

## Eulogy: Peter Conway

PAUL CHALMERS\*

It is said of Peter Conway that he was soft on people and hard on issues. That was true but there was one person he wasn't soft on, and that was himself. One conversation I had with Peter in his office in 2013 focussed on why he looked so grey and what was the reason his left arm was shaking? He smiled at my concern and said "I'm just tired mate".

What tuckered Peter out and what got him in the end was the sense of responsibility he had for holding together the Labour Movement in New Zealand, as it attempts to weather the passing storm of fundamentalist economics and the plundering by the super rich. Peter's time as a leader in the Movement coincided with a period of membership decline and the apparent inability of unions to connect meaningfully with the mass of the people they aim to represent.

None of this was Peter's doing. His union trajectory took in the times of the qualified preference clause and compulsory unionism; when union bosses could comfortably argue the toss between the amazing Soviet model (would you like a study tour to Moscow comrade? – he never went) or Chairman Mao and his workers' paradise.

Meanwhile, workers in New Zealand happily picked up the 'going rate' and prepared to forget about the movement that had brought them the weekend and decent pay. Peter observed the frailties of this pseudo militant model and felt the new force of monetarist economics brewing in the United States. I asked him in the 90s why he wanted to do economics. He felt unions were being outgunned by economically literate employers and the only way to fight fire was with fire. His Masters in Economics was accompanied by a shrewd appreciation of strategic unionism encouraged by his great friend, Paul Tolich, and also by an understanding of the limitations economic analysis had in dealing with the raw power of the boss. Both Peter and Paul saw the need for unions to be more proactive and positive at both the industrial and political level. Not just at the table for their muscle, but for the sophisticated contribution they could make to the debate.

Yet, Peter combined a sophisticated analysis with an ability to cut through the economic mumbo jumbo and connect it with ordinary lives. Arthur Grimes notes in his obituary of Peter that: "He was especially appreciated for his ability to explain economic issues in a simple and convincing way through the media."

Why was Peter so concerned about the plight of working people? His early commitment to fairness took root at home and his membership of the Christian Youth Movement, as a teenager, saw him connect with the radical Young Christian Students (YCS) at Victoria University in the early 70s. YCS also had a passion for music and parties, and Peter felt right at home. At this point across the globe, student Christian movements were questioning the role of both the state and the church in repressing working people and liberation theology was on everyone's lips. It was in this

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environment that Peter met Paul Tolich, Paul Swain, Pip Desmond, Sue Ryall, Petra Van den Munkoff, John Ryall, Colin Feslier, Pat Martin, Gabriel Brett Kelly, Celia Lashley and others, and began to challenge the conventional views on feminism, abortion, the Vietnam War and NZ's love of racist South Africa.

Given what we knew of Peter then; his commitment to the movement, his quiet resolution and attention to detail and his determination, it was not hard to predict his life path.

His final contribution was his contribution to the NZCTU's seminal piece on insecure workers, which notes that "it would be surprising if the total numbers were less than 40% and may well be 50% and more." When Peter looked at that figure, as a champion for the working poor, it must have been very tough. Knowing Peter, he would have taken it hard and redoubled the effort.