

Organising Our Future

What Australian Unionists Can Learn from US Labour's Fight Back

**Barbara Pocock and John Wishart
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Introduction

As a social and political movement, the labour movement internationally has faced a consistent challenge to reinvent itself. Its capacity to make the transformation from a movement based amongst male, craft workers in 'first world' countries like England in the early part of the 19th century, to a movement that organises young, female, recent immigrants to large Asian cities like Manila and Seoul, is critical to its survival as a relevant movement into the next century.

The Australian movement's challenge to remake itself is no less daunting: to shift from a movement whose traditional members worked in manufacturing, mining and construction to one which must now necessarily also be based amongst contingent, part-time, female, younger workers in clerical, retail, hospitality and service occupations - in an environment no longer protected by labour law and governments that recognise unions' legitimate right to organise and collective organisation. Making this change represents as great a challenge as that faced by craft unions as they admitted 'unskilled' workers to their ranks; or white workers as they recognised coloured and black workers; or men's recognition of women's labour. Each of these moments of transformation has been accompanied by much creaking, resistance and in many locations, cultural crisis within the institution of unionism. Could a movement that embraced Chinese labourers still bargain effectively? Would the recognition and support of part-time, female workers mean an inevitable slide in the conditions of all? At the end of the 20th century, can the Australian movement make the changes that are necessary now, and what strategies should it adopt to accelerate the transformation? Can it organise the 4.8 million Australian workers who currently have no collective voice or bargaining power?

Can the Australian movement make the changes that are necessary now, and what strategies should it adopt?

The purpose of this booklet is to set out some lessons that arise from current US experience for the challenge of organising in Australia. Union density in Australia is now around 30 per cent, down from 51 per cent in 1976. The US movement has never enjoyed the kind of unionisation levels of Australia. But the decline in unionisation in Australia has been greater than in many other countries and if it persists, Australia will soon face union density levels that are not very dissimilar from those in the US.

This paper is based on research amongst US unionists between August and December 1998 including interviews recorded with 30 unionists through all levels of the movement and in a variety of positions; attendance at union and peak council meetings, conferences and education programs; and examination of published and unpublished union materials. Otherwise unattributed quotes that appear through this booklet arise from these interviews; generally we have not named individual sources but indicate their positions.

We would like to thank our colleagues at the Labor Education Research Centre (LERC) at the University of Oregon for their generous intellectual and practical assistance, especially Margaret Hallock, Marcus Widenor, Lynn Feekin, Gordon Lafer and Steve Deutsch. We would also like to thank the many unionists who invited us into their unions, homes, meetings, workplaces, and educational forums to talk about unionism.

Why look at the US experience?

The situations and experience of Australian and US unions are very different. In many ways the US movement is in worse shape. Union density in the US is now 14 per cent – only 10 per cent in the private sector - while Australia sits on a much diminished but still sizeable 31 per cent (ABS Cat No 6310.0). The crisis of declining density is much sharper in the US where density has fallen below critical mass in many sectors of the economy and labour's political voice is weak. There are 110 million unorganised US workers, compared to around 4.8 million in Australia. The US movement must recruit over 300,000 new members a year just to stand still, and one million if it is to grow by one per cent (Welsh 1997:78). Through a renewal of organising effort in 1997 it managed to do slightly better than just maintain its absolute size by recruiting 385,000 new members - the first time for many years that a decline had been avoided.

The US movement must recruit over 300,000 new members a year just to stand still.

Nonetheless the numerical size of the movement, with over 16 million unionised workers, is eight times greater than Australia's 2.1 million (ABS Cat No 6310.0). This scale provides great scope for diverse experience. In some locations reform groups have been working to mobilise and expand membership, and democratise leadership for over 30 years. What is more, critical decline has galvanised the US movement in many quarters and licensed some to take unconventional risks. The US movement has also had to deal with a set of political, legal and ideological legacies that make labour organising extremely difficult by comparison to Australia. We cannot make an assessment of US unions' prospects or draw useful lessons from its experience without taking account of these differences. First amongst them is the bitter opposition of employers to union organising throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. Intimidation and discrimination against union-minded workers, the use of company spies and thugs, and open violence against labour organisers have been long standing and widespread. Direct employer efforts to break unions and avoid unionisation has been on a scale far greater than experienced in Australia.

Secondly, at all levels of government the state has frequently acted to keep unions out of the workplace and remove militant unions. In Australia we can cite the direct use of troops to break strikes on a handful of occasions such as the 1949 Coal Strike or the more recent Pilot's dispute, but examples of the use of the National Guard, specially enrolled state deputies and the armed forces are numerous in the US. For example between 1877 and 1903 federal and state troops intervened on the employers' side in more than five hundred labour disputes (Forbath quoted in Lukas 1998: 116). Thirdly, the US legal regime has long been adverse to successful unionisation and collective bargaining. Alongside this, individualism is deeply ingrained in many American citizens, and union organisation and action are not widely seen as the means to attain security and material improvement. For many working Americans, economic inequality is viewed as legitimate – the result of cleverness or luck on the part of the rich rather than injustice, exploitation or historic inequity.

A combination of factors contributes to a high level of fear amongst potential union members: fear that is easily mobilised by anti-union employers during union certification ballots. Fourthly, the US shares a border with a low wage

What can Australian unionists learn from a weaker, more fractured movement, that we can't invent for ourselves?

country, Mexico, so that immigrant workers - many illegal - form an underclass of poorly paid workers, with significant consequences for the shape of the labour market, wage levels and union organising. Finally, the union movement in the US faces many internal sources of weakness: it is notoriously corrupt in many places, has traditionally focused upon narrow economic gains (like some Australian unions), lacks a parliamentary partner, has endured a punishing expulsion of radicals which all but eliminated its politically conscious left, is amongst the most decentralised in the world and has been beset by skill, gender and racial divisions. On the positive side, US union resources are immense: for example unions own more than US\$300 million of real estate in Washington DC alone, and investment income is adequate to operate some unions indefinitely (Rothstein 1998:51). (Needless to say, such resources blunt the impulse to change.) These factors distinguish US unionism and its environment from Australia's in important ways.

So what can Australian unionists learn from a weaker, more fractured movement, that we can't invent for ourselves? Some important things, just as they could learn some things from us. Reflecting on the US experience is not some new form of cultural cringe. The US experience is instructive because the US movement is large and diverse. US unionism models many examples of long-lived organising attempts in an extra-ordinarily hostile environment - one that increasingly resembles our own. The US labour crisis is deeper and has been going on longer: their fight back effort is older. A progressive, organising response has been underway for many years in some unions where activists have fought to organise and mobilise members and against corruption - long before 'the organising model' became prominent. Finally, all progressive movements can learn from each other: neither anti-intellectualism or undifferentiated anti-Americanism have any place in a movement which faces a severe crisis of its own - one it shares with unionists in the US.

Key Questions in the US now

The US movement has enjoyed something of a partial renaissance in recent years as new leadership has taken over its national peak council, the AFL-CIO, and several large unions have aggressively adopted organising activity in sites that previously proved very difficult to unionise. But how much is US labour really changing and what are the odds of realising the promise of the AFL-CIO's 'New Voice'? How much, and how, does the old body of labour (its structure, culture, habits) weigh against change? Specifically, can the contradiction between the 'organising model' and bureaucratic control at mid-union level - where bureaucracy is most entrenched - be transcended? What are the missing ingredients for success? What else will it take? What US union initiatives, approaches and organisational structures etc, are working and how can they be quickly replicated? What is the role of labour education in making the shift: is there an 'organising' approach to labour education? These questions are being asked amongst US unionists now. There is much that Australian unions can draw on here - both to apply, and to avoid.

Can US unionism make it?

A wave of activism is underway at all levels in a significant number of US unions. It includes new organising strategies, mobilisation of existing members, active coalition with other social movements and organisations, innovations at

county, state and national peak councils, a massive education effort and the creation of a stronger political voice. Key unions like the Service Employees International Union, Communication Workers of America, Hotel and Restaurant Employees Union and the Teamsters (at least until the demise of Ron Carey's team), now all working with the active support of the AFL-CIO, are committing sizeable slices of their resources to organising – eventually escalating to 30 per cent of total annual budget in the case of the AFL-CIO. In 1996 only 15 Locals out of the 3000 in the US had moved 20 per cent of their budgets into organising. By 1998, Richard Bensinger estimated that 150 had done so (Whifford 1998). This represents a massive shift in human, political and financial capital. It is not hard to find inspiring models of activism in many places: in Las Vegas amongst construction workers; strawberry workers in California; hotel employees in St Louis; low wage, private sector workers in Seattle. A number of state and county AFL-CIO bodies have adopted innovative programs which reach out and involve their broader regional communities in efforts to raise minimum wages, facilitate organising and take unions closer to the centre of the community.

It's not hard to find inspiring models of activism in many places.

At the national level in Washington DC, the AFL-CIO has pursued many initiatives including Union Cities (see Case Study 1), expansion of the work of the Organizing Institute, and new education and mobilising campaigns. And there are many specific small scale organising efforts that are applying innovative tactics and achieving significant contract and unionisation gains. Unfortunately there are also many union Locals, labour councils, and some union Internationals that have not shifted from the sleepy complacency of the post-World War 2 era. (In the US, Internationals are those national unions to which individual Locals (equivalent to Australian branches or worksites) belong. These national bodies are 'international' in the sense that some have Locals from the US, Canada and Mexico.) As one senior official interviewed put it, the shift to organising at the International level 'is very uneven. Some are moving faster than the AFL-CIO, but not many. More unions are grappling with organising. When will results follow? I don't know when...and I don't know whether'.

There are also some signs of serious reversion. The triumph of Jimmy Hoffa JR, closely aligned to the union's 'old guard', in winning back the leadership of the Teamsters in late 1998 strikes an incalculable blow against the reform movement, one that will reverberate at the most senior levels of the AFL-CIO where the Teamsters are the largest affiliate. Hoffa - who has never been a Teamsters official - has identified himself with a return to 'authentic', old-style Teamster unionism that wins strong contracts for genuine Teamsters - the big-rig, truck-driving kind, rather than the part-time parcel delivery workers that Ron Carey's reform team championed.

In another significant change that gave pause to many enthusiasts for John Sweeney's 'New Voice' leadership team, the leader of the Organizing Institute, Richard Bensinger, who relentlessly pushed unions to move to organise the unorganised, was shifted from his job in mid-1998 and then left the national AFL-CIO, replaced by Kirk Adams 'a career bureaucrat and former political campaign manager with close ties to Sweeney' (Whifford 1998). Bensinger's departure represents a serious loss to the AFL-CIO and sends confusing signals about the commitment to the organising drive:

Case Study 1: SEEDING FROM THE TOP

The US labour movement is one of the most decentralised in the western world. Many thousands of local unions effectively control most of the movement's resources. Of course, some Locals are more centrally-directed, and most contribute to their 'Internationals' and peak councils, including state and county labour councils. So with limited money, how is the national peak body, the AFL-CIO going to get things moving at the local level where so much potential organising capacity lies?

