Organising for What Purpose? Reconsidering the Organising Model in Australia

Introduction

The diminished influence of trade unions, manifested most visibly in declining union density, is the most significant industrial relations issue of our time. In Australia, 49 percent of the workforce belonged to a union in 1982. Twenty-five years later, only 18.9 percent held a union ticket (ABS, 2008a). A mere 12.1 percent of the United States’ workforce were unionists in 2007. In 1975, 28.5 percent had been union members. While Canada has fared better than either Australia or the United States, only 29.7 percent of the workforce were union members in 2007, compared to 38 percent in 1981 (BLS, 2008; Statistics Canada, 2007). In the United Kingdom, union density fell from 55 percent in the late 1970s to 28.4 percent in 2006. Within the Anglo-Saxon world, the union response to this decline has hinged upon a new ‘Organizing Model’. First developed in the United States during the late 1980s, it was embraced by Australian and New Zealand unions in 1993-94. British unions endorsed the model in 1996 (Griffin and Moors, 2004; Walsh and Crawford, 2003; Fairbrother and Stewart, 2003). In Australia, the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) initiated the Organizing Works programme during 1994 to train organizers in the model’s implementation. In judging the model’s Australian effect, Peetz (2006: 163) argues that the ‘tide’ was ‘turned back.’ Griffin (2007: 559) observes that, ‘organizing … remains the key strategy of Australian unions.’

Although unions have always organized, the Organizing Model is directed towards fundamentally different objectives to those traditionally pursued by unions. Historically, unions saw their raison-d’etre as the establishment of a ‘common rule’ that provided for standardised employment conditions across each craft, occupation or industry. In studying the origins of United States’ unions, Perlman and Taft (1966: 10) noted that organizing was undertaken to enforce ‘laws’ that were ‘mandatory upon the individual employer and employee.’ Unions did not establish local branches so that workers could negotiate their own wages and conditions but, as the Webbs (1902: 201) observed, to ensure ‘uniformity’ and ‘to guard the local interests of the trade’. Advocates of the Organizing Model, however, believe that workplace bargaining must be the priority, arguing that unions were largely responsible for their own decline by creating a ‘Servicing Model’ in which members became passive recipients of industrial representation. Workers were alienated by centralised structures and a lack of democracy. Thus, while the model calls for a greater emphasise on recruitment, its central argument is that unions will only be attractive if they ‘empower’ local members so that they have the ability ‘to solve problems themselves, as opposed to having the union office – away from the workplace – solve it for them’ (Peetz, 2006: 164).

Industrial relations academics, throughout the Anglo-Saxon world, have been forceful advocates of the Organizing Model (Banks and Metzgar, 1989; Conrow, 1991; Bronfenbrenner, 1997, 2003; Juravic and Bronfenbrenner, 1998; Peetz, 2006; Peetz et al., 2007; Cooper, 2001, 2003; Fairbrother and Yates, 2003; Oxenbridge, 2003). Within the union movement itself, however, it has faced resistance. Cooper (2001), in studying one white-collar union, found that ‘each step of the change process was contested’. Surveys of ACTU delegates, conducted during 1995 and 1997, recorded that only 43.7 percent rated Organizing Works a success (Gahan and Bell, 1999: 19). Resistance to the new model has also been reported from the United States, New Zealand and the United Kingdom (Voss and Sherman, 2003; Oxenbridge, 2003; Heery et al, 1999).

While the Organizing Model has faced union opposition, it has not been subject to much in the way of critical academic review. To the extent that scepticism has been expressed, it has largely related to the practicalities of implementation (Griffin et al., 2003; Heery et al, 1999; Fletcher and Hurd, 1998) rather than to its underlying merits. This article, however, contends that the Organizing Model is conceptually flawed, in that it largely overlooks the historic significance of strategies directed towards the regulation of product (the demand for a good or service) and labour market forces. In these domains, regulation requires an industry-wide or occupational focus. An ‘organizing’ strategy that focuses on simply building up workplace strength will not, in itself, redress market-created power imbalances. Empirically, there is no evidence to suggest that – fifteen years after its Australian adoption – the Organizing Model
has had any meaningful impact. Union density and absolute membership continue to fall. The best predictor of high union density in Australia is not a union’s workplace organizing ability but rather – as in the past – its capacity to exert control over labour market entry and product market outcomes. In August 2007, there were only seven industry sub-sectors where union density remained above 40 percent – rail transport, air and space transport, electricity, preschool and school education, public order and safety, hospitals, and coal mining (ABS, 2008a). Each was characterised by substantial capital and/or licensing barriers to entry for new competitors, and union-endorsed restrictions or training qualifications on labour entry. (In coal mining the recent collapse in union density followed on from the demise of such restrictions.)

