

Union Organising in Australia: Can the Decline be Stemmed?

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**Paper presented to “Organizing and Reorganizing: Unions Meet the Millenium”
Conference, McMaster University, Hamilton Ontario, 12-14 March 1999**

Advance draft: not to be cited

Introduction

This paper charts the decline of Australian unionism in the 1990s and its probable causes. The responses made at the national level by the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) to counteract the decline are then outlined. The major ACTU initiatives have been a total restructure of the union movement to create 20 large 'super-unions', an attempt to develop an organising culture through a flagship program named Organising Works, and an attempt to recruit and train large numbers of workplace delegates. Evidence on the effects of these programs on unionisation is evaluated. It is concluded that, while there is no convincing evidence as yet that the ACTUs initiatives were a major cause of the decline of unionisation, some of these initiatives may have contributed to the decline, and none have been effective at reversing it. The ACTUs initiatives have been driven from the top down that have often been based on overseas models adopted hastily without much analysis, discussion or consultation. While the ACTU has recently announced more membership-driven initiatives, the adoption of cultural change may be slow. The short-term prognosis for Australian unionism is not good, and further reductions of union density can be expected over the next two years.

This paper contains the personal views of a rank-and-file union member who has no special insight into the subterranean operations of the Australian union movement, and is compiled from publicly-available sources. Because of time constraints and cognitive deficiencies, this early draft will not contain elegant theorising and will confine itself to the descriptive level.

Workers of Australia Disunite

This section of the paper maps the extent of union decline in Australia, and summarises opinion as to its causes. Chart 1 illustrates the decline of Australian unionism since 1976 as measured by a household survey. While membership held up during the 1980s, density fell. During the 1990s membership has fallen rapidly, density even more rapidly. If the trend of the last six years was to continue, density would decline from its 28 per cent level in 1998 to 15 per cent by 2006, and zero by 2013. If Chart 1 was a company sales or profits chart, the management would have been fired, and the shareholders would probably have thrown out the board of directors.

Both Peetz (1998) and Drago & Wooden (1998) attribute the decline to two main factors: firstly, increased government and employer opposition to unions that resulted in a substantial reduction in the incidence of closed shops and compulsory unionism; secondly, structural changes in the economy. According to Peetz, structural changes were the dominant factor in the decline of union density in the 1980s, while the reduction of compulsory unionism was the chief factor in the 1990s. Drago & Wooden attribute some of the 1990s decline to structural factors, but agree with Peetz that the reduction of compulsory unionism was a more important reason.

At first glance, the structural explanation seems compelling. In common with many other industrialised countries Australia has experienced a relative decline in the proportion of workers engaged in manufacturing, including heavy downsizing in highly-unionised heavy industries such as steel-making. There has also been a decline in the relative size of the public sector and a fragmentation of former public sector bargaining units. However, the empirical evidence on effects of structural change on union decline is not convincing (Griffin & Svensen 1996; Kelly, 1998; Towers 1997).

Turnbull (1996) argued that structural factors do not really explain union decline, given that it has occurred across all industries and most groupings. Tables 1 to 5 tend to confirm this. Indeed, the decline has been steeper for males than females, non-manual as compared with manual workers, and full-time workers as compared with part-time workers, while there is no clear pattern in density loss between contracting and expanding industries.

In addition, it may be argued that to the extent that decline can be said to be associated with structural changes, the explanation for the decline is not to be found so much in the changes *per se*, but rather the ways in which such changes are brought about and responded to by unions, workers, employers and governments. It must be acknowledged that unions face an unprecedented array of difficulties simultaneously, including entrenched high unemployment, the decentralisation of the industrial relations system, the fragmentation of bargaining units, the increased use of casualised and contract labour and an increasingly diverse working class. Nevertheless, change is inherent in capitalism and unions must adapt to it or collapse. They have done so in the past, for example, the growth in unionisation among female and white-collar employees.

The effect of governments and legislation on union density is controversial (Bruce, 1989; Freeman & Pelletier, 1990; Kenyon & Lewis, 1992; Northrup, 1991; Western, 1997). The rate of union density decline during the term of the Keating Labor government (December 1991 to March 1996) was almost identical to that experienced under the Howard conservative coalition (March 1996 to date). This does not necessarily mean that political factors are unimportant, as there have been opposing forces at work in Australia. The Labor governments of the 1980s and 1990s adopted neo-liberal policies of privatisation, deregulation and free trade (Fairbrother, Svensen & Teicher 1997; Hampson & Morgan 1998). The decline of union membership has been associated with the decentralisation of bargaining structures that gathered momentum from late 1991 under Labor governments (Dabscheck 1995). This decentralisation followed a long period of centralisation during which the delegate structures and workplace activism of many unions were underdeveloped. New Right-influenced employers have been mobilising against unions since the mid-1980s, making very effective use of legislation such as the secondary boycott provisions of the *Trade Practices Act*, which provides penalties against unions acting in support of other unions. Management attitudes towards unions also hardened in the public sector during the 1990s (Drago & Wooden 1998).