Through a mix of strategies. The AFL-CIO has:

- begun to shift more of its budget to organising - aiming for 30 per cent
- pulled money back from international activities
- built up the Organising Institute, Union Summer, Field Mobilising and education resources
- maximised its leverage through state labour councils to push local organising, and reallocation of local union resources, in Union Cities.

Any AFL-CIO Central Labour Council (CLC) willing to make a serious commitment can join Union Cities. After resolving to pursue eight common strategies, CLCs can call on the AFL-CIO Field Mobilization Department for help - and some resources - in implementation. At the end of each calendar year, the work of every CLC is evaluated, and Union City status for those making significant progress, is reconfirmed. Successful CLCs will be widely publicised and given extra resources.

The goals, the strategies

GOAL 1: Changing to organise

- **Strategy:** Persuade at least half of union affiliates to devote more resources to organising, to develop a strong organising staff, implement a strategic organising plan and mobilise their local memberships around organising.
- **Actions:** Set an example to local unions by moving 30% of CLC resources to organising, establish organising committees, audit the region's organising prospects and opportunities, reward and highlight successes.

GOAL 2: Mobilising Against Anti-Union Employers

- **Strategy:** Recruit and activate at least 1% of CLC membership as a local mobilisation team.
- **Actions:** Establish a 'Street Heat' rapid response team including people from each union, to support union organising, pickets, community groups. Involve retired and unemployed members, families, those in union training, young people, and community supporters. Reward affiliates for mobilising members into 'Street Heat'. Set goals to mobilise members regularly: for example, instead of a CLC meeting, take action on some union issue - supporting a pay claim, organising - or a community issue to show that unions aren't a special interest and broaden the face of labour.

GOAL 3: Building Political Power and Community Coalitions

- **Strategy:** Organise local political committees. Build community alliances and support good candidates. Hold winners accountable.
- **Actions:** form a political committee to plan, lobby and take action. Mobilise members to lobby and act. Set a time commitment target for activists. Work with church and community to mobilise politically.

Goal 4: Promoting Economic Growth, Protecting Communities

- **Strategy:** work with others to influence local economic development and employment.
- **Actions:** Close off 'low road' options to profit - like exploitation of outworkers. And build the 'high road' (high wage and skill jobs) through coalition with allies to develop alternative plans and research options. Follow public money and ensure that the associated jobs, subsidies and contracts are union and create good jobs.

GOAL 5: Educating Members in Paycheck Economics

- **Strategy:** train members about the relationship between the economy and workers' lives.
- **Actions:** Establish an education committee. Develop shared materials on political economy and conduct train-the-trainer and study circles.

GOAL 6: Generating Support for the Right to Organise

- **Strategy:** Persuade local or state governments to support the right to organise.
- **Actions:** lobby for labour law reform. Get politicians' support for organising drives, strikes, and in lobbying employers to recognise unions.

GOAL 7: Reflecting the Faces of Our Members

- **Strategy:** work towards proportional representation of women, young people and immigrants throughout CLC structures.
- **Actions:** Encourage unions to select representative delegates, select and recruit under-represented groups to CLC positions. Evaluate progress. Create education and 'shadowing' or apprenticeship opportunities for potential leaders.

GOAL 8: Increasing Union Membership 3% Annually by the Year 2000

- **Strategy:** Make organising top priority and aim to grow by a specific amount.
- **Actions:** Ask of every strategic decision, program and budget line - in organisation, education, politics, negotiation, community outreach - will it help us grow? Encourage all affiliates to devote 30% of all resources to organising and set objectives for their numerical growth.

Some Lessons

- **Follow the money: Resources, resources, resources:** The emphasis is on making sure that all of the union's capacities are being effectively used to build power, to bring in new members and activate those we have. This means consciously managing all the human, financial and political resources, rather than letting them drift along in the established lines of spending and working.
- **Evaluate:** In order to know whether we are on the right track, we need to evaluate our success. Are the numbers growing? Are political allies delivering for workers?
- **Build on success.** Reward success. By publicly acknowledging good outcomes, and successful unions and individuals, we draw attention to success and reward it.
- **Leverage resources to seed innovation:** the AFL-CIO has used its limited resources and influence to encourage affiliates to change, to reassess budgets and activity, and to reward success with real money and recognition.
- **Broaden the face of labour:** Union Cities helps take labour out of the corner that conservatives want to confine it to, and locate it in the broader community with shared interests, goals and action.
Action: all the emphasis is upon action and activism - not plans, meetings, and just talk.

Ask of every strategic decision, program and budget line, will it help us grow? Will it build power?

Bensinger's role at the AFL-CIO, as he defined it, was part cheer leader, part ass-kicker, and part conscience. Before closed door sessions of the AFL-CIO executive council, in countless small gatherings with union members across the country, and at private weekend retreats for leaders of big locals, Bensinger and his band of what he called contrarian bureaucrats were leading a wrenching internal revolt – an attempt as Bensinger put it - to drive a rapid instant, massive cultural transformation in the labor movement'. (Whifford 1998).

Diverse accounts of his departure circulated - ranging from the view that Sweeney simply bungled his management of Bensinger, through to a view that the shift signaled Sweeney's retreat from organising. At the most extreme, some suggested that Sweeney had essentially given up: 'that barring another social upheaval on a scale with the 1930s, he no longer has confidence that large-scale organizing is a winning strategy', a view that Sweeney dismisses (Whifford, 1998). Senior officials and organising directors of some major unions were critical of Sweeney's actions.

Can US unionism win a turnaround and revive union density? To offer a crude assessment of its prospects, on a scale of 1-10, with 1 being it can't (the goal cannot be realised) and 10 being it will (a turnaround is highly probable), we guess it hovers somewhere around the 3-4 mark - that is, its on the wrong side of the mid-point; winning higher density presents a poor betting prospect. (Australia, we would suggest, sits somewhere in the middle, mostly because of its little cushion of 30 per cent density - fast deflating - and a range of historical and political factors which place its prospects higher - but the clock is ticking). Unless some major new social change occurs - on the scale of events preceding the 1930s and 1940s CIO organising drive - it is hard to see even the rejuvenated force that is now pulsing through many quarters of the US movement, winning through.

We make this negative assessment of its prospects on several grounds. Firstly, the numbers that unions must persuade to join are very large. A massive organising effort is required to win any sizeable increase in union presence. Secondly, labour law remains firmly pitched against unionisation, and the presence of a Democratic president even in a slightly less Republican-controlled Congress offers no hope of change in the foreseeable future. Thirdly, a rash of activity at the commanding heights of the labour movement - at AFL-CIO level, or amongst national union leaderships - is not enough: 'We can move 100 per cent into organizing at the AFL-CIO' Bensinger explained last spring. 'But if nobody changes out there, we're dead' (Whifford 1998: 3). As another observer put it: 'Sweeney's success can only come if he can inspire, motivate and beg leaders in the unions themselves to reorder priorities, assume political risks, put labor's long-term interest ahead of short-term pressures, and become an organizing force' (Rothstein 1998:51).

While some peak councils, industry/regional organising drives, and coalition groups are moving very effectively and quickly, and with great commitment and creativity, many are not. The blazing examples do not look like enough right now to constitute a majority even amongst peak councils themselves - let alone a force that can carry the great proportion of union activity that lies at the International or even more decentralised, Local level. This level is the most important sphere of US union life - where much of the money and potential for organising lie. To win a real shift in density, many union Locals need to shift

To win a real shift in density, many union Locals need to shift the balance of their activity towards organising the unorganised

the balance of their activity towards organising the unorganised and mobilising current members. As one official observed in interview, the shift to change 'lacks pressure from below. In its absence we find leaders trying to pull their organisations along. We need to build that pressure from below'. Jobs with Justice – see Case Study 8 – presents one such effort.

Once again, some extraordinary examples of reshaping, commitment, fine leadership, rank and file involvement and new organising exist. But - alongside the legal barriers and pressures resulting from a globalising capital - there is a persistent dead weight of full-time officials - alongside members - who are attached to servicing and being serviced . These act like a lead counter-weight attached to the legs of the movement that are trying so hard to move the whole body. At the moment the deadweight appears to have the dominant effect.

Fourthly, corruption and seat-warming by paid union officials at various levels of the movement remains widespread. Finally, there is the question of the capacity of the movement to manage itself and the necessary change. Are the movement's skills up to managing the transition? There are some important examples that are positive, but it seems that one of the major lessons out of current US experience - the Teamster's debacle being the most telling example (see case Study 5) - is related to capacity to manage union organisations as they are transformed from one model of working (economistic, corrupt, undemocratic, localised fiefdoms) to another (democratic, participatory, honest, non-economistic).

That rudimentary assessment offered, it is not clear what more activists and leaders within the movement can do, other than more of what they are doing, including using peak council dollars to seed models of good practice; educating leaders and activists across the movement in the organising model; convincing individual Internationals and Locals to work together to organise the unorganised on a craft/occupational, industry or regional level; creating new pools of activists within unions to stimulate new organising and ways of working; and preventing the passing of new anti-union measures by keeping political relations functional with the Democrats.

But will this be enough? Perhaps not. The crude score we offer is not in any way to suggest that giving up on the project is an option for the committed activist - since without even 'holding the line' activities it is clear that the scenario would be much worse for working people in the US. Clearly, holding against further decline, and ameliorating the force of attack, is a very valid political objective for labour activists. So, what can Australia learn from the enormous flurry of activity in the US at present? There are eight main areas where useful insights for the strategy and tactics of Australian unions can be drawn and we consider these in turn.

A Sense of Urgency

While there are still many areas of the US movement that could accurately be described as sleepy, there is energetic movement, sustained by a deep sense of crisis, in many places. Activists who might have been considered impolite hotheads are now licensed in many places to have their head and push hard for more organising activity and greater mobilisation amongst existing members. It took until the US movement reached a unionisation rate of half

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our own to generate such a sense of urgency, activity and impoliteness. The lesson for Australia is obvious: the crisis has arrived and a sense of urgency should be the dominant sensation. Our little pillow of union density - fast deflating - provides a vitally important, but narrow, opportunity to take decisive measures to rebuild union density. To date, despite the dramatic decline in union density and the onslaught of labour laws by conservative governments, only some unions are mobilising creatively. There is concern, but relatively little innovation. Servicing the core membership predominates.

Australian labour has a long record of social unionism. US experience reinforces the importance of broad objectives.

The Industrial Agenda: Beyond Economism to Families and Working Life

The quality of life of working families appears centre stage in the US movement's strategy in a way that is new to many - at least this century. The quality of jobs, importance of family incomes, equal pay, health care and education are all prominent amongst labour's claims. The limitations of economic unionism seem to have been well learned and transcended - at AFL-CIO level particularly. Workplace stress, speed-ups, their links to family life also appear, and these claims have been shaped in direct response to serious, methodical research about the concerns of working people. Goals that reach well 'beyond economism' are firmly at the centre and reinforced by much of the work with non-labour social movements like church and welfare groups.

The Australian labour movement has a long record of social unionism both at peak council level and in many unions. US experience reinforces the importance of these objectives, and a union voice that speaks as a voice for working families - in all their diversity, whether inside unions or outside them.