This article begins by examining patterns of union decline in Australia, before reviewing the ‘organizing’ literature. This is followed by two brief case studies. The first discusses how, in the coal industry, decline occurred despite a history of strong union organisation. The second study explores how, by maintaining a centrally bargained focus, the United Firefighters Union (Queensland) kept the loyalty of virtually every professional firefighter. The article concludes with a reconsideration of the model and patterns of union decline in Australia.

Patterns of Union Decline in Australia

Union strength can be gauged against a number of objective measures – density (the percentage of workers who take out union tickets), the absolute number of unionists, the level of industrial disputation (typically measured as working days lost) and the ‘wage premium’ enjoyed by unionists over their non-union counterparts. Before considering these measures, however, some general comments are required. The factors in union decline are complex, and have produced a considerable literature (Griffin and Svensen, 1996; Turner, 1991; Pocock, 1998; Alexander et al., 1998; Gahan and Bell, 1999; Freeman, 1995; Haynes et al., 2006). In Australia, as elsewhere, union decline has been associated with new technologies, altered work practices and structural changes. Manufacturing – which provided jobs to more than 28 percent of the workforce in the early 1960s – gave way to only 10 percent in 2006-07. By the latter date, the retail trade (14 percent), property and business services (12 percent) and community services (10 percent) all employed more people. In the decade to 2006-07, the proportion of employees engaged part-time, rather than full-time, rose from 19 to 28 percent (ABS, 2008b). Increases in other forms of contingent labour, including self-employed contractors, also contributed to labour market change (Vandenheuvel & Wooden, 1995: 263). Such changes, however, cannot be understood in isolation from the transformation of Australian industrial relations.

Prior to 1986, employment conditions were largely determined by federal or state awards, which typically provided for ‘preference’ in employment for unionists. From 1986, however, Australia witnessed the effective dismantlement of this system. Awards were ‘restructured’ during the late 1980s. Enterprise bargaining was introduced in 1991. Non-union collective agreements followed in 1993. These changes were overseen by Labor Governments. The election of the Howard-led coalition in 1996 produced more overtly anti-union legislation, providing for individual Australian Workplace Agreements (AWAs). By 2006, only 19 percent of all workers had their wages set by awards, while 38.1 percent were under collective agreements (only 3.1 percent were on AWAs or their equivalent). There were, however, marked differences between the private and public sectors. Whereas 92.9 percent of public sector workers were under a collective agreement, only 24.4 percent of private sector workers were engaged under such arrangements (ABS, 2008b: 258).

From the preceding discussion it is useful to compare the rate at which union density fell in the ten years to 1996 (the ‘Labor’ years) with the ensuing ‘Howard’ decade. As Figure 1 indicates, the rate of decline moderated in the ‘Howard’ decade. Union density dropped by 14.5 points (from 45.6 to 31.1 percent) under Labor. In the Howard decade it fell 10.8 points (to 20.3 percent). In both decades, the rate of decline was most marked in the public sector. Under Labor, public sector density fell by 15.2 points (from 70.6 to 55.4 percent) whereas in the private sector it fell by 10.5 points (from 34.5 to 24 percent). Under Howard, public sector density dropped by 12.8 points to 42.6 percent. Private sector density declined 8.8 points to 15.2 percent (ABS, 2007, 2007a). These results suggest that Howard’s legislation was not the main factor in union decline. It also indicates that the almost universal coverage of the public sector by collective agreements did little to maintain union membership. The Australian public
sector has not acted as the bastion of union strength that is assumed to be the Anglo-Saxon norm (Haynes et al., 2006; Pocock, 1998).

Figure 1: Declining union density, 1986-1996, 1996-2006

![Graph showing declining union density from 1986 to 2006.]

Source: ABS 6310.0, 1996, 2006

The marked decline in public sector union strength is emphasised when we examine absolute numbers. As Figure 2 reveals, even in 1992 there were more unionists in the private sector than the public. The gap has widened since. The union movement lost 812,400 members between 1992 and 2007. Of these, 455,500 were lost in the public sector (ABS, 2007, 2008a). The union movement thus suffered more direct harm from changes in public sector employment than from aggressive private sector management strategies.