As in other countries, the increasing propensity of employers and governments to oppose unions was facilitated by persistently high unemployment levels during the 1980s and 1990s. It has been argued that the post-war labour-capital accommodation was a transitory phase in Western European industrial relations necessitated by the perceived need to curb wage demands during a period of near-full employment, a situation which no longer applies (Leijnsne 1996). A similar argument could be made about the Australian situation.

The Howard government's *Workplace Relations Act* of 1996 was a watershed in that, for the first time in federal legislation, provision was made for the certification of individual employment contracts. The roles of the Australian Industrial Relations Commission and industrial awards were downgraded and restrictions were placed on the rights of unions to organise, under provisions supposedly designed to guarantee 'freedom of association'. The government also intensified the neo-liberal agenda of Labor, with further public sector downsizing, privatisation and deregulation. These factors should have exerted downward pressure on unionisation, but the defeat of the government by the Maritime Union of Australia in

the widely-publicised dock dispute of 1998 (Griffin & Svensen 1998), together with other anti-union actions by the government, may have acted to partially offset such losses.

State government legislation may also influence unionisation, except in Victoria, which in late 1996 abdicated most of its industrial relations responsibilities to the federal government after workers fled *en masse* to the federal system following the election of the Kennett state government (Teicher & Svensen 1998). In September 1996 the New South Wales state Labor government passed the most union-friendly industrial relations legislation currently in force in Australia, and it is noteworthy that union density in that state fell by only 1.3 per cent in the two years to August 1998, compared with between 3.2 and 4.7 per cent in the other states (Australian Bureau of Statistics 1998).

What these contradictory patterns may indicate is that, while industrial relations legislation and the ways in which it is applied are important to the unionisation process, a simple Labor-non-Labor distinction may be becoming irrelevant. That is, if policies which adversely affect unionisation are implemented, union density will fall, irrespective of which party is in power.

Other reasons for the decline of Australian unionism have been proposed, but as yet lack convincing empirical support. According to Kenyon & Lewis (1992, 1996) the Accord between the ACTU and the Labor governments was a major contributor to union decline. To put it very simply, the Accord was a series of agreements under which the ACTU agreed to limit wage demands in return for the reinstatement of a universal health-care system and improved social security benefits. Kenyon & Lewis based their case on a crude econometric model in which the Accord period was entered as a dummy variable. The model is not only unconvincing (Griffin & Svensen 1996) but had poor predictive validity in that there was no upturn in unionisation following the ending of the Accord.

In contrast to Kenyon & Lewis, Peetz (1998) marshalled evidence from surveys to argue that the priorities and processes of the Accord, if not necessarily the outcomes, were congruent with employee preferences. In addition, Peetz argued that the brake on wage growth and opportunities for greater productivity and flexibility provided by the Accord would have acted to reduce employer opposition to unions.

Another explanation for the deunionisation of Australia, popular among conservative politicians, is that there has been a decline in the demand of workers for unions. If there has been, it is proving difficult to measure. Attitudes towards unions appear to have been fairly stable in Australia during the 1990s (Peetz 1998). Finally, union amalgamations have been implicated in union decline (Bodman 1998). This issue will be dealt with below, where it is concluded that the study is unconvincing.

There is much anecdotal evidence of member dissatisfaction among certain unions, much of it to do with the ways in which amalgamation issues have been handled; as well as dissatisfaction with the Accord or, more probably, with the ways in which enterprise bargaining was implemented. Unions have been complicit in making agreements that have led to significant increases in hours of work, work intensification and job stress (ACIRRT 1999). While the outcomes of bargaining have been better for union than non-union employees, this fact has not been widely reported. Despite the unconvincing nature of the econometric studies and the existence of plausible alternative explanations, it would be unwise to entirely rule out these sources of dissatisfaction as contributing causes to union decline. Something is making Australians exit from and not join unions, and employer

opposition and the elimination of closed shops would not appear to be enough on their own. Many of the samples in the attitudinal studies of Peetz (1998) are confined to workplaces with at least 20 employees, and it may be the case that the highest rates of exit are occurring in smaller workplaces. In addition, a combination of events at the micro level may be quite significant, but not show through at the macro level.

United We Fall

One of the paradoxes of union decline in Australia is that it has occurred in a period when the labour movement has arguably never been more united. There is now only one national representative body, the ACTU, and all unions of any importance are affiliated with it (Griffin 1994). As in any movement, tensions and disagreements are ever present, but are in historical terms relatively mild. In contrast, the high point of the movement in terms of union density, the late 1940s to the mid 1950s, was a period in which the ACTU had little authority, and relations both between and within unions were marked by bitter divisions, particularly between supporters and opponents of communism (Sheridan 1989).

This is not an argument for sectarianism or division; membership would probably have fallen even more rapidly in a movement which lacked unity. But the declines have occurred in an environment in which the major policy debates are between the Victorian Right and the New South Wales Right, and in which the left has disappeared as a credible source of ideas to reinvigorate the movement. The influence of the left has also declined within the Labor Party, and all factions within the party have embraced or reconciled themselves to the neo-liberal policy agenda pioneered by the Hawke and Keating governments.

