

'People's power' for the Rabbitohs

BY MARGARET GLEESON



SYDNEY — An estimated 80,000 people marched from Redfern Oval to Sydney Town Hall on November 12 to demand the inclusion of the South Sydney “Rabbitohs” football team in the 2001 National Rugby League competition. The massive show of support followed a November 3 court decision that the NRL was within its rights to exclude Souths from the competition.

South Sydney, one of the original clubs that formed rugby league as a separate football code in 1908, was excluded from the 2000 competition by the News Ltd-dominated NRL. The NRL was established following the “football wars” between the Rupert Murdoch-backed commercial Super League competition and the “traditional” Australian Rugby League (ARL) competition.

Souths was one of a few teams to resist the corporate might of News Ltd. Ultimately, a deal was hatched between the ARL and News Ltd to establish a single competition combining both ARL and Super League teams, with three former ARL teams (Eastern Suburbs, Parramatta and Newcastle) represented on the NRL board. As part of the deal, designed to benefit Murdoch's Foxtel pay TV network, the new competition included teams from around Australia and New Zealand. A number of these new teams were banked-rolled by Murdoch or wholly owned by commercial operators. In order to meet the criteria for inclusion in the 2000 competition, teams were encouraged to increase corporate sponsorship and amalgamate.

Souths billed the November 12 rally as a “Save the Game” rally and called on supporters of other teams to join in. While the great majority of men, women, children and dogs who marched wore the Rabbitohs' red and green colours, there were sizable contingents of supporters from Wests, Parramatta, Norths, Easts, Cronulla, Illawarra, Newcastle, St George and Canterbury. A truck full of “silvertails” (Manly supporters) were cheered as they passed.

The Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union and the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union were highly visible in their support.

The rally was chaired by former test cricketer Mike Whitney, and speakers including many league “legends”. They were joined by media identities, the mayor of South Sydney and federal Labor MP Laurie Brereton. Lyall Munro represented the Metropolitan Land Council.

Although Premier Bob Carr's electorate is in Rabbitohs' country, he was at the Country Labor Conference to support the privatisation of the freight handling arm of State Rail. A coincidence that was not lost on a number present at the rally.

The overall sentiment was anti-corporate. The Rabbitohs are the embodiment of working-class resistance. "If the NRL is the protector of corporate power, then South Sydney is the protector of people's power", Munro declared.
