



## Future of the Wellington Peoples' Centre

### Overview

On its 20th year, the Wellington People's Centre (WPC) is in a period of transition. This document aims to suggest ways of advancing, as well as preserving what we have.

Beginning with the Fourth Labour Government and continuing on to this day, the state has committed to a program of restructuring the economy and breaking-up the old welfare state. The wholesale attacks on the working class, both employed and unemployed, led to a period of mass political action in the late 80s and early 90s, eventuating in the formation of WPC in 1992.

The People's Centre was formed both to defend the rights of the unemployed and underemployed, and to provide services in light of a retreating welfare state. With the retreat of the mass movement against the neoliberal reforms and the return of political stability, the WPC has found itself politically isolated and has largely retreated into service provision, both health and advocacy. While the WPC has not abandoned the task of political campaigning, this task has largely fallen to the wayside when measured against the day-to-day operation of the centre. Without a mass movement or an active membership, the centre has been emasculated as a political force.

Now with a fresh round of attacks, we need to also refresh our response to these attacks. We'd like to see a more politically active and visible WPC, with an involved membership

### Financial

In the long term we'd like to see a WPC funded primarily by members, its own business operations, and politically sympathetic organisations. Ideally the organisation will not have to rely on the Ministry of Social Development and other "charitable trusts" for its survival.

A sustained membership drive is therefore important for both the financial and political future of the organisation. Growing membership will mean regular stalls outside WINZ; public meetings with draw-cards such as Sue Bradford; stronger promotion and online presence; greater involvement in community events and campaigns. Ensuring membership records are regularly updated will also be crucial.

In addition to an increased membership, we would like to see a greater connection—both through engaging in joint work and through attracting funding—with the trade unions and like-minded community organisations. While the dental service pays for itself, the Benefit Rights Service will need to work out an arrangement with other community groups for affordable accommodation.

### Political

Clearly the WPC must oppose all attacks on beneficiaries and low-income workers. In order to do so effectively, it will have to develop solidarity between employed and unemployed workers. This is necessary both because of the greater resources of employed workers, and because of the way division is used to drive down conditions for everyone.

The Kaupapa Co-ordinator will have to both develop the WPC's links with sympathetic organisations, and engage the membership more actively. Regular public discussions and political demonstrations will keep people engaged. The WPC must be an organisation able to mobilise people against attacks, to organise and not just represent.

### Services

As well as maintaining its existing services, we would like to see the WPC play a more of an

educational role. Education reforms already enacted by the current Government has seen funding for community night classes, funding for University bridging programmes, and funding for polytechs cut. This has caused some resistance amongst students and workers.

The PPTA and workers at Wellington High School organised a demonstration to Parliament in response to the cut in community night classes at the beginning of this Government's term. Recently, there has been a regeneration of a radical student's movement with the national formation of "We Are The University".

We envisage the WPC working with the WEA and the aforementioned organisations to form a working group to address this marked gap in the community.

## **Campaigns**

Launching public campaigns will help move the WPC's political orientation away from a mainly reactive/defensive approach towards something more far-sighted. These campaigns should be initially developed in consultation with the membership and experienced advocates, before being publicly launched, however below we outline a few possibilities:

- A campaign in support of parents on the DPB, highlighting the importance of unpaid work. This could attempt to undermine the dominant perception perpetuated by figures such as Paula Bennett. If successful this also has the potential to develop a nucleus of a future progressive women's movement.
- A campaign for benefits tied to the average wage, highlighting the way they are kept below subsistence and the way the benefit is designed to pull down all workers' wages.
- Challenging WINZ's contracting-out model where private organisations (often reactionary such as the Salvation Army) with secret contracts profit from providing essential public services. Secret contracts in the provision of public services are anti-democratic.
- Campaign for a Universal Basic Income.

## **Conclusion**

A more ambitious, more visible People's Centre, with an engaged membership, could grow rather than simply surviving.