One cannot blame the right wing of the labour movement for having ideas, or even for having bad ideas. It is understandable that the left would go through a period of intellectual crisis following the collapse of the authoritarian model of socialism. But perhaps it is now time to regroup and move on. One thing that neo-liberals and socialists agree on is that the state has a role to play in redistribution. The disagreement is, or should be, about the direction these flows should take. The Australian working-class has been absolutely decimated and demoralised by neo-liberalism, far worse than most academics and union leaders comprehend. The task of the labour movement is to provide a basis for the re-empowerment of the working class.

What Has Been Done?

Although this paper will concentrate on developments at the federal level, it should be noted that responses to union decline are not confined to the ACTU. Each state and many regions have Trades and Labour Councils, and officials in the largest of these, the New South Wales Labor Council, have been active participants in the debate on the future of unionism and how best to respond to the membership crisis. As well as being vocal critics of the ACTU amalgamation strategy (Costa & Duffy 1991; Costa & Hearn 1997) these officials have firmly embraced the telematic revolution by setting up a comprehensive web site. The Council has also recently launched an on-line newspaper, *Workers Online* (<http://www.labor.net.au/workers/>). Moreover, individual unions have initiated campaigns to boost membership.

The ACTUs approach to solving the membership crisis has had three main elements. The first, now virtually complete, has been a comprehensive restructuring of the Australian movement through the creation of 20 large unions by a series of amalgamations. While there were other motives behind this restructure, it has always been promoted as a means of bolstering membership through the creation of bigger and better-resourced unions. The second element has been an attempt to invigorate the movement by the development of a more organising-based culture, most notably through the flagship program, Organising Works. The third element was to boost unions' workplace presence by increasing the number of workplace delegates and providing access for their training.

In addition to these main elements, the ACTU has made sporadic and often unsuccessful efforts over the years to introduce new services to members. At the 1997 ACTU Congress, it was decided to initiate a series of industry-specific and issue-specific campaigns to increase the perceived relevance of the movement to workers. One of the consequences of this decision was the ACTUs 'back to the future' 8-hour day campaign (Norington 1998). The ACTU Congress also decided to forge stronger links with progressive community organisations and progressive academics and research organisations (ACTU 1997).

Union Amalgamations

The best sources on Australian union amalgamations to date have been written or co-written by Canadian residents (Chaison, 1996; Yates & Ewer 1997) so I will not dwell very long on the amalgamations themselves as you people know more about it than I do. What I will do, though, is evaluate the evidence to date on the effect of amalgamations on unionisation.

The amalgamation strategy was an ACTU-driven total restructure of the Australian union movement that followed a joint ACTU/Trade Development Council fact-finding mission to Western Europe. Two resultant strategy documents (ACTU 1987; ACTU/TDC 1987) advocated the adoption of a model of 'strategic unionism', to be achieved chiefly by transferring most of the members of the existing 326 mainly occupationally-based unions into 20 mainly industry-based 'super-unions'. This, it was hoped, would produce larger and more efficient unions capable of responding to the challenges of downward pressures on unionisation that had already become apparent (ACTU 1987: 14).

Critics from a variety of non-left ideological positions have argued that the amalgamation process was designed not so much for the purpose of resisting deunionisation, but to centralise power, and to increase the union movement's domination by the ACTU and its senior officials (Costa & Duffy 1991; Thompson 1990). It is characteristic of the intellectual crisis on the left that, apart from the usual diatribes in the socialist weeklies against union bureaucrats, there has not been any left critique of the amalgamations. The federal Labor government endorsed the amalgamation plan as it not only fitted into their plans to increase the 'efficiency' of the labour market by reducing the incidence of multi-union workplaces, but it assisted in the process of securing the approval of the ACTU leadership for some of the more unpalatable aspects of the Accord. The government facilitated the amalgamation process by changes to legislation which included the effective removal of a requirement that amalgamations could not take place without 25 per cent membership approval. The minimum size of a registered union was raised to 1,000 and subsequently 10,000, although this was later reversed after employer complaints that it amounted to an infringement of the rights of freedom of association (Hawke & Wooden 1998).

Most of the amalgamations took place between 1991 and 1995. The outcome of the process was mixed. Many of the amalgamated unions were marriages of factional convenience rather than true industry unions (Yates & Ewer 1997) while some unions were amalgamated in name only, retaining duplicated executives and infrastructure (Richardson 1994). While the amalgamations had their share of tensions and problems (Dabscheck 1995) they were effected about as smoothly as anyone could reasonably have expected. As far as can be judged, most amalgamations had rank-and-file support. In cases where ballots were required, all but a few endorsed the amalgamation, generally by large majorities (Australian Electoral Commission 1995).

Chart 1 indicates that amalgamations were not effective in boosting membership, on the contrary, union membership went into its steepest decline since the great depression of the 1930s. This correlation does not, however, imply causation. Bodman (1998) claimed to have found a significant causal relationship between amalgamations and membership decline, but his data and methodology are unconvincing. The dependent variable employed was an annual series of union membership compiled from union returns, and is generally considered a poorer indicator of trend than the alternative survey-based series. The 'two-step' cointegration methodology used by Bodman has never produced reliable results for these data, while econometricians have yet to reach agreement on how cointegrated systems should be modelled (Duy & Thoma 1998; Griffin & Svensen 1996).