Organising

At the rhetorical level, at least, the language of organising and the hazards of a servicing-type unionism, saturate the US movement amongst full-time officials, activists and stewards. An impressive and extensive shift in understanding has occurred, so that the balance between servicing/organising has shifted in a wide range of places (including Locals, Internationals, peak bodies). This is a major accomplishment.

• The Role of the New AFL-CIO Leadership in Organising

The AFL-CIO under John Sweeney's leadership has played a critical role in shifting its own resources towards organising, fostering the same shift in state and county AFL-CIOs and individual Internationals and Locals, and undertaking new programs which stimulate organising. For example, 30 per cent (or around US\$20 million) of the AFL-CIO's resources are projected to be spent on organising within a few years; over a thousand young people participated in the 'Union Summer' internship in 1996 and slightly less in 1997. (Under this initiative young recruits with an interest in learning about union activities spend relatively short periods of time in specific union organisations where they experience unionism and organising, often by participating in a specific campaign or project, or by more general 'shadowing' of existing officials.) Sweeney's team is committed to a broader voice for labour, within revitalised social movements.

He has increased the proportion of women, people of colour and other minorities on the AFL-CIO board from 17 to 27 per cent (Milkman 1998) and has beefed up the industrial punch of unions through support for the Teamsters struggle at UPS and a higher minimum wage. The AFL-CIO's Organizing Institute has been crucial to moving organising up the union agenda. The Organizing Institute was created by the AFL-CIO Executive Council in 1989 to enhance organising and foster organisers. Over a thousand organisers had undertaken training by 1995.

There are other important examples of organising education programs, for example, Construction Organizing Membership Education and Training (COMET) through which the fifteen construction unions had, by 1994, educated over 100,000 members about the necessity of organising the unorganised. Other unions have drawn on the COMET model (Grabelsky J. and R. Hurd, 1994). The Institute has unswervingly pushed organising, training many hundreds of young organisers and sending them out to unions. Regional industry organising drives are also underway in several locations. For example, the AFL-CIO is assisting three unions who have traditionally feuded with each other (the Service Employees International Union, the Hotel and Restaurant Employees Union and the Operating Engineers) with a US\$1 million budget and 25 organisers to undertake a 'wall-to-wall' organising drive in New Orleans in the fastest growing national industry: tourism, hotels and casinos. This is a city-wide, industry-wide drive amongst low paid housekeepers, waiters and kitchen workers, many of whom are earning minimum wages of around US\$15,000 per year, despite working in luxury hotels. Many are black or Hispanic.

Individual Unions on the Move

Some large unions are committing a growing proportion of their resources to organising new members (usually referred to as 'external organising') while attempting to develop new ways of looking after existing members (through, for example, mobilising the capacities of activist members and drawing them into greater voluntary work within their union). For example, some unions have given more and more responsibility for local workplace grievance resolution over to their (properly trained) workplace representatives, liberating full-time officials for organising work. Others have called upon workplace activists to donate a given number of hours per year to organising work beyond their workplace, complementing the organising work of full-time paid officials.

The Communication Workers Union has undertaken a number of successful union organising initiatives under the leadership of its organising director, Larry Cohen. These have been based on the principle that 'local unions in their own communities can best organize the unorganized' because they can best develop 'leads' in their communities, are not outsiders, are cost effective and mean that organisers can lead a more normal, non-motel based existence (Nissen and Rosen 1998:3). To successfully organise in their communities, local unions need support through staff officials. This more organic approach to recruiting, rather than the 'drop in organising blitz' fosters local organising skills – usually best developed on the job and through experience - and builds local recruitment capacity.

Some unions have given more responsibility to workplace delegates, liberating full-time officials for recruitment work.

The Children's home and the Organisation of Public Employees (OPEU) in Portland Oregon

Case Study 2: ORGANISING THE UNORGANISED

Union organising in the US is a hard struggle, with labour law pitched to favour employees and prevent unionisation. The case of organising workers in a home for children under the care of the state illustrates some of the difficulties, including:

- the challenge of 'organising 30 million people, 100 at a time'.
- the use of mobilising tactics within the workplace and beyond
- great persistence - even on such difficult terrain as community services where vulnerable children are the clients.

Children who are in transit to foster homes in Portland are looked after at the Children's Home. The home was unionised and new pay and conditions were won in 1997, through the following activities:

- **the organising committee** began meeting, and after 6 weeks was broad and deep enough to get card signing underway. (If just over a majority of employees sign cards calling for a vote, then a 'union certification' election can be held to see if a majority of employees want to be represented by a union. The Oregon Public Employees Union (OPEU) - the union backing the workers - judge that a certification election is unlikely to win unless 70% of employees are willing to support a petition for election.)
- **the march:** With 70% of employees signing cards, the committee and supporters marched on management who declined to immediately recognise the union in view of the high level of support. 30 days later the certification election was held. The vote was overwhelmingly in favour: 105 to 17.
- **the challenge:** the employer then began a series of 12 legal challenges to the vote - all trivial and unsuccessful but designed to delay and frustrate (is paying for a worker's donut over the street really buying their vote?).
- **maintaining unity** - for two months until the hearing of these complaints, the committee distributed a weekly flyer. Staff wore union buttons each Wednesday, and took 'unity breaks' to share a 'we are the union'-decorated cake.
- **a community campaign:** the workers took their issue to the local community and media through a 'Justice Document' - which explained 'who, what and why union'. Community supporters signed it, before it was presented to management pressuring them to cancel the NLRB hearings.
- **the employer escalates:** when the NLRB threw the challenges out, the employer appealed to the national NLRB - which can take years.
- **the union replies:** the workers took a vote on whether they were willing to wait. An overwhelming majority voted for a strike.
- **manipulate the clients:** Management came unglued and began to alarm the home's young children about the disruption that a strike would bring to their lives. Much worker angst.

- **rally and coalition:** The local Jobs with Justice Coalition mobilised community support for a public rally marching on the site where replacement labour was being recruited. The committee reached out to agencies funding the home who supported the workers' right to organise
- **management** then succumbed and recognised the union - but deferred and dragged out bargaining of new pay and conditions.
- **public pain:** members of the home's prestigious board found their own businesses picketed. Workers formed a 'reception line' down which board members had to walk to meetings. The workers took another vote to strike for decent conditions and used delivery of the strike notice to attract media attention - and eventually a year after the first vote to become union, they won new wages and conditions - a contract.

The lessons

1. Multiple tactics:

The Childrens Home organisers used a variety of methods:

- potential members took all kinds of action within the workplace which built unity
- they involved local supporters in the community - Jobs with Justice, church, media, family
- they targeted prominent board members in their workplaces and businesses
- they won support from funding agencies
- they fought the case legally - but backed up with action on the job and in the community. Without that, they would still be in court today.

2. Into the community

They took their issue into the community, and won support through activities that called on support like signing on to a petition. The potential members undertook all kinds of activities together - from 'unity' cake breaks to rallying and marching on management

3. Building unity

Worker activists within the workplace took on the organising job for themselves with vigour. They were creative, brave and persistent - and they involved all workers through big and small actions -ranging from marches to wearing badges.

4. A claim for their clients

The Local has worked hard to lobby for increased funding for the service and kept the quality of care at the centre of its claim.

The union has fostered networks amongst external organisers within the union, organised three-day retreats for them and publicly recognised their contributions and successes, fostering 'a partnership between locals and the national union in organizing tasks' (Nissen and Rosen 1998:7).

The involvement of local unionists in the recruitment of new workers also offers challenges. As one labour educator comments 'Volunteer organising committees are very realistic and positive when organised workers experience aggressive anti-union employers. This is a real education and can be very powerful. But [volunteer involvement] can be a problem if we call on volunteers and they have nothing to do. If we fire people up, we must have something for them to do'.

At the local level, innovative organising efforts abound, alongside examples of efforts to organise on an industry and regional basis. (See Case Study 2 The Children's Home, Case Study 3 LA MAP and Case Study 10 The Yale Campaign).

In recognition of the difficulty of organising in many workplaces, and winning union certification, there is increasing interest in the issue of 'minority unionism': that is, rather than wait to win formal union recognition through a certification ballot, usually followed by a campaign to win a collective contract, some are advocating unionism based around the minority group of employees who will join a union (often around a third) regardless of their prospects of winning a certification ballot and thence a union contract (Nissen 1998, Summers 1992).

Research about union organising tactics suggest that the choice of tactics affects recruitment outcomes, independent of employer tactics, workplace characteristics, and organisers' backgrounds. Brofenbrenner found that rank and file organising strategies (like those used by the CWA described above) based in local organising committees, membership involvement in making local contacts and emphasis upon dignity, justice and fairness rather than simply money, were all associated with greater organising success (Brofenbrenner 1997:211). Other researchers have found that US unions with highly developed administrative structures and decentralised governance systems are more successful than highly centralised unions with weaker administrative structures (Jarley et al. 1998:274).

Barriers to Organising

But important barriers inhibit thorough-going renovation across the movement. The US movement is very decentralised so a shift in union strategy, resource allocation and organising effort is essential at the individual union level, and especially in the union Local. On average, 70 per cent of union dues are retained by union Locals, the great bulk spent on negotiating and enforcing contracts for existing members. At present US unions spend approximately 3 per cent of their resources on organising the unorganised - a long way from the 30 per cent target that Sweeney and AFL-CIO reformers promulgate. As one commentator puts it 'Sweeney's success can only come if he can inspire, motivate and beg leaders in the unions themselves to reorder priorities, assume political risks, put labor's long-term interest ahead of short-term pressures, and become an organizing force' (Rothstein 1998:51).

Organising based amongst rank and file members in their communities, and emphasising dignity, justice and fairness are associated with greater organising success.

At the Local level the interests of insiders (existing members) are divided from the 'outsiders' (potential members). Local union funds are often viewed as a resource to be used principally to improve and protect the wages and conditions of those who have paid them: as a resource belonging to the insiders and their servicing. The traditions of fractured enterprise and craft-based unionism are pervasive, working against a class solidarity that reaches the unorganised and fostering a narrow, economistic culture: more a set of individualised interests, than a movement. Thirdly, the lack of clear jurisdictional boundaries with respect to union coverage encourage competition between unions for existing and new members and such competition between unions is still commonplace in many locations and industries.

In many ways, Australian unions are better placed to face the organising challenge: we have a relatively small number of unions amongst whom competitive unionism occurs but on a much lesser scale than in North America: this is a most important legacy of union amalgamation over the past decade, and the 'conveniently belong' provisions. Secondly, our movement has a coherent, authoritative single peak council in the ACTU which has projected a role for itself that is often - though far from always and rarely without some controversy - highly directive and interventionist in some individual union affairs. Most importantly, most Australian unions have some degree of coherent national organisation, whether in relation to policy, budget, industrial work, and/or personnel. While there are examples of local/state fiefdoms or disaggregated (and antagonistic) industry divisions within the one union, they do not constitute the majority of unions. What is more, our union movement does not - yet - have as its foundation unit, the enterprise-based 'Local' structure - despite steps in that direction through the *Workplace Relations Act* 1996. Such small, multiple, localised structures, greatly complicate the possibility of centrally-led steps to, for example, emphasize organising and change resource allocation.

