



Auckland Unitarian Church  
Love beyond belief

## The art of the impossible

Rachel Mackintosh © 16 May 2021

The pandemic is a great rupture. Those who seek hastily to sew up the rupture and return to pre-pandemic normal are seeking to preserve a world where wealth is funnelled to the already wealthy at alarming rates, while millions upon millions pay.

The alternatives to a return to normal are political. It is a cliché that politics is the art of the possible. We are at a moment in the arc of history where what once was politically impossible is possible. We can now perform the art of the impossible. It will take all of us.

The pandemic, in Aotearoa as elsewhere, has showed us what is essential, what is not, and how we have been valuing billionaires over the people who keep our world going. With permission, I share this story:

*My name is Rose Kavapalu.*

*I am an essential worker, who has been cleaning for fifteen years at police stations, on the minimum wage.*

*I work thirteen and a half hours per day — five and a half hours at Otāhuhu Police Station, and eight hours at St Cuthbert's College: a total of sixty-seven and a half hours per week.*

*During the first lockdown, I was really scared for my life, the lives of my elderly parents, and my husband, who's got underlying health conditions.*

*I wanted to stop working but I couldn't because I am an essential worker.*

*All of a sudden, the public realised how important my job is to them.*

*I was worried whether my PPE gear was enough to protect me and my family.*

*I couldn't sleep at night.*

*The sacrifices that we essential workers have to make for the minimum wage are not worth it.*

At the point of lockdown, Rose's story — already a story of struggle — paints a sharp picture of the divisions in our society. Rose couldn't stay in a bubble. While the higher paid in our country were able to work from home and have groceries delivered, Rose and her whānau, like all the low-paid essential workers, put themselves in harm's way every day.

There is more to Rose's story. There is a reason that she works two jobs. She explains the history of her police station cleaning, where she has worked for a series of employers who are contracted to the New Zealand Police:

*"I have gone through three cleaning contractors and every time the contract changes they reduce my hours. My hours used to be twelve hours a day and every time the contract changed it dropped. Now I have only five and a half hours a day."*

Before the pandemic, the only political possibility was to think of Rose as an individual, and of the solutions to the struggles in her life as individual solutions. Perhaps she could get a better education, get a better job.

But Rose's story is a story of how the world of work is structured in this country. We consider that some work, while it needs to be done, doesn't need to be paid enough for someone to live with dignity, doesn't need to be done safely, doesn't need to be done in a way that recognises the skills and humanity of the person doing it. We arrange work so that, where an organisation needs a service — cleaning, security, catering, deliveries — the people who run that organisation can contract out the work to the lowest

bidder. The people doing the work, like Rose, get whatever is the lowest cost the contractor can get away with. The lowest limit is not a liveable wage for forty hours a week, it is the number of hours one person can physically work, it is the number of families that can squeeze into a house, or a garage, or a car. It is dangerous, precarious work which kills people.

Because of the rupture, it is now politically possible — it is politically imperative — to see Rose's situation as an illustration of a structural problem. The way work is arranged in this country causes inequality, poverty and death.

Unions have the right to bargain collectively, to seek collective solutions, to rebalance the power. And unions make a difference in people's lives. Where unions exist, inequality diminishes, and people's material circumstances and their dignity improve. For the past 30 years, unions in this country have struggled for survival because the basis of our industrial framework has been the individual. We know that collectivism reduces inequality, yet the only political possibility of the past 30 years has been that each individual must choose whether they associate with others. The only political possibility has been the absolute nonsense that we are connected with one another only if we make the individual choice to be so.

It has been a political impossibility to see that there is an interconnected web of existence, of which we are *all* a part.

Our country doesn't have to arrange work this way. We could do it differently. We now have the opportunity to make the impossible possible.

We can have a world in which the basis of our industrial framework is collective, where working people bargain collectively for living incomes that lift the material circumstances in which we live.

We can prioritise true health and wellbeing, where working people have a collective say in our wellbeing, and so are safe, come home alive at the end of the day, and are free from all forms of violence and harassment.

We can have decent work, work that we have collectively decided is useful, work that is performed in good conditions, that is healthy, safe, skilled and well paid.

We can end inequality.

The government has just announced a law that will be part of this new political possibility: there will be legislation setting up Fair Pay Agreements.

These agreements will be collective agreements that go beyond a single employer or multiple employers, to a whole industry. Working people will be able to negotiate collectively for one agreement — one set of minimum, industry-wide pay and conditions — across a whole industry. Employers will not have the option to undercut each other, as they will all be covered. If industry employers and unions cannot reach agreement on these minimums, there will be an independent arbitration body that will make a final and binding decision on these matters.

Fair Pay Agreements are about more than pay. In a Fair Pay Agreement, working people will negotiate for pay, for safety and wellbeing, for education and development, for how work should be performed, including the hours of work.

Under a Fair Pay Agreement, Rose Kavapalu can hope to have just one job, with sufficient income to work a standard full-time week, with safe and healthy conditions of work, with a voice in her employment, and she can hope for priceless time with her husband, elderly parents, and wider whānau.

Already there are powerful voices arguing for the old political possibility, arguing that arrangements about work are best settled between individuals, that there is no interconnected web of which we are a part, that

employers should be able to opt out of any arrangement, for they are individuals in charge of their own destinies.

For Fair Pay Agreements to deliver on the promise of a new possibility, it will take wide public support. It will take a recognition in all of us, that Rose's life matters, that, in the words of an African whakatauki, "I am because we are."