Data from the 1995 Australian Industrial Relations Survey (AWIRS) provide no evidence that union amalgamations at the aggregate level were associated with union exit (Drago & Wooden 1998; Griffin & Svensen 1998; Peetz 1998) while, as discussed above, alternative explanations for the decline in membership are available. Despite the ACTUs commitment to increasing the labour movement's links with researchers, it has not as yet permitted the release of the union identifying codes employed in AWIRS, so it is not possible to say what impact amalgamations may have had on unionisation in particular unions. It may well be the case that in some unions, amalgamations have produced high levels of member dissatisfaction and exit. The ACTUs general secretary, Bill Kelty, conceded that some amalgamations had not gone well, nominating the AWU-FIMEE as one example (Carney & Johnston 1995). The data in Table 5 suggests that some unions have performed much worse than others at retaining members in the post-amalgamation period. At the same time, there may have been cases where amalgamation had a positive impact on unionisation by, for example, reducing inter-union conflict (Penn & Scattergood 1996).

What is clear, though, is that amalgamations have not proved to be the magic bullet for reversing declining unionisation. While the ACTUs 'top-down' approach was effective at effecting a large number of amalgamations in a small span of time, there was little the ACTU officials could do in the event of amalgamations going wrong, except to act as mediators. The super-union model was adopted hastily, with little consideration or analysis of the likely consequences, or exploration of alternatives.

Organising Works

Organising Works was established by the ACTU in 1994 as an avenue for recruiting, training and supporting new union recruiter/organisers, who would each be attached to a participating union. The program was modelled largely on the AFL-CIOs Organizing Institute. The

Organising Works program was a registered traineeship and received subsidies under a federal government labour market program. The mentoring union provided most of the remainder of the trainees' \$17,410 salary, with assistance from the ACTU for training and support. The first intake of 58 trainees from New South Wales and Victoria was inducted in March 1994, 55 graduated from the program and 54 obtained ongoing jobs. The program was expanded in 1995 with two drafts of 86 and 52 trainees respectively, and was also extended to Queensland. The initial focus of the program was recruitment, especially in industries where union presence was weak (Bagnall 1994). Improvements were made to the training program, which in 1995 included two residential courses and approximately 30 days of other training, delivered on average two days per fortnight (ACTU 1998; Cooper & Walton 1996; Turnbull 1996).

Initial reports of the program's progress were encouraging and it received generally favourable media coverage (Bagnall 1994; Davis 1995). The ACTU claimed considerable success, stating that over 10,000 new members were recruited as a direct result of the efforts of the 1994 intake. The first intake of 1995 was said to have recruited 13,800 members representing an income of \$2.7 million, or an average of 174 and \$34,000 per trainee, meaning that the program more than paid for itself. A visiting British academic, quite understandably, recommended that the British union movement adopt a similar scheme (Turnbull 1996). Table 6 shows some (as yet) incomplete data on the trainees. Approximately 55 per cent were female, their average age was 26, they were highly likely to have a degree or be studying, and highly likely to have previous union experience and to have been nominated by a union.

Since the first two intakes, there have been three main developments. Firstly, the ACTU has stopped publicly releasing data on the numbers of union members recruited by the trainees. Secondly, although the program was extended to other states, there has been a steady reduction in the number of trainees inducted, with 38 entrants in 1996, 27 in 1997 and 23 in 1998. Thirdly, the focus of the program has been shifted from recruitment to almost everything else. Organising Works, in conjunction with Trade Union Training Australia Inc., has developed a number of initiatives including:

- “Organising in Everything We Do” - a one day course and manual for union staff which aimed at developing an ‘organising culture’.
- “Planning To Be Effective” - a two day course which covers the principles of strategic planning and implemented organising as a priority.
- A packaged course and handbook for union delegates or activists titled “Winning in the Workplace”.
- A two or three day course, “Skills of Recruitment and Organising” for organisers aimed at assisting unions in the development and implementation of recruitment plans and strategies.
- A two-week “Craft of Organising” program for experienced organisers (ACTU 1998).

Some academics would find the new entrepreneurial spirit implied in these short courses vaguely familiar. It was in part a response to the decision of the Howard government in June 1996 to end government funding to the Trade Union Training Authority.

According to the ACTU the success of Organising Works should not be looked at in financial terms alone. It argues the program has achieved recruitment success in workplaces and industries previously thought unorganisable, ranging from horse racing to hairdressing. The ACTU also argues that aim was not merely recruitment, but also the establishment of sustainable workplace organisation based on an organising model of unionism. The ACTU also claims success in getting more women, young people, workers from different ethnic and diverse backgrounds into the union movement. The trainees were a diverse range of people with experience in women's organisations, green and peace groups, student politics, socialist groups, Christian organisations, the Labor Party, gay and lesbian groups, ethnic communities organisations, independent struggles and animal liberationists, providing a base to build the vital links between the union movement and other social and community movements. The ACTU claims that a survey of graduates highlights that the overwhelming majority of them maintain an organising/recruitment focus, and that a minority maintain dedicated recruitment roles (ACTU 1998).