A final complication for the US organising effort relates to the mechanics of taking the rhetoric of organising into reality. Even in leading edge organisations the shift from servicing the insiders, to recruiting the unorganised, is proving complex and sometimes a source of conflict and difficulty as old cultures clash with the new. The existing population of union officials generally have well established habits of servicing and contract negotiation that are not easily transformed into organising powerhouses. This habit is reinforced by the established expectations of existing members, accustomed to particular services from their unions.

Theory into Action

In terms of action then - and not surprisingly - the shift to organising is much more partial and patchy in the US than the grasp of the ideas in theory, just as in Australia. While some have made large strides and modeled the necessity of a new organising push, significant unions appear to have either struggled to shift resources to fit the new emphasis on external and internal organising (for example, the United Food and Commercial Workers of America (UFCW)), or have simply not seriously countenanced such a refit (for example the Union of Auto Workers (UAW) and the Machinists).

The shift from servicing to organising is proving complex as old cultures clash with the new.

LA MAP

*An attempt
to organise
across
industries
and unions.*

Case Study 3: A NEW WAY TO ORGANISE MANUFACTURING WORKERS

The Los Angeles Manufacturing Project (LA MAP) was conceived in 1994 as a large community focused organising drive to unionise in the biggest light manufacturing region of the USA. Over 400,000 people are employed along a 20 mile strip of the Alameda Corridor near the Port of Los Angeles. Most workers are non-union, two thirds are Latino and almost 10 per cent are Asia-Pacific migrants. Nearly all are low paid.

In the early 1990s there had been a series of wild cat workers actions amongst low paid migrant workers - cleaners, car accessory assemblers, and dry-wallers in the building industry. Some joined unions and secured contracts.

Peter Olney, an experienced labour organiser, realised the potential for bottom up organising in the region. With Goetz Wolfe, a labour researcher from UCLA, they put together a research and organising plan. Olney's vision for LA MAP drew on the organising experience of the CIO in the 1930s where grass roots innovative organising occurred across industries successfully - outside established unions of the day.

The four principles behind the plan were:-

1. Win union recognition without relying on the conventional legal mechanism of the National Labor Relations Board. Recruit and pressure the employer to recognise the union and bargain a contract directly.
2. Organise whole industry sectors not just individual companies or "hot shops". This would maximise the likelihood that wages and conditions would be lifted across the sector rather than individual companies being priced out and shutting down.
3. Create an independent organising body which participating unions funded. Organisers could then recruit workers without worrying about union jurisdictional niceties. The workers - at least initial - would be joining LA MAP.
4. Base the organising in the migrant communities. Build trust and recognition among the religious, sporting and welfare organisations in the communities rather than just focusing on the target companies.

Early work on the project was promising. Nine unions contributed an initial \$25,000 each to allow a feasibility study of the most promising firms and sectors. The AFL-CIO national leadership foreshadowed significant financial support. Staff and students at the UCLA conducted the detailed corporate research. LA MAP leaders went out into the communities to prepare for the organising drives.

What went wrong?

After a solid beginning, individual union support for the project began to wane. Most of the nine participating unions were not prepared to make the large ongoing financial contribution required to move the project on. After initial seeding money, the Project called for a \$250,000 per year contribution from each union without any assured membership outcome. This was a huge leap for unions in a Project that they did not control.

One by one the unions peeled off, preferring to concentrate on other recruiting initiatives that they controlled. Nor did the national AFL-CIO come through with the anticipated big contributions. Only the Teamsters stayed in, donating \$200,000 in 1996/97 and allowing LA MAP to make some break-throughs in the baked goods industry among drivers. But the struggle between the old guard Teamsters and Carey's new leadership in California took its toll and the Teamsters withdrew from the Project.

LA MAP limped on for a short period before closing down in early 1998.

Some commentators believe that the long lead time between conception and the first organising drives was too great - that it would have been better to start organising in some sectors early and build momentum and confidence of unions in the project.

"The question is how do we - the unions - fit in? I've become convinced that union organisers can't be of the motel school. You can't just send a few people into town, put them up at a motel, collect authorisation cards and file for an NLRB election. It's just not working. It's not how the CIO operated in the 1930s. The unionisation came from the bottom up."

Tom Gallagher (1998:14)

***'You can't
just send a
few people
into
town...and
file for an
NLRB
election...'***

“One of the biggest obstacles to progress are the dinosaurs, the old white guys in leadership doing what they are doing forever...”
**Jobs with Justice
Organiser**

In some Locals in the United Food and Commercial Workers Union, where the leadership have decided on organising, the long-tenured full-time officials have been compulsorily required to retrain in ‘the organising model’ and do so with great reluctance. Alongside them sit, in some locations, recently recruited young organisers – ‘a free, warm body’ as one described himself - employed through ‘special’ funds whose commitment to organising is undermined - even subverted - by old hands. ‘New’ money and ideas and even people can make little progress when the weight of the established, dominant ethos is subtly pitched against them. As one organiser in Jobs with Justice put it ‘One of the biggest obstacles to progress are the dinosaurs, the old white guys in leadership doing what they are doing forever. They have a real tight grip on their unions’.

The historical legacy of individual union cultures is also an impediment in some places. To give one example, union contracts in some workplaces compulsorily require union membership and organisers enforce this clause by causing unfinancial members to be dismissed. Not unexpectedly, some employers take advantage of this negative ‘union enforcer’ role and entice sacked workers into anti-union greenfields sites to compete with the compulsorily unionised.

In other locations, some activists are critical of large, rich unions like the machinists union (where some Local have over 40,000 members with a single employer) yet maintain an inward-looking focus on unionised production workers, fail to recruit clerical workers, maintain traditional uncritical support for Democrats, and fail to assist local external organising drives or initiate their own. In a different example, the UAW has established new organising positions in some locations, but has shoehorned ex-presidents into some of the new posts, many having little interest or commitment to organising. As one member-activist said:

The UAW is real sluggish when it comes to organising. Look down this road. My plant and the one next door are completely organised and alongside us - an entire road of factories that aren’t union. Never been touched. Why not? Whose job is it? Traditionally its been the job of the Organising Department of the International. They are pretty bureaucratic. There has now been talk of Locals themselves doing it, but its expensive, it takes energy, and it can be dangerous. Some of those down the road might want a union and I wouldn’t know...We have more organisers from the International now in the region, but they are all patronage jobs. All white, and mostly guys. I’d like to say its getting better, but I don’t know.

These organising dilemmas are well summarised by Richard Hurd:

Initial enthusiasm among adventuresome unionists for the organizing model ultimately has waned in the face of internal resistance. Officers and staff, comfortable with their traditional roles, have displayed a reluctance to reduce services compounded by a fear of the unknown. Members have accommodated to this attachment to the servicing model; they typically resist efforts to reduce services and question expenditures of dues on external organizing. Even those unionists who view organizing as the top priority have struggled with the relationship between servicing and organizing. Some have argued that organizing success depends in part on the union’s reputation in servicing and yet the reality is that the only way

to increase organizing on a significant scale is to shift resources away from servicing. Most important, mobilization has proven to be harder and more staff-intensive than traditional servicing. This has raised concerns about draining already limited resources away from organizing. (Hurd 1998:240).

Hurd concludes that the duality of 'servicing *versus* organising' has been too crude and has failed to 'elucidate a clear path from servicing to external organizing' (ibid.:24). Establishing such a 'clear path' is a major challenge to existing union culture and management (see below).

A number of interesting controversies have arisen around US organising. Firstly, what is the relationship between the organising model and democracy? Does a shift to external organisation and the mobilisation of existing members automatically imply a more democratic union? Activists point out that this is far from guaranteed, as newly mobilised members sometimes appear as new ammunition fired at centrally selected objectives, like political campaigns (Slaughter 1996:37). Not surprisingly, democracy is sacrificed in an environment of defensive crisis. The organising model is not, then, necessarily a democratising model. Secondly, a debate about the method of choosing new organising sites is also lively: should unions 'go after' workplaces where problems lead potential members to unions (many of which may be small or strategically insignificant)? Or do unions need to be more hardheaded and pro-actively target larger, strategically placed workplaces where soft pressure points exist and/or winning a union will build power in an industry or region? Thirdly, how much emphasis should be placed on time- and energy-consuming membership mobilisation, and how much on tactics that target corporate pressure points like financial sources or consumer opinion, in an attempt to shortcut to organising victory? No doubt these and other controversies will continue to emerge from the diverse US experience.

The duality of 'servicing versus organising' has been too crude - and has failed to map a clear path from the one to the other.

• Lessons About Organising

A number of lessons emerge from US organising practice. Perhaps the simplest and most significant is the importance of a conscious allocation and reallocation of resources. Kim Cook an organiser with the Service Employees International Union describes the SEIU mantra as 'resources, resources resources': if the union is not deliberately directing all its resources - its voluntary/unpaid and paid human capacity, its financial capital, and its political capital - towards its goals, then it is squandering opportunity. Few Australian unions, at state and federal levels, have evaluated the total scope of their resources and sorted their use in terms of union objectives. Without this strategic evaluation, important opportunities are lost and assets are frittered away.

Secondly, efficient use of seeding money and projects can contribute to important demonstration effects. The AFL-CIO has made strategic use of relatively small amounts of money, to stimulate action in a range of places - in the development of new organisers (the Organising Institute), the promulgation of the labour movement as an exciting place for young people of talent to work (Union Summer), encouragement to Internationals and state labour councils to organise the unorganised (the Mobilisation and Field Services program) and education of the broad population of activists in political economy and organising skills.

Workers Rights Boards

Case Study 4: CREATING OUR OWN PUBLIC ACCOUNTABILITY FORUMS

The use of Workers' Rights Boards emerged from a 'day of action' at National Labor Relations Board offices around the US in 1993. As part of these actions, Jobs With Justice enlisted prominent citizens in public investigations of worker abuse. More and more groups have been making use of this tactic.

In Wisconsin, for example, as part of the Campaign for a Sustainable Milwaukee, unionists and community members have established a 'Workers' Rights Board' which takes public testimony from the community on issues affecting working families. The Board then works on actions that various groups - church, union, women's, and others - can take on the testimony that has been heard. The emphasis is on hearing people's direct experience, and then taking action in response to it.

The Milwaukee Workers' Rights Board is made up of representatives of religious, community, political and labour groups (four from each), who hold the hearings and assist workers regarding unfair treatment and discrimination.

PUBLIC HEARINGS

- In December 1997, over 400 people turned up to assess the impact of welfare elimination on Milwaukee area workers, and to hear and encourage the many workers and families badly affected by welfare changes. As a result welfare providers have changed their policies to better serve residents.
- The Board has developed a Living Wage 'score-card' to build an effective voice for low wage workers, monitor working conditions, draw attention to sub-standard arrangements, and help workers address workplace discrimination and bad working conditions.
- In September 1998 the Board held an inquiry into low wages and pay discrimination in the city's fast food restaurants, after a major racial discrimination lawsuit was filed against a fast food outlet. In a packed room, the Board took testimony over several hours from individual workers. They spoke of unfair pay and promotional practices, sexual and racial discrimination, bad food hygiene, and many other problems. The event attracted widespread publicity.
- The five point Action Plan adopted out of the fast food hearings called on outlets to adopt a code of conduct towards employees including a fair grievance procedure, and recognition of the right to unionise and to quick response to problems. Rallies, consumer boycotts and leafleting of offending fast food outlets followed the hearings.

