

Unions at the crossroads



Phil Teece

Advisor,
personnel &
industrial relations
phil.teece@alia.org.au

Data released recently by the Australian Bureau of Statistics raise interesting questions about trade unions in the current Australian labour market. They also confirm library workers as one of our more heavily unionised groups. Despite wholesale casualisation, outsourcing and increasing use of independent contractors, union membership grew by almost 24 000 in the past year. This compares with a 208 000 fall in the previous year. But a larger overall national workforce means that total union density is still flat. Only one in four employees is a union member. By contrast, among librarians membership exceeds fifty per cent, primarily because three quarters are employed in the more highly unionised public sector.

Australia's trade unions have recently been trying hard to make themselves more relevant to their potential membership base. But the nature of the modern labour force has made this particularly difficult. Casual, fixed-term and non-standard workers who have tripled in the past decade are understandably much less likely to automatically join unions than the full-time, long-term employees who previously made up the great bulk of the national workforce.

Faced with this major challenge to its member base, the Australian Council of Trade Unions [ACTU]'s response is a strategy for new and better services, a closer focus on the workplace level and development of key campaigns on the major issues worrying most Australian workers. An attractive new member services package has proved popular. It offers a wide range of benefits, including low-interest home loans, cheap computers, financial planning, shopping discounts and low-fee credit cards.

In combining these initiatives with a strong major issues campaign, the ACTU seems to have decided that valuable services are likely to prove a more sustainable basis for recruiting and, particularly, retaining members than merely reducing fees. The recent ABS data suggest that this approach has been modestly successful in the past year. Its lasting worth, however, will be measured by success in its issues campaign. Key areas identified are casual employment, low-wage work, reasonable working hours, and equal pay for women.

On casual jobs, the ACTU has recognised that contraction in full-time permanent positions has been a crucial element in falling union membership. During the 1990s, unions failed to recruit the new casual workers who replaced full-time workers. By taking up issues of concern to them, the ACTU hopes casuals will find unions are more relevant and attractive to them. This year, casuals have gained a legal right to transfer to more stable employment after a qualifying period. In addition, women in casual jobs now have access to maternity leave, just like all other workers. Both these changes followed success in major ACTU test cases.

The Living Wage campaign has been based upon what its proponents describe as 'Australia's new working poor'. Unions quote ABS statistics showing 816 000 low-income households now incur average weekly expenditure that exceeds weekly income by more than \$50. They say that, in the past five years, only the top twenty per cent of income earners have increased their gross weekly real income. In its Living Wage campaign, the ACTU has had some success in the Australian Industrial Relations Commission [AIRC] over recent years. The federal minimum wage has been lifted by sixteen per cent over five years. But a fifth of all adult workers still earn less than \$12 per hour. Clearly, these people will join and remain in unions only if they believe the labour movement can improve their position.

Long working hours are perhaps the dominant and most talked about feature of the new labour market. Despite the occasional silly newspaper article about high-income workaholic men, many people are clearly stressed by their working hours, especially those with young families. Recognising this, the ACTU recently commenced its Reasonable Hours Test Case. The claim seeks flexible but formal guidelines on excessive hours and unhealthy rosters. Guidelines would be tailored to suit the requirements of individual enterprises and industries, but would have to consider employees' personal circumstances in determination of reasonable hours of work. Given the success of some European countries in limiting working hours, unions see real potential in this claim.

Pay equity for women is the fourth key focus area in the ACTU issues strategy. Half a century after the world adopted an International Labour Organization Equal Pay Convention, women's pay is languishing. Australian women continue to earn a third less than men. And the gap has widened in the past five years. Formal pay equity inquiries in several states confirm that librarians are among those most affected by wage discrimination. The ACTU will shortly launch a major national Equal Pay Test Case in an attempt to reverse the slide in pay relativities.

Results in these four key areas will probably decide whether unions continue to turn around recent membership losses in the immediate future. But, with a federal election looming and a change of government more likely than not, industrial relations policy will also be highly significant. An ALP win would see important changes and a bigger role for the AIRC and trade unions in wage fixing processes, as perceived excesses in the enterprise bargaining system are moderated. If this occurs, and their issues campaign wins further improvements for employees, the ACTU and its affiliate unions may find the worst is over for them. Library workers will watch with interest. ■

Despite the occasional silly newspaper article about high-income workaholic men, many people are clearly stressed by their working hours...