While it is true that organising campaigns can have benefits even in the absence of recruitment success (Towers 1997) these claims have yet to be independently verified. It is unlikely that the ACTU would have scaled back the number of recruits to the extent it has if the program was meeting expectations. Rather, it would appear that the early burst of enthusiasm that provided initially good results has not been sustained. American experience indicates that recruiting is expensive (Voos 1984) and that most workers are not impressed much by the appeals of fresh-faced university graduates who lack local ties and much shop-floor or union experience (Early 1998). Membership-based campaigns are likely to be more effective than those run by professional organisers (Moody 1998).

In a more recent organising initiative, the ACTU has employed some organisers directly, who are seconded to two unions per year to assist in organising campaigns. The objective of these campaigns is to assist in the building of delegates' networks and training activists to be more self-sufficient in solving their own problems. The organisers attempt to engage workers in targeted industries outside the workplace, in pubs, cafes and even in their homes. Targeted industries to date include private bus and coach services, charities, and film technicians. The ACTU claimed 300 new members from the film technician campaign (Lewis 1999). This is a welcome departure from the ACTUs traditional top-down approach, but it remains to be seen how effective it will be.

Increasing Unions' Workplace Presence

An active union presence at the workplace has a positive effect on member recruitment and retention (Green & Soper 1993; Hartley 1992; Peetz 1998). The wage determination system in Australia was highly centralised for most of the first nine decades of the twentieth century, and this, together with the widespread use of union preference clauses in awards, inhibited the development of strong shopfloor union organisation, except in a small number of mainly declining industries (Benson 1988; Howard 1977; Lansbury 1980; Rimmer & Sutcliffe 1981). The 1989-90 Australian Workplace Industrial Relations Survey (AWIRS) indicated that there were no union delegates in 53 per cent of workplaces with 20 or more employees, 27 per cent of workplaces had union members but no delegates, while the remaining 20 per cent had no union members (Morehead, *et al.* 1998).

The ACTU's agreement in 1990 to embrace enterprise bargaining was promoted as a means of increasing unions' workplace relevance and presence (reference). What instead seems to have occurred was that union officials and delegates became mired in never-ending bargaining negotiations, leaving fewer resources available for members servicing and organising. By the time of the 1995 AWIRS, were no union delegates in 52 per cent of workplaces with 20 or more employees, and although workplaces had union members but no delegates had declined to 22 per cent, this was because 26 per cent now had no union members. In the private sector, the position was even worse, with the proportion of workplaces with 20 or more employees with union delegates declining from 32 to 25 per cent (Morehead, *et al.* 1998: 140). AWIRS panel data indicates that the rate of deunionisation was 2 per cent in workplaces which had union delegates as compared with 21 per cent in ones that did not (Peetz 1998: 121).

Although there was little change in delegate presence in unionised workplaces between AWIRS I and II, this is not necessarily indicative of lack of effort by unions. Drago & Wooden (1998) contend that deunionisation itself retards delegate presence while greater responsibilities of delegates may have reduced willingness to nominate. Alexander, Green & Wilson (1998) reject this interpretation of the data, arguing that it is delegate presence which influences unionisation.

In 1995, the ACTU adopted a policy of increasing the number of union delegates by 20,000 by July 1997. In 1997 the ACTU Congress passed a vague resolution to 'develop' delegates and officials who would 'promote a culture which develops delegates' capabilities' while a political education strategy for delegates was also to be implemented. It was also decided to establish and maintain comprehensive databases within unions that would allow for the identification and tracking of union delegates (ACTU 1997).

What is To Be Done?

Union movements make a number of strategic choices in the way they operate and organise, whether or not this is made explicit. One of these is the degree to which unions adopt an adversarial or a cooperative orientation towards management. The Australian industrial relations system is often described as adversarial, but conflict has long been contained, confined and formalised by the arbitration system to the extent that unions, employer associations and other industrial relations actors have been said to belong to a 'club'. Perhaps one of the greatest failures of the Australian union movement has been an unwillingness to articulate clearly what form labour-capital relationships should take now that this club-like atmosphere is breaking down.

Employers need to be shown that opposing unions is not cost-free. This need not necessarily be demonstrated through industrial disputes, there is more than one way to crack an egg. Australian industry superannuation funds, many of which have union representations on their boards, are now worth \$23 billion and are rapidly increasing, and will provide a valuable source of leverage. Industrial disputes and the threat of industrial disputes can also be an effective strategy, but only if they are properly conducted. Whatever may be said of the outcome of the 1998 waterfront dispute, it certainly galvanised and unified the Australian union movement. That action was a defensive one, and there are indications that the Howard government intends to wage industrial war in the building industry this year. If this should eventuate, the government's draconian anti-union laws need to be publicly challenged

through a campaign of non-violent mass civil disobedience, in order to expose them for the paper tigers they are.