Figure 2: Number of Union Members (Public and Private Sectors), 1992-2007

![Graph showing number of union members from 1992 to 2007.]

Source: ABS Trade Union Membership Time Series, 2008
When, as in Figure 3, we factor in non-union workers, in both sectors two points stand out. In the public sector, the fall in union density largely reflects the displacement of unionists by non-unionists. The total number employed in the sector in 2007 (1,692,900) was little different from 1992 (1,716,700). By contrast, declining union density in the private sector was primarily due to the addition of more than three million non-union workers during the same period. Thus, while there were still one million private sector unionists in 2007, there were 6.3 million non-unionists (ABS, 2007, 2008a).

### Figure 3: Total Employees (Union, Non-Union): Private and Public Sector, 1992-2007

![Figure 3: Total Employees (Union, Non-Union): Private and Public Sector, 1992-2007](source)

If possession of a union card is one indicator of support for unionism, so too is a willingness to join with fellow workers in industrial action. It has been argued that conciliation and arbitration systems adopted in Australasia had a particularly adverse effect on union activism (Peetz, 2006; Peetz, Pocock & Houghton, 2007; Fairbrother and Yates, 2003; Walsh & Crawford, 2003). The Organizing Model, it was hoped, would overcome this supposed legacy. However, Figure 4 indicates that the introduction of enterprise bargaining in 1991 was associated with a dramatic fall in industrial disputation. By 2007, passivity prevailed (ABS, 2008c).
One of the traditional benefits of union membership is the delivery of a ‘wage premium’, whereby union workers receive a higher wage than non-unionists doing comparable work (Freeman and Medoff, 1984; Peetz, 2006). By 2007, however, the mean weekly earnings for full-time union members and non-unionists were virtually identical ($1132 for unionists and $1131 for non-unionists). Industries where full-time non-unionists received higher mean wages than unionists included a number of traditional union strongholds – electricity, gas and water; transport, postal and warehousing; health care and social assistance; and public administration and safety. Mean full-time wages in manufacturing were similar for both groups. Paradoxically, some sectors with low-levels of union membership – accommodation, cafes and restaurants; and agriculture, forestry and fishing – were characterised by a marked ‘union premium’ (ABS, 2008a: 43). The latter suggests peculiar circumstances that insulated relatively small groups of workers from prevailing industry trends.

Given the pattern of union decline in Australia, to what extent has the ‘organizing literature’ provided the basis for a coherent strategy capable of redressing the above trends?

**The ‘Organizing’ Literature**

While the ‘organizing’ literature is of relatively recent origin, it nevertheless represents wider methodological and theoretical shifts within industrial relations. For the discipline’s founding figures – of whom Cole, the Webbs, and Commons and his associates were the most prominent – it was the capacity of unions to extend beyond mere workplace bargaining that made them worthy of attention. ‘Without a Trade Union in the industry’, the Webbs (1920: 179) observed, ‘it would be almost impossible to get a Common Rule extended over a whole district, and hopeless to attempt a national agreement’. Methodologically, their work relied heavily upon historical studies. In the 1950s and 1960s, Dunlop, Flanders and Clegg sought to understand the ways in which various ‘rule’ making institutions shaped regulatory patterns. Case studies supplemented historical research. By the 1980s, however, industrial relations academics were increasingly adopting a workplace focus. ‘New Left’ scholars believed it was at the workplace that the interests of workers and capital were most clearly counter-posed. Others, most particularly in the United States (Kochan et al., 1986; Turner, 1991), noted that new work practices and technologies had eroded unions’ ability to impose standardised employment conditions. They argued that unions could only survive if they adopted a ‘strategic’, or ‘change-response’ model, embracing new work and employee involvement systems at the workplace level. Methodologically, there was a growth in attitudinal surveys.
Various studies (Freeman and Rogers, 1999; Diamond and Freeman, 2002; Haynes et al., 2006) detected ‘unsatisfied demand’ for union membership. A key factor in determining membership was ‘union reach’ (a union’s presence at a workplace).

