

## **A Spotlight on IR: Media and Union Strategy in Australia**

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Track 4 - Institutions, Processes and Outcomes

In recent years, Australian trade unions have developed and implemented strategies aimed at ensuring their survival in a changing industrial context. These strategies have predominantly focused either on the development of large-scale blueprints for the national labour movement or on more specific and tailored strategies for particular unions in a range of different industries. In 2005, the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) supported by State Trades and Labour Councils embarked on a national campaign to protest the proposed introduction of new industrial legislation (Work Choices). Work Choices represented the most significant change in Australia's industrial landscape in more than a century and sought to restrict union influence and power by curtailing their capacity to take industrial action, organise members and to enforce, protect and improve working conditions. In response to this changed industrial climate, union strategy altered and greater emphasis was placed on a media and community campaign (including paid advertising) that aimed to reach not only union members but also the broader Australian public/population/community.

The use of the media within the ACTU's campaign against Work Choices was innovative as prior to 2005 the ACTU had not sought to utilise the mass media in a national campaign to nearly the same extent or with the same level of sophistication. The focus on media in the campaign eschewed traditional strategies based on political activity and industrial militancy such as those foreshadowed by then ACTU Secretary Bill Kelty who alluded to the "full symphony" being used against the initial round of industrial legislative change that followed the Howard Government's election in 1996. While this use of the media by the ACTU is innovative in the Australian context, international examples of similar occurrences have been recorded within the industrial relations literature.

In the 1980s, labour movements in the US and the UK faced similar challenges to the ACTU as conservative governments under President Reagan and Prime Minister Thatcher introduced policies that sought to weaken union power. Of particular note is the work of Glass (1984) that examines the use of new media technology by unions in the United States at a time of equivalent industrial transformation. This produced an era whereby organised labour faced the 'most serious challenge of its existence' (p.131), and unions responded by producing media material to communicate with ordinary workers and influence public opinion (p.150). Likewise, the United Kingdom of the late 1970s and 1980s was a hostile political environment for unions. The work of Edwards and Bain (1988) explores the relationship between trade unions and public opinion, and surmises that the increase in the popularity of unions at the time was linked to more positive media coverage. The anti union agenda recently confronted by Australian unions from a conservative government is akin to that experienced in the US and UK, making it appropriate to explore and reflect.

Further, within industrial relations it is often assumed that media will present unions in an unsympathetic light. Studies conducted by Schmidt (1993), Erickson and Mitchell (1996) and Flynn (2000) examine the impact of media coverage on union activity with a particular emphasis on the process of striking and the largely negative portrayals of unions and industrial action, while True (1999) documents this perceived bias from a union perspective. While these studies are important to the broader discipline they are based on an assumption that the relationship between unions and the media is entirely independent. In fact, these and other more recent studies (see Jamieson, 2005; Haugh, 2006) base this independence on the premise that unions and the media are fundamentally at odds due to the corporate ownership of mainstream media. While it would be foolish to ignore this particular dynamic, the reality of contemporary union strategy is that they have been able to penetrate and utilise the media despite this apparent hindrance.

The purpose of this paper is to explore how the ACTU, supported by State Trades and Labour Councils used the media to campaign against Work Choices. The focus of the research is on how paid media (eg advertisements) stimulated public interest, which in turn provoked 'unpaid' media coverage (eg news stories). It will examine what was involved in the formulation of the advertisements, the role played by focus-group feedback, union polling and surveys, and the influence of events such as the 1998 maritime dispute. The paper examines the period between 2005 and 2007 commencing with the development of the media strategy in 2005 and ends with the 2007 federal election campaign. It will chart the development of ACTU industrial and communications strategy, explore the effectiveness of the ACTU's use of advertising and other media-focused strategies to influence public opinion and examine the ongoing impact on the development of future strategy.

The project's significance for the study for Track 4: Institutions, Processes and Outcomes lies in its contribution to understanding of 'Trends in union presence and impact'. The paper does this by exploring union ability to respond to changed industrial landscape through embracing new forms of communication to actively seek to sway public opinion.

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