

Eulogy for John Cummins

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It is the greatest privilege to be able to participate in this incredible celebration of John's life. Of the many aspects of John's work, one I would like to talk about is his work with the staff of the CFMEU.

Cummo was simply adored by the people he worked with. He was our leader, our hero, our president, our comrade, our teacher and our friend. The mascara mixed with the tears that flowed by the bucket load last week as we tried to come to terms with the depth of our individual and collective loss. We cried til we could cry no more and then we cried again until one of the organisers nominated himself the blubber monitor. His self appointed role was to pull us together when we reached the proscribed level of sook. I'm not sure what the measurement of sook was, but I do know that Neil was a very busy boy.

And we needed our blubber monitor because we wanted to make Cummo proud and because we knew that he had a particular vulnerability to women crying and a particular strategy – avoid at all costs - which was actually quite hard for him to do because Cummo's office was directly opposite his PA's Danni and Marie. Danni and Marie, (and sometimes Miriem) in typical CFMEU style liked to share life's highs and lows, crying tears of joy in the good times and tears of sadness in the bad – embracing frequently. Cummo quickly learned the perils of an early morning trip across the corridor for a

letter to be typed or a page to be sent and soon perfected the silent 180 degree turn. The letter could wait til the women's business was done.

So we worked through our tears last week because we wanted to be together and because Cummo instilled in us a pride in who we are and what we do. He made us feel proud to be part of the union movement and that even the smallest of tasks was a worthwhile contribution to the struggle.

And it wasn't just the thought of John's heroic deeds, his staunchness or his inspirational words that spurred us on. It was the little things that made the difference.

I asked the women who worked with John what they would like me to say to you today about working with him. Without exception, his integrity, his friendly smile and his easy manner stood out. In short, Cummo said hello to each and every one of us, acknowledged our individuality and made us feel at ease. So simple and so important - and so easy to forget – but John never did.

One of the teachers related that when she first started working in the building industry, Cummo was the official that she felt most comfortable about approaching. When the Dalai Lama was visiting Melbourne she suggested to Cummo that he meet with him, as she had a contact who could arrange a meeting. As Howard had refused to meet with the Dalai Lama, she felt that this would be a great media opportunity to embarrass the PM. After listening patiently to her ideas, Cummo asked “Are you a peacenik or something?” After that when he greeted Jenny he called her “scoop.”

John's old fashioned chivalry was one of the qualities that most endeared him to us. When women were at a branch meeting and an unhappy member was in full flight with f*n c's this and f*n c's that and was about to become particularly explicit about what he wanted to do to the f*n c's, Cummo would stop the meeting and ask members to mind their language as there were builders laborers present. In doing so he spared us the grossest of imagery.

When our beautiful first aid trainer collapsed in front of her class, Cummo sent her a cheerio on the concrete gang, telling 3CR listeners that "she went down like a bag."

And when Cummo's old fashioned chivalry verged on old fashioned chauvinism, well his charm simply got him through. We always knew John wanted the best for us as he did for all workers.

Cummo was a great educator and because of this was suspicious of the training reform agenda that accompanied award restructuring in the 1980's and early 1990's. It took a little to convince John that we wanted to and could do something different with the CFMEU Education and Training Unit. In fact he wasn't really that hard to convince because Cummo embodied the educational principles that we aspire to. He led by disciplined example, he encouraged collective analysis and he inspired action. He assisted us practically by answering our questions and being available to speak in courses. He addressed every new shop stewards course with words of inspiration and encouragement. He ensured that our brand of training would

be provided for in every EBA and he entrusted to us Orr St and his dear friend Peter Voigt.

Cummo's skills as a negotiator are legendary and will be spoken of for decades, more like centuries to come. In negotiating the pattern EBA he pursued the small sectors and companies with as much vigor and determination as he did the giants. His encounters with the small but entirely fickle Diamond Cutters and Drillers Association is something that neither they nor the AIG are likely to forget in a hurry – all for the benefit of concrete cutters in the industry.

But as skilled and as experienced a negotiator as Cummo was, he met his foil when it came to negotiating the staff EBA. Unrelenting against the arguments, negotiating styles and work to rule campaign of the admin staff, Cummo and the rest of the executive refused to agree to a flow on of building industry conditions while staff maintained all provisions of their previous EBA. There would be trade offs.

Danni, the ASU shop steward at the time, having exhausted all reasonable avenues and exhausting herself in the process, had only one strategy left – tears - and a bloody good telling off. .. With Cummo taken care of, the rest of the executive fell like dominoes. It was 5 years before executive were able to get party and shopping leave back on the negotiating table.

The bury the hatchet election in 1993 saw the practical and willing integration of the BLF into the CFMEU and the beginnings of the fighting machine that the CFMEU is today. Led by Martin Kingham and soon after

with Bill Oliver and John, they were ably assisted by executive, state council, divisional branch management committee, organisers, teachers, trainers, admin, shop stewards, OH&S reps and rank and file. Cummo worked with each of these layers of responsibility and individuals to shape and develop the union that we wanted. No one would deny that there are times when the CFMEU could do with a bit of finessing, but most would agree that it is an organization that strives to treat workers, its own included with fairness and compassion. John would have it no other way.

In closing, I would like to thank Ralph Edwards for his guidance and support over the last 14 months and I would like to pay tribute to Di and the family. This remarkable man chose for his partner in life a truly remarkable woman. Although John didn't disclose too much of his personal life, he did share some of the happy times. From pie nights at the footy club to sunsets in Broome, one thing rang out – John's deep, deep love for Di and his two boys. Thank you for the sacrifices you made and for your commitment to a just and fair society. Thank you for showing by example that it is possible to maintain a balance between work and family even when you have a partner and dad who is always on call. But most of all, thank you for your ultimate gift to us – your generosity and your understanding throughout John's illness. Even in those last precious days and weeks, you opened your home, the hospital and your hearts to the flood of people who wanted to pay their respect, feel his strength and connect just one more time with the great man, John Cummins.