Unions also need to become more willing to take offensive actions. Although the data is missing or unreliable Australia seems to have mirrored the British pattern of decreasing strike activity at a time when worker grievances are increasing (Kelly 1997). Nevertheless, some unions are learning how to fight effectively. Nurses in Victoria, for example, have recently won substantial improvements to their working conditions through a well-targeted campaign of industrial action over staffing levels. Responsible economic unionism invariably collapses unless it is supported by employer coercion.

Another strategic choice confronting the Australian union movement is its orientation to governments, especially Labor governments, given the current tendency of non-Labor governments to ignore and marginalise unions. Shortly after the fall of the Keating government in 1996, the ACTU decided against entering into an Accord type arrangement with a future Labor government. While many may consider this to be a good thing, the decision was implemented with little discussion or consultation, or analysis of the costs and benefits of the Accord and similar social-partner type arrangements.

The ACTU needs to re-examine the question of union structure in Australia. A more analytic and consultative approach needs to be taken, incorporating the issues identified by a growing body of international research (Chaison 1997; Murray 1994; Strauss 1993; Sverke 1997; Wial 1993). While unions are independent entities and the ACTU is limited in what it can achieve, problem areas need to be identified and mechanisms put in place to help heal damaging internal divisions. More needs to be done to boost membership involvement in unions, to democratise unions and to prevent the entrenchment of self-serving cliques.

The ACTU has yet to fully embrace the telematic revolution. While it does have a web site (<http://www.actu.asn.au/>) it is an uninspiring, text-based, low-budget effort. While improving this site may not yield many immediate benefits, the potential of this medium undoubtedly warrants an increased investment (Lee 1997, 1999).

There has been some discussion as to the extent to which increased provision by unions of non-industrial services will affect membership (Griffin, Svensen & Teicher 1997). While the sceptics probably outnumber the optimists in this debate, the option should not be completely ruled out. According to the literature, Ghent-type unemployment insurance schemes have contributed to the maintenance of union density in countries which operate such schemes. In Australia, the Australian Nurses Federation provides an indemnity insurance scheme which contributes to the high union density levels among Australian nurses. While, the ACTU's excursions into the field of non-industrial service provision has not often been successful, no option should be ruled out.

Conclusion

A major failing of the Australian union movement has been its propensity to introduce major changes with a top-down, 'crash through or crash' attitude. Quick fixes, often imported from overseas, have been adopted with little consultation or strategic planning. The leadership of the ACTU have so far been unwilling to take responsibility for the policies that have contributed to the rapid decline in Australian unionisation. The chief architect of the Accord,

amalgamation and enterprise bargaining strategies, Bill Kelty, is still secretary of the ACTU after 16 years in the position, and at 51 is still a long way from retirement age. His current term expires in 2003, and leading union officials in Victoria and Queensland have suggested that he should stand down earlier (Carson 1998). Kelty has responded to the membership crisis with an alarming complacency, arguing as recently as 1995 that, 'in comparison to a great number of other union movements in the world, people would describe us as in sparkling shape' (cited in Johnston 1995). For the last two or three years Kelty has been almost invisible, and he rarely returns telephone calls from journalists (Carney 1998). Ironically, in one of his last media interviews, he reportedly said, 'If you have some bureaucrat sitting in an office, this is the real threat to unionism. In the future, I want the union ringing people up and asking what they want' (cited in Carney & Johnston 1995).

The ACTU has, in the last couple of years, flagged a new, more member-oriented direction and launched some promising policy initiatives. Doubts must remain, however, as to the speed with which a leopard can change its spots, and few resources have yet been devoted to the new programs. Given this, it must be doubted whether the membership crisis can be reversed in the short term. If union density decline slows in the next two years it will be surprising; if it levels out it will be astonishing, and if the decline is reversed I will be absolutely flabbergasted. What this review shows is that there are no magic bullet, quick-fix solution to the crisis. In a free-choice environment, unions have to become more effective to survive, and this will take a lot of work, and a significant change of attitude.

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Chart 1. Union Membership and Density: Australia 1976-1998
(Australian Bureau of Statistics Cat No. 6325.0, 6310.0)