LESSONS

When the media pays little attention to long term problems that affect the poorly paid and unemployed, we need to establish our own accountability forums.

The Workers' Rights Board in Milwaukee:

- Involves an inclusive community – including elected politicians, unionists, and religious leaders
- Takes direct, personal, public evidence from people affected, and this is witnessed by the community
- Chooses issues that affect the low paid in the community, highlighting circumstances or actions that have no place in our community
- Decides on an Action Plan (usually five points) which people present at hearings are encouraged to adopt and take action around
- Follows up testimony with tangible support for those affected, and action to publicise and change the circumstances and behavior which led to the hearings.

Thirdly, US experience provides some outstanding models of leadership and real coalition: for example the Milwaukee and King County Labor Councils which have made effective use of resources and coalition with their communities (see Case Study 4 on the Workers Rights Board and Case Study 6, the King County Labor Council). Good leadership - particularly in terms of relationships with community organisations, and an adventurous vision about the possibilities - appears to have been critical to the successful organising and mobilisation that has arisen from these sources. An injection of funds has been important in such locations in stimulating action, but has proved far from a sufficient condition: genuine coalition with some history of joint action and success are vital. This is reinforced by experiences where money has flowed to Local unions but little has changed.

The challenge of organising under the US legal regime - a matter of organising 30 million workers 100 at a time, as one observer put it - means that strategists have adopted industry and regional organising drives where individual unions work together at wall-to-wall organising. These and other US experiences reinforce the importance of avoiding territorial competition for membership. Energy is drained in many locations by jurisdictional fights - for example, rank and file carpenters suggest that these consume a quarter of their union's capacity at every level. Personality/ego conflicts also hamstring organising in some quarters - for example Locals within the same International can be seen locking horns and competing for members, with debilitating consequences that impede recruitment. This is sometimes complicated by conflict between different levels of unions. For example, an AFL-CIO decision to organise, say, hotels in a region by working with enthusiastic local labour councils and unions, means that some of these unions take actions that might be at odds with the program and goals of their International. In this way local mobilisation sometimes results in real tensions at the International level. Of course, such local mobilisations sometimes also challenge the established International culture - perhaps even its personnel - alongside its priorities.

Culture, leadership and management

"The change from servicing to organising is messy. And each union has its own special mess."

Organisational culture, leadership and management emerge from current US experience as key to an increase in union density, and mobilisation of that density. The range of union cultures is vast, across Internationals, Locals, and peak councils, but in many places where change is advanced, difficult questions of transition have arisen: as one experienced union manager put it 'The change from servicing to organising is messy. And each union has its own special mess. And some smell worse than others'. Even leading-edge unions are struggling to process the internal implications of a shift in their mission towards external organising and internal mobilisation. As one tired official well acquainted with the necessity to increase organising put it: 'We have 17,000 members and they all just want to be looked after'. And that reluctance is not one-sided: 'The truth is that a lot of staffers would rather be servicers. Organising is too hard. Servicing is more satisfying. At the end of the day you have taken care of someone's problem' as an organiser put it.

One large union, recently arranged a meeting of its organising supervisors across the US, to find that conflicts around the transition to organising were sizzling in most Locals as they struggle to accommodate servicing demands alongside organising targets. This complex change in union mission has

implications for workload, work type, membership expectations, supervision, education and leadership.

At least four varieties of approach are evident in response to the managerial crunch that this shift is causing in US unions:

- **Churn and Turn:**

The most common is probably best titled 'churn and turn'. In this approach painful, successive waves of employee turnover and anguish meet the push to change, with many good people burned in the process as they protest the change, or its pace, or its demands - and leave the union or movement in waves (sometimes more than one). The result is slow change in organisational culture and much buffeting of all, including the young and enthusiastic, the experienced and committed, and the leadership.

- **Bleed and stall:**

In a second approach which might be called 'bleed and stall', the rhetoric of organisational change is pegged to the mast head, people train and learn it - compulsorily in some places - and the 'organising model' is loaded on top of the existing servicing work (collecting dues, handling grievances, bargaining contracts). As a result, union staff grumble, resist, and isolate the enthusiasts - but in general simply don't do it, and don't leave the organisation.

- **Front end refit:**

In this third, much less common, approach a leadership committed to rapid change, re-call or re-advertise all union jobs and re-engineer the organisation, with new job descriptions which relate to a new structure in a new organising union. Heads roll, as those who do not fit are simply retrenched.

- **Process and remodel:**

Finally, and rarest of all appears to be a 'process and remodel' approach where the organisational change is worked through with staff, members and leadership, supervision is adjusted, clear long term and short term goals are agreed, staff are actively managed (on a weekly, even daily basis), and some people elect to leave, or are counseled or forced to do so.

The lesson here seems to be that unless some process of deliberate management and anticipation of change and its conflicts is followed, and the change is directly and openly managed, then the rigors of the front-end refit may become necessary. Certainly the inaction of the 'bleed and stall' road, and the torture of 'churn and turn' appear undesirable and fairly widespread in some unions. This is not a trivial question of management styles but goes to the heart of the possibility of change. The best ideas and most exquisitely refined strategy are worth nothing if a successful plan and process for their implementation does not exist. Recent experience in the Teamsters union illustrates some of the difficulties facing new union leaderships (Case Study 5).

The best ideas and most exquisitely refined strategy are worth nothing if a successful plan and process for their implementation does not exist.

Case Study 5: The Teamsters and the UPS Dispute

'Whoever controls the Teamsters influences the entire labor movement, and, to an extent the national political landscape (Corn, The Nation, April 6, 1998: 12).*

When Ron Carey's team somewhat unexpectedly won the 1991 national elections for the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, a relatively inexperienced leadership took control of one of the biggest and most influential union in the US. Ron Carey had narrowly defeated Jimmy Hoffa JR, for President on a platform of democratising the union, ending corruption and facilitating a militant participative culture. Few on the Carey slate elected to the Executive Board had been full-time, paid union officials, and almost all the presidents of the Locals across the nation had backed Hoffa or other contenders for President. Carey inherited an international, regional and local structure stacked with antagonistic, well paid officials - some with multiple salaries who were opposed to greater rank and file involvement in the union and in many cases were comfortable doing deals with employers.

Carey's victory was an expression of immense dissatisfaction among rank and file members with the old, corrupt leadership. It was also the outcome of two decades of steady, courageous work by the Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU), a progressive organisation of members who took on the mob-influenced Teamsters from the late 1970s, slowly building their network across the nation. This movement engendered hope among activists in the labour movement that renovation was possible - even in this 1.4 million member union that for years had been headed up by a leadership which was rumoured to be ruled by fear, thuggery and pay backs to loyal officials.

Following Carey's installation, moves were made to end the perks of the top officials and the multiple salaries of middle level officers. Seven jets were sold along with ten limousines and the luxury condominiums at Florida Keys. Union officials' salaries were cut and money was pumped into education for stewards and members with the emphasis being on contract campaigns and shop floor organisation. The new leadership also undertook structural reform of the union to lessen the power of regional officials loyal to the Old Guard.

The UPS Strike

The high point of Carey's leadership was the successful co-ordination of the contract campaign within the United Parcel Service (UPS) in 1997. UPS employed 185,000 Teamsters in a large national package delivery business. A strong membership campaign to prevent contracting out and create full-time positions from many part-time and casual jobs developed wide public support. The campaign touched many American working people who themselves were fed up with insecure, contingent employment. UPS drivers were known as hard working and reliable employees and their decision to take militant strike action received support from many of the customers.

It was the first time that UPS members had been called on to take action over a national contract. Unlike the previous contract negotiations under the old Teamsters leadership - where members never saw the contract on offer and the National Executive endorsed it despite oppositions from a majority of the

The high point of Carey's leadership was the successful contract campaign within the United Parcel Service (UPS) in 1997.

membership - in the 1997 campaign rank and file members were informed of management's bids and encouraged to develop creative tactics in support of the union's claims. The union's victory in this highly visible campaign demonstrated to many people that unions could still win. The UPS victory was to union supporters what the PATCO workers defeat was to business in the early 1980s.

Carey's resignation

Three months after the UPS victory, Carey resigned as President when the federal Independent Review Board found that Carey had failed to prevent the misuse of over \$750,000 of Teamsters funds. Carey's 1996 election campaign director and two of Carey's advisers admitted to laundering union money to raise funds for Carey's re-election. The evidence was not strong that Carey actively participated in this (Corn 1998:13-14), but the consequences were dire for the reformers within the Teamsters. The court ruled that the 1996 national elections should be re-run and that Carey was disqualified from candidature. At the 1998 nation election the Old Guard, lead by Jimmy Hoffa JR defeated the reform team, led by Tom Leedham.

Problems

Much of the discussion about Carey's demise has focused on the narrow question of the funds controversy of 1996. However the Carey leadership's biggest problem may have been the inability of the elected national leadership to strategically plan and manage a large complex union and staff.

One participant likened Carey's win in 1991 to 'the dog who has been chasing the car and finally gets a grip on the bumper bar. He can't let go, but what does he do next?'. Carey's own political experience was not broad: as one activist comments 'He was a good street fighter, related well to workers but had no political game plan'. Although Carey's team won the majority on the Executive Board, few had extensive administrative experience and none had ever faced the job of running a large national organisation with a multi million dollar budget. Some comment that Carey found it difficult to delegate, with critical decisions delayed unduly. In addition, Carey appointed a number of staffers who - whilst loyal and reform minded - were not interested in developing the expertise and decision making skills of the Executive Board members. Some frustration developed on the Board about processes and power.

Hoffa's victory

Jimmy Hoffa JR's election as International President in December 1998 is an enormous blow to reformers in the US movement, impacting within the large Teamsters membership and on the character of the AFL-CIO. Despite Hoffa's denials, it seems likely that a number of big employers supported Hoffa's candidature, including UPS. Hoffa's group also has close links to the Republican Party and some organized crime figures (Botz 1998). On the other hand the TDU network remains, as does the substantial local autonomy of the Teamster Locals. Leedham has vowed to begin campaign preparations for the next national election in three years time, and Hoffa's victory may be challenged if allegations of improper election practices and /or donations should come to light.

*Jimmy Hoffa
JR's election as
International
President in
December 1998
is an enormous
blow to
reformers in the
US movement.*

**The King
County
Labor
Council,
Seattle**

Case Study 6: RENEWING LABOUR COUNCILS

"When the Labour Council learnt that the government was going to issue pro-NAFTA awards at a large conference in the city, labour and community activists swung into action. We "salted" the meeting with our own people, getting 500 people into the hall. At a critical moment we took over the podium and proceeded to present our own anti-NAFTA awards. The security guards were caught flat footed. The employers left the conference."