A central assumption of the Organizing Model is the belief that if a devolved, democratic system of union representation was offered to workers – and ‘union reach’ was extended through greater organizing – it would meet the ‘unsatisfied demand’. As noted earlier, the model was also based on a number of other propositions – top-down structures had alienated workers; a greater emphasis on recruitment was needed; activism would only revive if union members were given the capacity to manage their own affairs. Some have also called for the model to be extended to include support for ‘social unionism’, in which unionists ally themselves with others in pursuit of wider social objectives (Pocock, 1998; Voss and Sherman, 2003). In practical terms, the model’s implementation has, by common consent (Griffin and Moors, 2004; Cooper, 2001; Fletcher and Hurd, 1998; Hurd, 2006; Peetz et al., 2007), been conducted in a ‘top-down’ manner. Where the model has been adopted, it has typically followed the election of a new leadership team. The supply of organizers entrusted with carrying out the model initially came from the new union organizing academies. Few had industrial experience. In Australia, any embrace of ‘social unionism’ is constrained by the close ties between unions and the Labor Party. Throughout its history, Labor has been extraordinarily successful in destroying those forces within the union movement that (whether from left or right) advocated a social vision at odds with its own. There is little doubt that, if seriously challenged, it would do so again.

The implementation of the model has been ‘patchy’, beset by difficulties and opposition (Peetz et al.; Heery et al, 2000; Oxenbridge, 2003). This has, among supporters of the model, been largely attributed to continuing support for the old ‘Servicing Model’ among serving union officials (Oxenbridge, 2003; Cooper, 2001; Voss and Sherman, 2003; Pocock, 1998). Griffin et al. (2003: 95), however, have suggested that the ‘central tenet of the organizing model’ – the preparedness of ordinary workers to become union activists – is ‘unrealistic’. In the United States, Fletcher and Hurd (1998: 52, 43) also concluded that, in most situations, the model was ‘not realistic and is not good strategy’ as the ‘typical member’ was ‘either timid or disinterested’. Even where new organizing campaigns were successful, they were often circumvented by employers with relative ease. As Ness (1998: 101) observed in the US garment industry, ‘Once a shop is organized, manufacturers can switch production to lower-cost producers’. In Australia, Probert and Ewer (2003: 111, 114) have suggested that strategies aimed at a ‘revitalization of craft-organizing practices – which focus on exploiting occupational labour shortages – may be more effective than ‘the workplace organizing model favoured by the ACTU’. Enthusiasm for the model among American unions waned. By 2006, Hurd (2006: 208) was describing the ‘Organizing Model’ as a ‘failure’, whose demise provided a salutary lesson for those ‘in other countries who have been impressed by the promise of narrowly conceived revitalisation.’

Despite Hurd’s stark conclusions, the Organizing Model’s impact has been portrayed in more favourable terms in Australia. It has been stated (Peetz: 2006: 163; Griffin, 2007: 559) that, from 1999, the new organizing focus halted the loss in union numbers. How credible is this claim? It is certainly true, as Figure 2 indicates, that 1999 saw a levelling off in the rate of decline in absolute union numbers. Of the 812,400 members lost to the union movement between 1992 and 2007, only 181,800 were lost after 1999. But the overall growth in the labour market was also much faster after 1999 than previously. More than 1.6 million new jobs were created between 1999 and 2007. In the preceding period (1992-99) only 900,000 new positions were created (ABS, 2007, 20008a).

That the union movement could not even maintain its membership during a period (1999-2007) when overall employment grew by 23 percent to nine million is hardly suggestive of success. Of perhaps even greater concern for the union movement was that, during this period of supposed stabilisation, density levels began to collapse among some of its best organized sections. Previously, research had predicted that high levels of workplace organisation would protect unions from a loss of members (Alexander, Green & Wilson, 1998; Peetz, 2006; Pocock, 1998). This thesis was contradicted as, between 1996 and 2007, union density levels dropped by 28.6 percentage points in coal mining (to 56.6 percent), 20.7 points in electricity and gas (to 47.7 percent) and 15.4 points among railway workers (to 69.5 percent). In 2000, there were for the first time more non-unionists than unionists in the public...
sector (ABS, 2008a). Rather than the 'unsatisfied demand' being met by an extension of union organisation, workers were opting not to join up (or letting their membership lapse) even where unions were well-established.

Contrary to the claims made, the model's adoption appears to have had no discernable impact on the rate of union decline. The 'organizing' literature also fails to explain the rapid fall in public sector union membership, to which it appears largely blind. The disappearance of a union 'wage premium' for full-time workers has also escaped much discussion. Solace has been obtained from citing (Peetz, 2006: 102) figures for mean weekly earnings for all jobs, including part-timers, which still suggest a 'union premium'. However, the inclusion of part-timers does not allow for meaningful comparison, given the variance in hours worked. Peetz (2006: 90) contends that a 'union premium' depends on the level of workplace organisation, and 'bargaining power', rather than union membership per se. But this does not explain the retreat of all three.

