

Vale John Cummins 1948-2006





On September 4, the trade union movement held a memorial service for the workers' hero John Cummins — “Cummo”, as he was known. Three thousand people from all around the country and all walks of life packed the Regent Theatre, a building saved by the Builders Labourers Federation's (BLF) green bans in the 1970s, and heard many heartfelt reflections from speakers.

Cummins, who was the final BLF secretary and the Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) Victorian president, died on August 29 after a long battle against cancer.

The Regent Theatre's stage was decked out with a massive Eureka flag and the coffin was decorated with symbols of Cummo's life — a football and football jumpers, a Sorrento beach shell, a hard hat, a denim jacket and a eureka flag.

Moving photos of Cummo's life in struggle, and with family and friends, were projected above the stage. Everyone present received a red booklet titled Quotations from Chairman Cummo, which compiled many of Cummo's favourite sayings, including: On searching for enlightenment, “When you find an easy way don't keep it a secret”. On dialectical materialism, “Let's deal with the facts, not fiction”. On matters of strategy, “As effective as throwing snow balls at Ayers Rock”. On supporting East Timorese independence, “Fuck this, we'll go and stand in front of the plane”.

Father Peter Norden, who crossed paths with Cummo in jail, described Cummo as “a man of principle”. He said, “John Cummins was a man who hungered and thirsted for what is right. He was a man with a big heart who at times himself was persecuted in the cause of right.”

Norden related how he had talked to Cummo's two sons, Mick and Shane, when their father was in jail. Norden told them, “Your father is in prison because of his honesty”. Cummo was jailed twice for contempt of court after visiting work sites against court orders during the campaign against the deregistration of the BLF.

Mick Cummins read from a letter his father had written to him from prison: “I don't tell

the judge how to do his job so I don't see why he should tell me how to do mine." Mick was only 10 years old at the time. Mick went on to say that no matter where they went in Australia, people would always come up and say, "Hey Cummo, have you got a minute?" Cummo would always listen and give advice before moving on.

Acting CFMEU state president Ralph Edwards, a long-time friend and confidante of Cummo's, revealed that the Australian Building and Construction Commission had continued investigating Cummo over an industrial dispute, even as he was dying in hospital. The ABCC withdrew the case only the day after Cummo died.

Edwards said the ABCC "wanted the family and the union to make a declaration he was not going to fight. But like John, the CFMEU is going to fight."

Edwards continued, "John Cummins, you have taught us lots of things. Most of all you taught us the willingness, the ability to fight. Make no mistake, we'll fight."

After the ceremony, the crowd marched through Melbourne's streets behind Cummo's coffin, silent but with fists defiantly in the air and carrying the old BLF flags. The march stopped traffic, as Cummins-led rallies had done throughout his life.

When the march reached the CFMEU office, and again outside Trades Hall, the march stopped and broke into the old BLF chant "Dare to struggle, dare to win. If you don't fight, you lose", and "Long live John Cummins". Many of the younger CFMEU members marched side by side with older BLF militants, other unionists, community activists, and friends and family.

At the wake in Trades Hall, former BLF lawyer Lenny Hartnet recounted: "When hauled in front of the building industry royal commission, Cummo said to Commissioner Cole, 'I'd like to know what gives you the right to question workers' wages when you yourself are paid such an obscene amount of money?' Cole, not being used to people confronting him, was stunned at the question."

Not surprisingly, the establishment media reports on Cummo's memorial were brief. However, the Australian newspaper acknowledged, "Notices marking Cummins's death have dominated local newspaper classifieds for the past week, outstripping those for Democrats founder Don Chipp". The newspaper failed to mention that in the news sections Chipp was given pages of type while Cummo was allocated only small articles in hidden parts of the newspapers.

Despite the newspaper editors' desire to marginalise the memorial for Cummins, the Herald Sun published up to three pages of obituaries. The sentiment of these can be summed up by a few excerpts:

"You were the most significant and respected trade unionist in the country. A mentor to thousands. You taught me so much and helped me and my family through times of adversity. Your memory will live on forever." — Craig Johnston and family.

"To a great leader who will be sadly missed. May your legacy and hunger for the rights of workers live on." — All the workers at L.U Simons Project 501.

Even bosses wrote in: "John, I can never recall winning a dispute with you, but many

fond memories of you being straight forward with me will never be forgotten.”

— John Kettyle, KGM.

Chipp got a state funeral. Cummo was sent off in the way he would have wanted — no state funeral but surrounded by thousands who loved and admired him, and who all, even though teary, partied long into the night in his memory.

Mick Bull