Over the past four years the King County Labor Council, covering the city of Seattle in Washington State has been transformed. It has shifted decisively from being a bureaucratic and reactive body to an activist, participative assembly with an emphasis on action in the streets and the community to achieve gains for working people.

"Everything we do is campaign driven. We've done away with reading minutes and giving officers' reports. It's dry, its boring. Every meeting we have workers attend who are involved in struggle. We have music and song. Before 40 or 50 people attended, now we have people coming in their hundreds" (Ron Judd, President King County Labor Council)

Delegates from local unions come together twice a month to make decisions and to take action. The action could be house calls in support of a union recognition drive, going to a city council meeting to promote a living wage ordinance or demonstrating on the doorstep of a CEO whose company has engaged in unfair labour practices.

**Delegates
who do not
actively
participate
are replaced.**

When union locals nominate delegates to the Council, acceptance is not automatic. They must undergo an orientation in which their role as delegates is explained. Each delegate is assigned to a council committee. This does not entail more meetings but agreeing to take part in some action three, four or five times per year. It may mean joining a picket line or going out to speak to a community group about an issue or struggle. Delegates who do not actively participate in these actions are replaced.

The Council has expanded from having 1.5 paid staff four years ago, to employing 26 people in 1998, some with money provided by the national AFL-CIO.

"Winning affiliates to this activist program has not been easy, but a clear majority of unions support the direction. All unions agree that King County Labour Council is doing more things than it has ever done before - not just making paper changes but changing peoples lives." (Ron Judd, President King County Labor Council)

SEATTLE UNION NOW

The Council is sponsoring Project Sun (Seattle Union NOW) in which local unions have committed resources to organise the unorganised in target occupations and industries. SUN is part of the AFL-CIOs Union Cities program (described in Case Study 1).

As part of the Sun Project, four unions are conducting organising drives – the Service Employees Industrial Union (SEIU) with child care workers, Teamsters with independent truck drivers, Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees International Union (HERE) among hotel, theatrical and stage workers, and the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) reaching out to tug and barge workers. The next areas of recruitment planned are in building and construction and among high technology employees and in the health care sector. It is hoped to have 28 unions involved by end of 1999, aiming to recruit 25,000 to 40,000 members.

“The critical question for me is how do we take the labour movement in this big country and put the grass roots back into it.”

(Ron Judd, President King County Labor Council)

The deliberate management of change is a necessity if it is not to result in organisational implosion.

Questions of leadership and power are rarely directly addressed in many unions. One young organiser commented upon contrasting experiences in her old and new unions: the first 'had no leadership style except fear. There was no plan. Power never directly surfaced in the organisation'. In her new union there was a much more open discussion of power, where lines of decision making were more transparent and facilitated organisational change. The absence of effective management in many US (and Australian) unions, and the seeming inevitability of strong conflict between the new and old cultures, makes the front-on and deliberate management of change a necessity if the change is not to be subverted or result in organisational implosion. The issue of management process is therefore a significant political question. It is not enough to understand how important organising the unorganised is: the key action is being able to change an organisation to realise the shift. Few in the US have done so comfortably, and some appear painfully paralysed or riven by the process

Labour Law and Political Partnership

The US legal regime governing collective bargaining makes it very difficult for unions to win recognition at the enterprise level and to conclude collective agreements. Union avoidance is very easy for employers who frequently resort to legal and illegal means to prevent unionisation (Brofenbrenner 1994). Legal delays and blatant unfair labour practices can delay and often defeat union organising efforts. The AFL-CIO documented this story in 255 cases provided to the Dunlop Commission in 1993. In just one of these cases, Rock Tenn Corporation fought a four year battle with the United Paper Workers International Union (UPIU) to prevent unionisation at its Indiana plant. When the UPIU began its organising drive in July 1989 'the employer sacked eight pro-union workers, placed union supporters under surveillance, interrogated employees about their union sympathies and threatened to close the plant and reduce benefits' (Hurd 1994:13). The company's unfair labour practices continued even after the union succeeded in winning certification through a majority vote at its second attempt in February 1991. The company failed to bargain in good faith, and filed for decertification of the work unit in December 1992. In mid-1993 an administrative law judge found for the union and ordered the company to 'cease and desist' its anti-union activity and bargain in good faith. No other penalties were available. The company appealed and continued to delay recognition into 1994. This case is one of many and represents a common delaying practice made available through administrative law which 'manages' the employment relationship and the activity of unions.

It is striking that despite the unfair advantages enjoyed by employers, the federal provisions governing union recognition and collective bargaining have barely changed in 50 years since the enactment of the Taft-Hartley amendments to the Labor Relations Management Act in 1947 (Gold 1989:5). Although there exists a sizeable body of state and federal statutes on workers' compensation, occupational health and safety and individual anti-discrimination law, very little has changed with respect to collective bargaining. Agricultural workers, excluded from the provisions of the National Labor Relations Act (1935), still have no rights to collectively bargain, and government employees have only achieved union recognition through Presidential Executive Orders and the passage of legislation in a number of states.

Case Study 7: PROTECTING A POLITICAL VOICE

Conservative forces at the state level across the USA have been pushing in recent years for referenda that would prevent unions using dues for political purposes without explicit written authorisation from members. "Paycheck Protection" measures - labeled "paycheck Deception" by unions - have been introduced in 29 state legislatures and defeated in 23, most recently in Oregon in November 1998 by an extremely narrow margin.

When Californians were asked to vote in favor of restricting unions' political voice on June 2 1998, unions mobilised to defeat it. Passage of the cleverly worded measure would have been a big defeat for labour in a big state. But a grassroots intensive education campaign by a range of unions turned voter opinion around and prevented the political gag from being applied.

AFL-CIO President, John Sweeney, described the win as a "modern political miracle".

The turn around in voter opinion was striking. In February 1998 surveys showed that 71% of the general public supported the measure with only 26% against. Union members were little different, with support for Ballot Measure 226 at 71% and 26% opposed.

The AFL-CIO, a number of International unions, the Californian Labor Federation and union Locals went to work. The California Labor Federation reported that:

- 650,000 phone calls were made by volunteers
- 5,005 precincts were visited by volunteers talking to people and distributing literature.
- 18,000 worksites were visited
- 24,000 union members and their families participated in phone banks, precinct walks or work site visits.
- 3,500 union members and their families participated in get-the-vote out efforts.

By April 1998 union members were evenly divided on the measure with 46% for and 46% against. By May members of the general public were also evenly divided. Just prior to voting day 71% of union members were against the measure and only 29% were in favour. Among the general public it was more finely balanced, with 54% opposed.

Close to the poll, the union grassroots campaign concentrated on getting union members to vote. Exit polls showed that 35% of all voters came from union households even though union households represented only 17% of the potential voting population.

*The fight
against
Ballot
Measure 226
in California*

Unions have begun to push for greater accountability in relation to the Democrats.

Perhaps the most significant change since the 1980s is the increasing preparedness of anti-union employers to exploit the provisions of the law to shut unions out. Employers can permanently replace workers who engage in economic strikes against the employer. Little used until Reagan's onslaught against the PATCO traffic controllers in 1981, it has been used to break strikes in the 1980s.

Despite the inadequacies of the law, and the control of Congress by the Democratic Party from World War 2 until 1994, unions have not been able to generate enough political pressure to bring about favourable reforms. This is partly because of complacency amongst 'big labour' which rested on its laurels in the 50s, 60s and 70s when it had more clout, confining most of its activity to those industries and sectors already organised. By the 1980s a more marginalised labour movement and an aggressive anti-union climate made reform both more urgent and less likely.

Organised labour has been a big donor to the Democratic Party and has supplied many elected representatives particularly at the local and state levels, but it has won little in return for its support, at least in recent decades. While union optimism about labour law reforms flowing from the Clinton-appointed Dunlop Commission was 'difficult to overstate' (Hurd 1998:16), the Commission's recommendations were a great disappointment (leaving intact puny penalties for employer violations of the law, maintaining existing inadequate union access to potential members and failing to force unionised employers to bargain first contracts in genuine good faith).

Relations with the Democrats have changed somewhat under Sweeney's leadership as more unions have begun to push for accountability. The AFL-CIO spent US\$35 million on a political 'voice' and education campaign connected to the 1996 elections (Milkman 1998), and its voice was similarly heard in the 1998 elections where the AFL-CIO concentrated on encouraging unionists to vote, with good effect in many key races. (While unionists represent only around 16 per cent of potential voters, it is estimated that they made up 28 per cent of voters in the November 1998 elections.) Some activists estimate that two-thirds of all union members nationally were lobbied by phone to vote, a massive grassroots effort to mobilise a political voice for labour.

However, union influence and connection have not resulted in progressive policies on workers' rights or a pro-union stance by elected Democrats. While Clinton took a neutral stance in relation to the UPS struggle - considered a significant advance - Vice President Al Gore has refused to commit himself to the notion that union organisation is a good idea for the unorganised (Rothstein 1998:47) and the Democratic party shows little interest in curbing the regular employer breaches of the National Labor Relations (NLR) Act or improving laws to assist organising: for example, by replacing an NLR Board supervised election to win union recognition in the workplace, with a simple requirement that a majority of employees sign a card in support (as occurs in parts of Canada); requiring employers - once unionised - to bargain to a contract, rather than endlessly stall; and supporting fair processes in contract and unionisation votes which roll back decisions over the last 50 years that have decisively favoured employers (Rothstein 1998:49).

The contrast with Australian experience is stark, given Australian unions close - though far from smooth or consistently supportive - relationship with the Parliamentary Labor Party. However, over the last decade Labor and conservative parties and business leaders have made a determined push to Americanise labour law, with success on many fronts. For example, increasing replacement of national/industry awards with enterprise and individual contracts, promotion of across the board inter-union competition instead of legally enforceable and defined areas of union coverage for particular unions, a straight jacket on how and when industrial action can be taken, and the dismantling of compulsory arbitration by specialist 'independent' labour tribunals.

Peter Reith has given notice that the Howard Government will introduce further legislation to accelerate these trends during the period of the second Howard Government. His first practical shot across the bows has been the introduction of regulations removing unfair dismissal protections for employees working in jobs for less than six months or in firms employing less than 15 workers.

Clearly the Australian labour movement cannot wait for the return of Labor governments to repeal the worst features of conservative labour laws. Instead unions must campaign around the impact that the Americanisation of labour law will have on the right to organise and the consequential slide in living standards for the unorganised.

Interestingly, a hostile legal regime has stimulated the beleaguered US movement to look at non-traditional ways of organising, by-passing elaborate legalistic hurdles, to achieve union recognition and collective agreements. Community organising, non-violent civil disobedience, and corporate campaigns of boycott and public shaming have arisen from the experience of labour activists who have many times failed to win recognition by conventional, legal organising on the job and at the factory gate.

Community Coalitions to Advance Workers Rights

Determined and aggressive anti-union campaigns by employers combined with poor legal protections for union members have compelled workers' organisations in the US to reach out to the community beyond the immediate workplace. In many cases winning in the US workplace has not been possible without strong support from community and religious leaders and their constituencies. Even with significant community support, organising drives or contract negotiations often fail. The construction of community coalitions to advance workers rights and support a better deal for working families is uneven across the country, reflecting the diversity of the labour movement and the communities in which they are located. However some innovative initiatives have occurred and in a number of regions real momentum is developing to strengthen coalition work and win significant gains.

