And the body is quieted into awe

We, this people, on this small and drifting planet  
Whose hands can strike with such abandon  
That, in a twinkling, life is sapped from the living  
Yet those same hands can touch with such healing,  
Irresistible tenderness,  
That the haughty neck is happy to bow  
And the proud back is glad to bend  
Out of such chaos, of such contradiction  
We learn that we are neither devils nor divines

When we come to it  
We, this people, on this wayward, floating body  
Created on this earth, of this earth  
Have the power to fashion for this earth  
A climate where every man and every woman  
Can live freely without sanctimonious piety  
Without crippling fear

When we come to it  
We must confess that we are the possible  
We are the miraculous, we are the true wonder of this world  
That is when, and only when,  
We come to it.