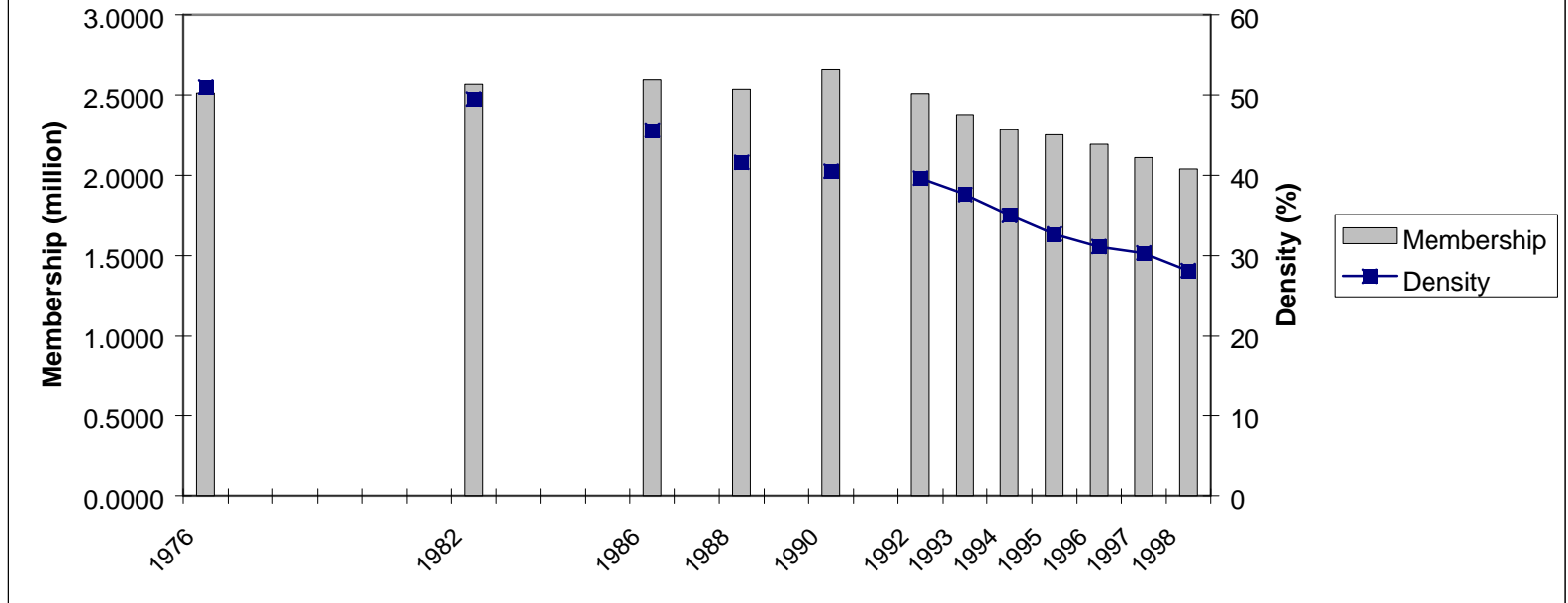


Table 1. Union Density, Australia, by Selected Characteristics, 1990-1998

Year	Sex		Sector		Hours		Engagement		Occupation	
	Male	Female	Public	Private	Full-time	Part-time	Perm-anent	Casual	Manual	Non-manual
1990	45.1	34.7	66.8	30.8	44.7	25.1	45.7	18.8	50.8	34.0
1991	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
1992	43.4	34.8	67.1	29.4	44.3	25.2	46.1	17.2	48.7	34.3
1993	40.9	33.5	64.4	27.5	42.1	23.6	43.9	16.0	45.8	32.9
1994	37.9	31.3	62.3	26.0	39.1	22.9	41.3	14.7	42.3	30.9
1995	35.7	29.1	56.4	25.1	36.3	22.4	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
1996	33.5	28.1	55.4	24.0	34.5	21.6	37.4	13.1	39.8 ¹	26.8
1997	33.0	26.9	54.7	23.3	33.7	21.3	36.0	13.8	n.a.	n.a.
1998	30.0	25.8	52.9	21.4	31.2	20.2	34.2	11.6	31.3 ²	27.2
% decline 1990-98	33.5	25.6	20.8	30.5	30.2	19.5	25.2	38.3		

Sources: ABS 6325.0 *Trade Union Members* (1976-1992, 1994, 1996); 6342.0 *Working Arrangements Australia* (1993); 6310.0 *Weekly Earnings of Employees (Distribution)* (1995, 1997); 6310.0 *Employee Earnings, Benefits and Trade Union Membership* (1998)

Notes:

1. There was a change in the way occupations were classified in 1996, and figures may not be exactly comparable with previous years.
2. There was a change in the way occupations were classified in 1998, and figures may not be exactly comparable with previous years. Non-manual workers include tradespersons, labourers and related workers.

Table 2. Union Density, Australia, by Age 1990-1998

Age Year	15-19	20-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-59	60+
1990	25.0	33.5	42.3	43.5	45.6	49.6	43.4
1991	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
1992	22.6	31.5	40.5	43.0	46.5	45.7	37.9
1993	21.5	30.0	37.2	42.6	42.7	42.9	37.0
1994	19.3	26.7	34.4	40.5	40.2	42.9	31.6
1995	19.0	24.6	32.3	36.8	38.4	38.8	30.4
1996	18.5	24.0	29.5	35.9	36.1	38.6	25.3
1997	18.6	21.8	28.4	35.2	35.9	34.8	27.0
1998	17.3	20.3	25.4	32.5	34.4	32.1	26.7
% decline 1990-97	30.8	39.4	40.0	24.1	24.6	35.3	38.5

Sources: ABS 6325.0 *Trade Union Members* (1976-1992, 1994, 1996); 6342.0 *Working Arrangements Australia* (1993); 6310.0 *Weekly Earnings of Employees (Distribution)* (1995, 1997); 6310.0 *Employee Earnings, Benefits and Trade Union Membership* (1998)