Community organising and mobilisation in support of labour received a renewed emphasis with the formation of Jobs With Justice (JWJ) in 1987. (see Case Study 8).

Australian unions cannot wait for the return of Labor governments to repeal the worst features of conservative labour law.

Case Study 8: Jobs with Justice and the Living Wage in Portland

Portland Jobs With Justice (JWJ) is an energetic organisation of unionists, church people and community activists who take action in support of workers' rights and labour standards. It has succeeded in establishing a wages floor of \$8.00 per hour for employees carrying out contract work for local and county government instrumentalities in Portland council area, and \$9.00 per hour in Multnomah county.

Formed in 1991, Portland JWJ has built its influence from the bottom up, gradually gaining the respect of most local unions in the area through its practical and positive actions in support of specific workplace struggles. Until 1995 it operated without any paid staff and a modest budget. Currently it has one full-time and one part-time worker.

Its main resource is the people who form its network, each person pledging to be there at least five times per year for workers in struggle. The organisation can mobilise over 500 people through an efficient telephone tree.

JWJ is a union friendly but independent coalition whose steering committee decides priorities from the many requests for support received from community organisations.

Over the last two years, in addition to supporting workers in dispute, JWJ has campaigned to establish a living wage for employees carrying out contract work in the public sector. Building on the successful campaign by Oregonian progressives to achieve a minimum wage (\$6.50 per hour by January 1999), JWJ in Portland has achieved a Living Wage for county workers by:-

- collecting 4000 signatures on a petition over a one month period, calling on the Portland Council to fix a living wage for public contract employees
- developing support among union Locals for the living wage
- holding public hearings where people told stories about impoverished living conditions
- lobbying elected officials to support the plan.

Lessons: Action, Continuity, Equality

- JWJ Portland - one of 30 branches of JWJ across the US - is a place where labour and community activists come together as equals in defence of working families.
- It is a continuing coalition which is action orientated in support of working people in struggle. It is not a 'letterhead' coalition.
- It is a place where younger people can learn from old hands, and where labour and community activists can learn about each others' struggles and perspectives.
- It is a grassroots organisation which is independent of political parties and particular unions, but supportive of their issues. 'Street-heat' and non-violent civil disobedience are used where necessary and appropriate.

JWJ now has 30 chapters in cities/regions across the US. They are grass roots organisations of activists drawn from unions and community groups who take up particular struggles or issues but are continuing coalitions guided by a broad charter to advance workers rights and living standards. Financially supported by the Communications Workers Union and other national unions, JWJ was – and remains - different from conventional alliances and organising. As Early writes ‘Unlike past ‘progressive alliances’ of labor and non-labor groups - most of which never became more than Washington DC based letter head coalitions - JWJ has actually fostered closer grass roots relationships between trade unionists and members of student, senior citizens, consumer, environmental and religious organisations’ (1998:3).

*Jobs with
Justice goes
beyond many
traditional
union
'coalitions' –
it is not a
letterhead
alliance .*

In their strategy and tactics JWJ groups have drawn on the 1960s civil rights movements, employing street actions, creative appearances at business and board meetings and non-violent civil disobedience. Although in part composed and supported by particular union Locals and federations, JWJ chapters are independent of specific unions or political parties. The JWJ chapters also help mobilise in support of particular strikes, sackings or unfair labour practices when approached by union locals.

In another example, the Wisconsin ‘Campaign for a Sustainable Milwaukee’ is a coalition working to create and retain family supporting jobs (see case study 9). It has a close partnership with the Milwaukee County Labor Council. More than just a planning group, the coalition is mobilising and uniting the community around a living wage, funds for better public transport, fair labour agreements for public works contracts and other job creation initiatives. The coalition has established a Workers Rights Board of prominent community leaders to deal with the impact of low wages and cuts to welfare on working class people in the area (see Case Study 4). The JWJ chapters also help mobilise in support of particular strikes and against sackings or unfair labour practices when approached by union locals.

The ACTU and some Australian unions have had a long history of involvement in coalition work but it has often been around individual issues and causes, or confined to policy formulation without grass roots mobilisation. There is real value in considering the extension of coalition work in Australia. Such coalitions are seen as very rewarding for some: as one long-time US official put it ‘Frankly I get more recognition from my community work than I do from my union work – and the retired president recently said the same thing to me. I get asked to do things that astound me.’

The US experience points to some important lessons in coalition politics. Firstly, JWJ has avoided involvement in internal union politics, as well as endorsement of particular political candidates. It is built on the personal commitments of individuals to action – both in relation to their own struggles and especially those of others. Its decisions are made locally by steering committees in which sponsoring organisations each have a voice. Its budgets are small, but through highly active supporters and low overheads, is able to generate levels of activity that put much larger organisations to shame. In Boston for example local JWJ volunteers ‘manage to do more with an US\$80,000 annual budget than some established unions accomplish with US\$1 million’ (Early 1998:8).

Case Study 9: Campaign for a Sustainable Milwaukee and the Milwaukee County Labor Council

In the face of declining real incomes and employment for many living in Milwaukee's central city area, representatives of community, religious, labour, environmental, business and government organisations decided to work together towards an alternative economic development plan in the city. These groups adopted a central theme: the creation and retention of family-supporting jobs. They formed the Campaign for a Sustainable Milwaukee (CSM) which was not just about making a plan - it was also about mobilising and uniting the community around it, and winning it. The emphasis is upon action and grassroots participation, with organisation and management by local residents, along with church, labour and community leaders.

Milwaukee is described as one of the greatest 'Union Cities' in the US. The Milwaukee County Labor Council - an active community-oriented council, played an important role in encouraging a coalition organisation which has an ongoing mission - it's not just a single issue coalition - and is independent of any single organisation. CSM works through taskforces on local transport, jobs, living wage, and the environment.

How CSM in coalition with unions and community is making Milwaukee work:

- **Living wage campaign:** has pushed for signed living wage accords with local government and local school boards to raise the wages of some of the lowest paid contract workers in the region.
- held Workers Rights Board public hearings (see Case Study 4) to publicise and take action around low wages, welfare reform and discrimination.
- **Central City Transit Task Force:** challenged the misuse of spending on suburban highways and built support for central city mass transit through public 'actions' and legal cases, arguing that current public transport discriminates against the poor. Gathered public testimony from residents about their poor public transport options. Developed alternative bus and light rail proposals and organised actions in support of the plan.
- **Job Access Task Force:** ensured that big public works projects have fair labour agreements and real commitments to hire central-city residents and women. Won agreements with construction companies on major local projects to pay the prevailing wage, employ 25 % people of colour and 5% women and recognise the union. A Workers Centre connects local residents to living wage jobs.
- **Jobs Initiative:** proposed a successful strategic investment plan to an independent Foundation so that Milwaukee became one of six cities in the US to receive an eight year US\$5.2 million grant to develop innovative programs aimed at connecting central-city residents to family supporting jobs, while reforming the systems that have stood in the way of that connection in the past.

These wins have required creative mobilisation on many fronts. For example winning industry wage rates and unionisation on major construction sites, resulted from community actions at the site (where 3,000 rallied to protest the intention to build non-union) and lobbying of individual bond holders financing the projects, pointing out the risks to their investment associated with trying to build non-union.

The Coalition is not a single issue body – and is independent of any single organisation.

Some Lessons from Coalition for a Sustainable Milwaukee

- □Go for something worthwhile. Have ambitious goals - like a decent living wage - that people really want. Not little 'inbetween' goals that don't excite people
- Leadership need community credibility: do they act for all working people? Do they have a strong community vision? Do they have a plan? Are they willing to take risks? Cultivate leaders from outside the mainstream of leaders
- Have positive goals. Don't be defensive. Don't complain.
- Build from success: have some wins and build on them.
- □Find things that people can agree on. Build consensus around them.
- Use multiple strategies - like letters to bondholders simultaneous with community protests.
- Speak for all working people - not just organised labour, or any one group.
- □Involve those affected as decision makers, leaders and activists.
- □Research the problem: analyse where power lies, where the pressure points are, which strategies make sense and might work.

*Have
positive
goals.
Don't be
defensive.
Don't
complain.*

The absence of 'gatekeepers' within JWJ means that activists from a wide range of backgrounds become involved, leading Early to argue that JWJ presents an interesting institutional challenge to traditional unionism:

A labor movement truly committed to its own version of glasnost and perestroika needs many different laboratories experimenting with new tactics and strategies. In most places JWJ is still blessedly unafflicted by the 'meetingitis' that can paralyse well-meaning people at many different levels of organized labor. The culture of JWJ is one of active resistance, not resolution-passing, policy hair-splitting, or political favor-seeking. JWJ chapters help keep the focus on waging hard-hitting, creative campaigns, rather than squabbling about who's in charge or who's going to get credit for a win (if there is one). (Early 1998:15).

Research and Corporate Campaigns

US unions have had over twenty years experience in systematic campaigns directed at companies based on research and strategic planning. The aim of much of this corporate research has been to assist workers to organise at the enterprise level and bargain better contracts. At their best corporate campaigns dovetail with the organising and mobilising efforts of the membership. They can also be part of community awareness and mobilisation in support of workers rights which is dealt with above.

Two examples of corporate research and campaigning are contained in the case studies: LA MAP (Case Study 3) and Yale University (Case Study 10).

Corporate campaigning is resource intensive. In the Yale example the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees (HERE) employed 25 additional staff, many drawn from amongst university workers to research and mobilise members and the wider community. The two locals had set aside a portion of union dues each week over the duration of the contract in preparation for the coming struggle. The AFL CIO nationally kicked in resources and the HERE international underwrote most of the staffers. In LA MAP nine unions initially contributed to research employers in the light manufacturing region of Los Angeles and determine preferred targets based on agreed criteria.

Successful corporate research and organising campaigns also require considerable lead time. At Yale, the research commenced 6 months before the contract expired and the campaign was not successfully concluded until 18 months later.

At present few Australian unions employ permanent research staff and there are even fewer cases where research about a company is applied as part of a membership mobilisation plan to recruit the unorganised and protect the conditions of existing union employees. Australian unions have less financial reserves than their US counterparts to commit to corporate research. However, such research can play an important role in strategic unionism that may be increasingly relevant and necessary as more Australian employers Americanise their industrial practices.

'The culture of JWJ is one of active resistance, not resolution-passing, policy hair-splitting, or political favor-seeking'

Some implications for Australian union strategy now

There are many other aspects of US unionism that have not been discussed here, including in relation to international unionism. Many US unions and community organisations are working to build international links between working people, and to fight trade policies that undermine working conditions and pay, like the 'Fast Track' provisions that were recently defeated in the US.

Of the issues covered above, however, many have relevance to Australian unionism now. For all the significant differences that lie between the US and Australia and our political and legal systems, there are important commonalities.

Apart from the many specific lessons that arise from individual union initiatives in the US, there are some more general principles that emerge, particularly in relation to union strategy, labour law, civil disobedience, peak council profile, community coalition and the management of union resources and strategic planning.

