

The future of unionism



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Most ALIA members will be reading this column after the federal election has been decided. By now you will know which party's policy is going to define Australia's industrial relations for the next three years. And you will have a much better idea of what role trade unions are going to play. But for unions themselves it will be a period of soul-searching whoever governs.

Over the past twenty years trade union membership has collapsed, from more than half the workforce to barely a third. It is fashionable to suggest that this decline results simply from recent decentralising of industrial relations practices. But is this really true?

With the advent of a Labor Government and the Accord process in the early 1980s, for a time industrial relations in fact became even more centralised than before. Yet union membership was already declining sharply. And numbers continued to fall both before and after the advocates of decentralisation gained the upper hand in IR policy development. So the argument is not convincing. A more likely explanation lies in the changed structure of the national workforce. Twenty years ago manufacturing provided almost 30 per cent of Australian employment. Now, less than 15 per cent of employees are to be found there. Manufacturing was traditionally a sector in which union membership rarely fell below two thirds of total employment.

Similarly, the public sector has usually been an area of heavy union density. But in recent years public employment levels have been savaged. The huge swing to contracting out and competitive tendering in the public sector only increases the trend away from unions, since the type of short term, contract employment which goes with it has been only lightly unionised.

ACTU Executive member and former national president of the Community and Public Sector Union, Peter Robson, argues that unions are failing to come to grips with this 'new work'. Writing in the latest edition of *Evatt papers* (volume 3/2, Evatt Foundation ISSN 1320-5498), Robson points out that 'old work' in manufacturing and the public sector is being replaced by new jobs in hospitality, small business and services generally. He laments the fact that unionisation in this new segment is below 20 per cent. And even worse, he says, is the rural sector where membership has now slumped to a remarkable 9 per cent of total employees.

If they are to arrest this Robson says unions must themselves change to be relevant in a rapidly-changing labour market. Fundamental to that, he says, is acceptance that the so-called

'new management agenda' is not all negative, not all 'new Right' propaganda. Unions will have to be part of this transition — rather than opponents of it — if they are to offer anything to employees in these organisations.

For that to happen, unions must modernise themselves to become more effective. Robson says a major stumbling block to that happening is a dearth of management skills inside trade unions. It is a supreme irony that even as managerial shortcomings create problems for employees in workplace reform programs, the capacity of their representatives to deal with these difficulties is severely compromised by precisely the same lack of management skill.

Robson says research in the growing new employment sectors suggests strongly that people working there are actively hostile to trade unions. They associate wage increases with governments rather than unions. They see conditions like superannuation and maternity leave as conferred by government rather than as won by unions. If this is true, the union movement has a lot of work to do to stop membership levels falling even further.

Librarians will be interested to note that a centrepiece of the ACTU's answer to all this is information services. Already plans are being developed for major union tele-servicing centres to be set up in the New South Wales Labor Council building in Sydney and in ACTU House in Melbourne. As well, shopfronts in regional areas around Australia are planned using the databases established in the Sydney and Melbourne centres. Peter Robson believes that these services cannot be available only to union members. He argues strongly that the union movement will have to embrace the idea that services can be provided to people who are not members as well. Otherwise, unions will simply fail to make any real contact with workers in these sectors.

Obviously, these new ideas raise fundamental issues for trade unionists. Foremost is the question of whether unions are prepared to offer services to non members. The certainty of more and more local industrial agreements and individual employment contracts suggests a need for the availability of far more expert advice to help individual employees cope with the trend. And trade unions are well equipped with the expertise to provide it.

It is probable that unions will only retain a strong role in Australia's labour market by tackling these issues directly and quickly. And, as is often the case with major change, facing up to the threats is probably the best way for unions to grasp the opportunities provided by the very different workplace of the future. ■

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