The Organizing Model appears, at first glance, more comfortable in explaining the rapid collapse in union membership after 1991. Australian unions were too dependent on the arbitration system. This induced passivity and an inability to organize. It is certainly the case that union density fell abruptly when the centralised system was dismantled. But trends in industrial disputation (Figure 4) indicate much higher levels of worker militancy under the centralised system. Industrial passivity, therefore, was not a product of the arbitration system. It followed on from its destruction. The case for Australian (and New Zealand) 'exceptionalism' is also contradicted by the 'organizing' literature itself. Unions were found to have the same broad characteristics in the US, Australasia and the United Kingdom, despite differences in national industrial relations systems. Bramble (2001) has also contradicted the view that arbitration was associated with a lack of activism and an over-reliance on paid officials. He notes that, prior to the 1970s, Australia was characterised by high levels of 'militant rank-and-file activism' and a 'very low' ratio of officials to members.

To sum up, there is little evidence that the Organizing Model has been a panacea for the Australian union movement's woes. Its most notable claim – to have halted the decline in union membership – has little credibility. The steady retreat of 'union reach' in the public sector – and in key private sector strongholds – casts doubt on its underlying assumptions.

Explaining Divergent Experiences: Case studying coal miners and firefighters

Writing in the mid-1930s, Perlman and Taft (1966: 11) commented that 'the advance as well as the repulse' of trade unionism 'can best be seen in seen in connection with the fates of the individual union groups.' This viewpoint remains valid. While overall Australian density levels have fallen significantly, there has been considerable variation. To explore this variance this article will consider the experiences of both coal miners and firefighters. While coal mining has seen a significant drop in density levels, the latter has not.

Coal Mining: unionism in decline

The experience of the coal mining unions, the most notable of which is the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) – Mining and Energy Division, has been seen as proof of the thesis that effective workplace organisation protects unions from declining membership. While workers in the Western Australian iron industry were largely lost to the union movement in the 1980s, in the coal sector the density rate still stood at 85.2 percent in 1996. Peetz (2006: 175), writing at a time, paradoxically, when coal mining unionism was in marked decline, attributed the CFMEU's strength to a strong 'delegate structure' and 'a history of workplace-based bargaining that long pre-dated the rise of "enterprise bargaining".' By 2007, however, there were 10,600 non-unionists among Australia's 24,400 coal miners (ABS, 2008a: 38).

To understand union decline in the coal industry we need to examine the purpose for which unions organized in this sector. Gollan (1963: 25, 49) noted that the 'standardisation' of working conditions was always the 'central aim of unionists in the industry'. This was done in two ways. First, limitations were imposed on production to avoid 'boom-bust' cycles and to ensure that work was equally shared. Control over working hours was the principal strategy for achieving this objective. Second, the coal unions (separate unions covered supervisors,
electricians and mechanics) sought to restrict the supply of labour. Contractors posed the principal threat. They were essential to mine operation, driving new shafts and assisting with breakdowns, but they threatened permanent jobs.

Although much has been made of coal miners' traditions of workplace organisation, the industry was subject to greater industrial regulation than any other. Between 1946 and 1995, the coal industry was not even part of the mainstream industrial relations system. Instead, employment relations were subject to the oversight of the Coal Industrial Tribunal (CIT). Within this system the Miners' Federation continued to oppose 'continuous production', or the operation of the mine through night or weekend shifts (Barry et al., 1998). The use of contractors was strictly controlled. In the Hunter Valley, the latter was done via 'custom and practice' provisions. In Queensland, employers were bound by the Maintenance and Minor Construction Agreement. Where contractors were employed they were compelled to take out a union ticket. Such restrictions, and the regulatory oversight of the CIT, meant that the de-unionisation strategies pursued in the iron ore industry were simply not possible in the coal sector. In 1995, it was estimated that, while contractors comprised 60 percent of the hard-rock workforce, in coal mining they were responsible for only six percent (Bowden, 2003).

While the coal industry's centralised system of industrial regulation survived, so too did the workplace organisation of the unions. When, however, the system of industry-wide regulation unravelled, the unions found themselves in a difficult position. In 1987, the CIT acceded to the employers' demands for 'continuous production'. Twelve-hour shifts (typically worked on the basis of four days on, four days off) became the norm. New shift arrangements eroded the integrity of the communities that underpinned the strength of the coal unions. Increasingly, miners commuted to work from distant locations (Di Milia and Bowden, 2007). From 1996 employers, no longer bound by the CIT's dictates, began repudiating the agreements that had restricted their use of contractors. In Queensland, contractors made up 7.5 percent of the coal mining workforce in 1996. Six years later, they made up 30.2 percent (Bowden, 2003). Contractors typically sub-contracted, making recruitment much more difficult than in the past. As the industry expanded during the post-2002 'boom', the coal unions were unable to claw their way back. Instead, the recruitment of 'green-skins' from outside the industry was associated with a rise in the number of non-unionists.

