

Strategic initiatives in Australian union organising

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We wish to have this paper considered for the following track:
Track 4 - Institutions, Processes and Outcomes

Paper abstract:

Various commentators propose the adoption of the organising model as a strategy for union revitalisation (Bronfenbrenner & Juravich, 1998; Fletcher & Hurd, 1998; Voss & Sherman, 2000). In Australia, Crosby (2005) has re-stated this in reference to Australian unions, challenging them to “build for themselves power sufficient to counterbalance the power now so dominantly held by their employers” (p. 293). Other strategies suggested to reinvigorate and grow unions include the establishment of Member Service Centres; developing workplace leaders; educating non-members about the advantages of participating actively in union work; and organising internationally (Crosby, 2005).

The organising approach to revitalisation encourages unions to broaden their constituencies in order to attract new categories of workers into membership; to extend membership downwards to low wage workers in secondary labour markets, and to adapt quickly to changing corporate strategies by developing broad alliances and extending campaigns across national borders into the global arena (Bronfenbrenner., 2007).

While there is no absence of ideas for rebuilding the Australian union movement, it has been noted that unions’ adoption of organising is limited (Carter, 2006; Crosby, 2005; Peetz, 2006) and that the “absolute size of the organising effort is insufficient” (Heery & Adler, 2004, p. 64). Moreover, it is reported that a number of unions attempt to use the approach in a piecemeal manner or have adopted the *rhetoric* of organising without developing a corresponding practice (Bronfenbrenner & Juravich, 1998; Voss & Sherman, 2000). There are no studies evaluating current innovations in organising, such as the development and use of Member Service Centres; the development of workplace leaders; work with non-members participation in union work; and instances of international organising.

Are unions using the innovations described above? What evidence is there of the adoption of the organising approach to revitalisation? How are the unions using Member Service Centres? How have key stakeholders responded? How are unions progressing international organising? Using a case-study approach, we wish to examine current strategic union methods in various Australian union branches.

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