Table 3. Union Density, Australia, by Size of Location (Employees) 1990-1998

Size Year	1-9	10-19	20-99	100+
1990	16.4	30.3	46.0	58.2
1991	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
1992	16.3	29.8	46.1	57.6
1993	14.0	28.6	44.9	55.0
1994	12.6	25.3	42.0	53.4
1995	11.8	22.6	38.8	50.5
1996	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
1997	10.3	20.0	33.8	46.3
1998	9.4	18.2	32.4	43.9
% decline 1990-98	42.7	39.9	29.6	24.6

Sources: ABS 6325.0 *Trade Union Members* (1976-1992, 1994, 1996); 6342.0 *Working Arrangements Australia* (1993); 6310.0 *Weekly Earnings of Employees (Distribution)* (1995, 1997); 6310.0 *Employee Earnings, Benefits and Trade Union Membership* (1998)

Table 4. Union Density, Australia, by Industry (ANZSIC)

Size Industry	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998
Agriculture, forestry, fish					12.4	9.9	6.6	7.1	7.9
Mining					44.5	46.1	38.5	43.9	33.4
Manufacturing					40.8	39.4	38.7	36.6	34.5
Electricity, gas, water	79.3	n.a.	77.3	71.4	66.4	65.1	65.4	65.9	55.2
Construction	45.4	n.a.	42.3	35.3	34.1	30.6	29.7	33.5	25.2
Wholesale trade					14.6	15.0	14.8	12.7	12.6
Retail Trade					23.3	22.6	22.5	22.3	21.3
Accom, cafes, restaurants					19.3	18.4	15.4	15.5	12.9
Transport & storage					51.9	49.6	48.0	47.5	44.3
Communication	75.9	n.a.	77.1	75.1	65.6	66.1	62.1	59.8	53.8
Finance & insurance					42.4	37.2	34.0	35.5	29.8
Property & business serv					14.6	16.0	11.4	10.0	11.1
Govt admin & defence	60.0	n.a.	60.7	56.4	54.7	50.0	46.9	43.5	45.4
Education					56.1	49.3	49.9	49.3	48.2
Health & community serv					37.0	35.0	33.8	34.6	32.7
Cultural, recreational serv					23.8	26.8	22.9	23.8	21.5
Personal & other services					36.6	25.3	28.5	27.7	26.7

Sources: ABS 6325.0 *Trade Union Members* (1976-1992, 1994, 1996); 6342.0 *Working Arrangements Australia* (1993); 6310.0 *Weekly Earnings of Employees (Distribution)* (1995, 1997); 6310.0 *Employee Earnings, Benefits and Trade Union Membership* (1998)

Note: In 1994, the Bureau changed industry coding from ASIC to ANZSIC. Only data for comparable categories are shown pre-1994.

Table 5. Membership Changes in the 20 Largest Australian Unions

UNION	Jan 1995	Jan 1997	% Change
Independent Education Union	38,437	42,528	10.6
Shop Distrib. & Allied Employees Assoc.	208,925	227,656	9.0
Australian Education Union	156,195	164,343	5.2
Australian Nursing Federation	108,748	109,472	0.7
Const. Forestry Mining & Energy Union	120,000	120,000	0
National Tertiary Education Ind. Union	24,715	24,567	-0.6
National Union of Workers	101,950	101,038	-0.9
Media Entertainment & Arts Alliance	28,400	27,588	-2.9
Communications, Elect. & Plumbing Union	195,322	189,523	-3.0
Transport Workers Union	83,576	81,002	-3.1
Comm. & Public Sector Union (PSU grp)	110,520	106,080	-4.0
Australian Manufacturing Wkrs Union	200,000	191,750	-4.1
Public Transport Union	38,332	36,683	-4.3
Australian Services Union	182,312	168,903	-7.4
Finance Sector Union	119,081	109,771	-7.8
Aust. Meat Industry Employees Union	35,092	32,100	-8.5
Textile, Clothing & Footwear Union	36,588	33,271	-9.1
Australian Workers Union	161,000	145,000	-9.9
Health Services Union	71,452	64,268	-10.1
Aust. Liquor, Hosp. & Misc. Wkrs Union	201,740	160,266	-20.6
TOTAL	2,222,385	2,135,854	-3.9

Source: Davis (1997)

Table 6. Characteristics of Organising Works Trainees

	1994		1995 (1)		1995 (2)		1996		1997		1998	
Total Number	58	%	86		52		38		27		23	
Average Age	24.5		24.1				28.4		27.7			
Below 26 years	38	66	66	77	26	50						
Women	35	60	53	62	28	54	19	50	13	48	11	48
Degree	30	52	43	50			19	50			8	35
Higher degree	4	7	8	9								
Current student	19	33	33	38								
Second language	17	29	10	12			8	21			4	17
Previously Union Member	49	85	76	88								
Previously Union Delegate	17	29	35	41			26	68	17	63	9	39
Nominated by Union	38	66	37	43								
State												
NSW							8		10			
Victoria							6		8			
Queensland							5		7			
South Australia							13				12	
Western Australia							5				9	
Tasmania							1				2	
Graduated	55	95	79	92	42	81	36	95	25			

Sources: Turnbull (1996), ACTU (1998)