Clearly the choice of union strategies and tactics matters. The priorities chosen at any point in time, the methods of work, all affect the long term success of unions and in this sense unions have a degree of control over their own destinies. US research confirms that – at the practical level of recruitment as well as more generally – specific union practices are associated with union gains. Beyond factors related to specific workplaces, or industries and a range of other factors, union tactics have a greater impact on, for example, unionisation than these other factors (Jarley et al. 1998:279).

On the legal front several implications arise. A regime that forces localised enterprise bargaining has two potentially devastating effects on unions: firstly it fractures collective solidarity beyond the workplace; secondly it relentlessly drains union resources into the servicing tasks of contract negotiation for the already organised, crowding out efforts to organise the unorganised. It is vital that unions avoid any further - and repair the current - deterioration in national industry employment standards through awards and the role of arbitral machinery. This means that unions must adopt independent but cooperative relations with the Labor Party to win government and restore the main tenets of the pre-Howard labour law regime. But unions cannot afford to wait for Labor to win government. Creative new initiatives in organising, including the tactics of civil disobedience, experimentation with new organisational forms and cross-union organising are needed now. Such forms might include community coalitions, assisting the unemployed to organise, and developing new forms of public accountability for corporations and conservative governments.

Many initiatives in the US, along with the overall standing of unions, have been greatly enhanced by a forward looking, articulate, cogent, high profile leadership at national and state levels - one that is appropriately reflective of the working population in terms of age, sex and ethnicity.

The choice of union strategy matters... Good research can help inform strategies that bring success.

The Yale Campaign

Case Study 10: MOBILISING THE MEMBERSHIP

In mid-1995 two union locals at Yale university covering over 4000 workers joined together to press for union recognition for graduate student teachers and to resist erosion of job security and cut backs in benefits in upcoming negotiations. The Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees Union (HERE) mobilised the membership at the university, succeeding in building decisive community support for the workers over an 18 month period.

The multi-faceted strategic campaign was mapped out after detailed research to identify ways to pressure the university administration and Executive Board. HERE, using funds from the local and national union, committed 25 full time organisers to the campaign. Most of these organisers were drawn from the clerical, technical, maintenance and custodial staff who made up the membership of the two locals.

Strike action, community meetings, public shaming of employer representatives, non-violent civil disobedience, a media campaign and lobbying of politicians and community leaders were all employed at various stages. These actions together proved more powerful than the union busting efforts of a rich and prestigious employer.

The campaign was successful in preventing the contracting out of 600 blue collar jobs, blocking threatened take-backs in pay and benefits and in gaining recognition for many contingent employees working as part-time labourers. Recognition for the 1000 graduate student teachers was not secured, but these workers were integral to the mobilisation and legal action is pending to achieve collective bargaining rights for these teachers.

CAMPAIGN STRANDS

Over 12 months the campaign put pressure on the University decision makers by:

- **Targeting old scholars' donations.** Research revealed that Yale was wasting massive amounts of money by its failure to implement a preventive maintenance program for expensive buildings and equipment. This was brought to the attention of donors by publications and the presence of workers at alumni meetings.
- **Boycott of Yale's health plan and medical services.** Yale runs a very profitable medical services and health insurance plan. Workers went out into the community to dissuade people from signing up with Yale's health plan, letting people know that the University was planning to slash health benefits for its own employees. Research also revealed systematic over billing by the medical centre. This was strategically publicised among the University decision makers.
- **Industrial action.** White collar members struck for three weeks in February 1996 while blue collar members levied themselves US\$100 per week to sustain the strikes. After the term recess, the blue collar local went out and the levy was reversed. Graduate student teachers also withheld grade results in late 1995.
- **targeting the real decision makers.** Well before the contract negotiations, Yale Board members, many who were prestigious corporate executives, were each visited unannounced by up to 400 union members who took a day off work to press their case for a fair contract. The bus trips sent a message that the members were strong, as well as publicly embarrassing Board members.

- **Community action and lobbying.** Delegations to local politicians and community leaders, community meetings, invitations to community opinion leaders to sit in on contract negotiations and media work formed significant components of the campaign. In September 1996 a dozen community meetings attended by some 2,500 people were crucial in getting the employer to settle the contracts.

LESSONS

1. **Research:** Thorough research prior to the campaign enabled the union to identify the most effective pressure points which would shift the pain away from strike action alone
2. **Unity and Action:** A motivated and well organised rank and file committee of members was critical to each facet of the campaign by being able to turn people out when needed and keep people together .
3. **Escalation and persistence:** A series of escalating actions brought the university negotiators to the table. It also gave members things to do in what was a long war of attrition.
4. **Resources:** Considerable financial and human resources were necessary to win. The two locals put a portion of each weeks union dues towards the next contract campaign and the HERE International also was prepared to spend to succeed.
5. **Allies:** Winning allies in the community and tarnishing Yale's image were very important in winning the contracts. It took a year to inform, educate and win over opinion leaders in the New Haven community.

'Borders Books pumps every penny back into growth. We take every extra penny and pump it back into our existing membership. We're stupid compared with corporate America'

Such a voice and presence is vitally important to the prospects of Australian unions; it can contribute immeasurably to a climate in which unions continue to hold community relevance and serve as a vital inoculation against Reith-type attempts to isolate unions and position them as bastions of ancient privilege. This is no time for a shrinkage in the role of peak councils.

The allocation of more resources to the recruitment of the unorganised remains a major and inadequately addressed issue for the Australian labour movement. The ACTU and some unions have drawn on - and improved upon - ideas emerging from US experience (through Organising Works, for example) but their application is often little more than a tack-on to the traditional Australian approach and institutional form. They barely send a ripple across most union budgets. Richard Bensinger was fond of saying that unions needed to plow resources back into expanding their base like every successful US corporation: 'Borders Books pumps every penny back into growth. We take every extra penny and pump it back into our existing membership...We're stupid compared with corporate America' (Whifford, 1998). The Australian movement is comparable. It should consider developing new recruiting and campaigning vehicles and structures, that give a real boost to organising including through cross-union, regional, industry and occupational drives. Such efforts need the backing of significant union resources to be successful.

Many innovative recruitment and organising efforts in the US have been underpinned by education and research initiatives that have evaluated and shared experience. Where are the forums that Australia's best organisers and tacticians discuss and develop strategy which will have an impact nationally? Where are the think-tanks and research sources which underpin, inform and strengthen the organising efforts of unions? How is the diverse union education effort attuned to the objectives of organisational transformation and organising? What initiatives can strengthen union leaders' capacity to manage change in unions? The opponents of unions understand the importance of such activities, and make effective use of them - with lethal success in the US. These need to be extended and developed within, across and outside Australian unions.

What is more, it is time for new organisational forms that transcend traditional unions structures, to drive organising initiatives - whether cross-union or in coalition with community groups. Community-based organising and ongoing community coalitions around workers rights and living standards cannot be tacked onto workplace bargaining and servicing individual members, which for many unions consumes most resources. They require union leaders and activists to forge contacts and build networks and organisations outside conventional union structures and practices - organisations where the union is not always in control or dominant in the planning and execution of programs. These require not just a change in financial resources but a change in the culture of unions.

Protecting workers wages and living standards can no longer only be achieved by recruiting and organising paid employees - large as this task is in itself. As in the US, the Howard Government's regulations governing unemployed workers will progressively create a new stratum of the poor - those who work for the dole doing what was once paid work, assigned to that work by private companies. In the US this phenomenon is known as 'workfare', creating a reserve army of labour outside of employment laws governing other workers.

This is most developed in New York City where workfare schemes arose in response to the debt crisis of the City. Some 50,000 'workfare' recipients are now cleaning parks, streets and subways, replacing jobs formerly done by local government employees. The relevant unions have not opposed the scheme, being content with assurances that their existing members' jobs and industrial conditions will be maintained by the City (Piven 1996: 115).

In Australia unions must find ways to reach out to unemployed workers and 'workfare' workers who are being squeezed by the government and exploited by employers. They currently have no voice. One million unemployed workers are almost invisible. A place must be found for them in or alongside established unions.

Turning to the question of transforming union organising culture, it is clear that a small army of highly skilled, energetic young organisers like those emerging annually from Organising Works is inadequate to the task: they do not represent a real recognition of the problem that Australian unions now face, they barely disturb the face of the unions they enter, and they require little real change in the habits of established servicing union culture in Australia. Much more is required, and can only be done through the capacities of individual unions: peak council resources are small by comparison and better used in the creation of a loud pro-worker, public voice that squarely stamps issues like poverty, a decent social fabric and a reasonable family life as 'union'.

US experience suggests that the question of management of resources should also receive more deliberate attention. Only a few Australian unions develop meaningful strategic plans, set clear organising goals and targets, then align resources (human, financial, political) towards their realisation. Many resources sit in unproductive real estate, vehicles, officials, meetings, conferences, paper communications, or steadily servicing existing - shrinking - membership. Any union or peak council that is not combing its accounts, payroll, and annual program of activity for their contribution to increasing or mobilising membership is part of the problem. But the US experience also shows the importance of conscious and effective management of change in organisational priorities: the shift to organising requires complex changes for both members and existing staff and without careful management these are causing organisational burnout and implosion on a significant scale in some US unions: this is an important lesson for Australian union leaders.

There is much more in the US experience worthy of study and application: at its leading edge, the US movement has much to offer Australian tacticians - it is ironic that a movement with such problematic prospects, provides so many illuminating insights. The current federal government's intention is to eliminate the major structural and legal frameworks that underpin Australia's 31 per cent union density. If they succeed, Australia will fast approach US density levels - but without that movement's numerical strength and relative financial wealth. Perhaps the most significant lessons of US experience are the urgency of action to change, the necessity of considering new organisational forms, and the imperative to consciously plan and manage all forms of union resources to ensure regrowth.

Any union or peak council that is not combing its accounts, payroll, and annual program of activity for their contribution to increasing membership is part of the problem.

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Abbreviations and Glossary

AFL-CIO	American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organisations
CLCs	Central Labor Councils
CWA	Communication Workers of America
HERE	Hotel Employees and restaurant Employees Union
ILWU	International Longshore and Warehouse Union
JWJ	Jobs With Justice
LERC	Labor Education and Research Center
SEIU	Service Employees International Union
UAW	Union of Auto Workers
UFCW	United Food and Commercial Workers Union
UPIU	United Paper Workers International Union

Certification: Official designation by the National Labor Relations Board that a specific organisation has been selected by a majority of employees as their collective bargaining agent.*

Certification election: An election conducted by the National Labor Relations Board to determine whether a majority of workers support independent representation by a specific union or association.*

National Labor Relations Act (1935) Established right of workers to form organisations independent of employer control; prohibited unfair labor practices by employers which interfere with this right.*

National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) The government agency established to enforce the National Labor Relations Act as amended. The Board consists of 5 members, the agency has 33 regional offices.*

Taft-Hartley amendments Amended National Labor Relations Act 1947 by adding employers' rights to speak against unions; retained workers' rights and unfair labor practices specified in 1935 National Labor Relations Act.*

(*Source: Hurd 10994)

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