

## Reviving Australia's trade unions – clues from North America



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With a Senate Committee now deep into its review of the Government's proposed 'second-wave' industrial relations reforms, the future role of Australia's trade unions is in the spotlight once more. And the recent retirement of our best-known union leader, Bill Kelty, as secretary to the Australian Council of Trade Unions [ACTU] has only sharpened focus on the question 'where to now?' for the union movement.

Federal workplace relations minister Reith has been a continuing and trenchant critic of unions, describing them as 'out of touch' and 'irrelevant'. Others have labelled them 'unrepresentative', 'backward' and 'in terminal decline'. At the same time, there is widespread alienation in the workplace with many employees becoming painfully aware of the realities of their limited power in an environment dominated by direct bargaining and individual contracts. A number — including many ALIA members — express a feeling of helplessness and weakness. Often they bemoan an absence of effective representation and an inability to find safeguards collective approaches at work. Such circumstances would seem tailor-made for a resurgence in union membership, which has fallen sharply in recent years. But, to date, it is not happening in Australia.

With this background in mind, I was interested when holidaying recently in North America to note some eye-catching developments there, especially given the savage attack on trade unionism in that country over recent decades. Union membership in the USA private sector fell by two-thirds in the twenty years after 1975 from around one in three workers to just ten per cent. Things have been a little better in the public sector, but even so, less than twenty per cent of all American workers were members of trade unions by the mid-1990s.

Now, however, there are small signs of a comeback. Revival is centred in Los Angeles, where unions have gained almost 100 000 members this year. Many have

signed up as a result of strategic recruitment drives in targeted industries employing a high proportion of casual, short-term, low-wage and otherwise insecure workers. The labour movement has added to these efforts a strong campaign based on 'organising beyond the workplace', in which coalitions have been built with community and religious groups to more effectively represent the interests of wage and salary earners. Results are now beginning to look promising, with unions finally making some progress in reaching workers in the 'new' work areas — essentially the service industries — which to date have not been unionised. This is an absolutely critical issue for trade unions the world over. Unless they can attract members in these areas, overall membership will continue to plummet in all developed countries as manufacturing — traditionally the most highly-organised sector — becomes less and less labour intensive.

Beyond Los Angeles, I encountered the unexpected sight of employees of IBM — a long-time bastion of non-unionised employment — locked in combat with their employer across the country, to the extent that workers in states including New York, North Carolina and Vermont were holding mass meetings aimed at unionising the company. When unions are looking attractive to IBM employees, something is surely happening as far as employment trends are concerned.

One clear element of this trend appears to be a widening gap in work satisfaction between small enterprises and large companies like IBM. While in Canada I came across a major survey of 1200 organisations which measured employee satisfaction levels among employees of different-sized companies. People were found to be much happier working for small (under twenty employees) organisations. While fifty-one per cent of large-organisation staff reported 'work overload', less than a third of employees of small enterprises shared that feeling. Two-thirds of those working in small firms described their employers as

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very supportive of work-family balance through highly-flexible and generous time-off and work-scheduling schemes. Stress levels were markedly lower, morale and job satisfaction much higher, and there was far greater employee-commitment in the small enterprises.

This trend suggests that dissatisfaction is mounting, relatively, in large organisations which are regarded as having lost the human touch. They seem to be offering opportunities for unions to lift their profile and attract new members in North America. There is every reason to think

that a similar situation is developing in this country. It is certainly apparent among the many ALIA members with whom I regularly discuss workplace issues.

But while unions here may be able to capitalise on the insecurity of larger-company employees, their real challenge still lies in making inroads into the rising small-sector workforce, in which almost all jobs growth is occurring. Unless the Australian labour movement can effectively organise in this area it will continue to struggle for members and continuing relevance in a changing labour market. ■

*...two-thirds of those working in small firms described their employers as very supportive...*

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