The rapid decline of union density and strength in the coal industry highlights the importance of industry-wide regulation. While the supply of labour was subject to strict regulatory control, the coal unions maintained a well-organized workplace structure. When this framework disappeared, these structures were rendered increasingly ineffective.

Queensland Firefighters: union stability and growth

In 2007, the situation of the United Firefighters Union (UFU), Queensland Branch, stood in marked contrast to that prevailing in most other unions. Virtually every professional firefighter was a union member. Contrary to the precepts advocated by the 'organizing' literature, however, the union's success largely reflected the centralisation of authority and bargaining.

Professional firefighters are a uniformed force, subject to strict discipline. The maintenance of such a trained force is, however, impossible in smaller communities. Many centres therefore opt for 'auxiliary' firefighters, who typically work full-time in other jobs but who commit to a certain number of responses. However, as the fire service regards their work as 'community service' (Johnson, 2002), they have never been covered by any industrial award. In 2007, there were 2044 auxiliaries compared with 2274 professionals. While Brisbane and the Gold Coast remained the preserve of the full-time professional, elsewhere the lines were blurred. The professionals' position had been looking increasingly insecure since 2003-04. Like other public sector areas, the Queensland Fire and Rescue Service (QFRS) suffered from under-funding. Between 1996 and 2007 the number of professional, operational firefighters was virtually unchanged. To fill the void in regional areas, the QFRS increasingly relied on 'temporaries' (auxiliaries employed on fixed term contracts). Between 2003 and 2005 it tried to extend temporary work to metropolitan areas. It also sought to employ firefighters on a casual basis for the first time (Bowden, 2008).

The nature of the UFU's response reflected its history. In Queensland, the union was only registered in 1976 (firefighters were previously part of the Australian Workers Union). Its initial
rules were designed so that real power remained at the local level, rather than with paid officials. The State Committee of Management (SCM) was denied the right to interfere in ‘matters affecting the members of one branch only’ (UFU, 1976). The consequences of this devolved power arrangement were disastrous. Protective equipment, training and crew sizes varied from one region to another. In 1987, some regional firefighters were still wearing flammable polyester uniforms (Leivesley, 1989). The devolved structure also fostered parochialism and division. Regional branches of the UFU regarded Brisbane (the largest branch) with suspicion. Brisbane firefighters thought that their views were not given sufficient weight. Divisions became more pronounced after 1987 when officers joined the UFU. Many wanted to maintain their previous autonomy. As sectional interests dominated the whole, the Queensland Industrial Relations Commission observed during 1994 that the union’s internal conflicts had reached a ‘brutish level’ (QRIC, 1994: 867).

During the late 1980s and early 1990s, a new leadership group sought a more centralised approach. Greater authority was vested in the SCM. The union successfully lobbied for the creation of a single fire service. It campaigned for the standardisation of working conditions, protective equipment, training and crew levels. Under the leadership of Henry Lawrence (President) and Mark Walker (Secretary), the union also began signing up auxiliary members in 1998. Despite the union engaging in virtually no active organizing, more than 400 auxiliaries joined by 2007, attracted by the union’s services, particularly in the field of health and safety. The recruitment of auxiliaries did not, however, involve granting them the authority to bargain on their own behalf. Such a move could have resulted in the fire service extending its use of auxiliary firefighters. Instead, the union sought an award to regulate their employment (Bowden, 2008). When, in 2004-05, the QFRS attempted to introduce casual employment into the industry for the first time, and to utilise temporary firefighters in metropolitan areas, it met a union determined to resist such proposals ‘at all costs’. Even after the Queensland Industrial Relations Commission endorsed a regional ‘trial’ from June 2005, it maintained a policy of total opposition. Firefighters at the affected stations engaged in protests. The union threatened a mass march on Parliament. Politicians were lobbied. Responding to the growing industrial and political pressure, the Minister for Emergency Services decided to indefinitely ‘defer’ the proposed employment changes (Bowden, 2008).

The experiences of the UFU are instructive in a number of ways. By giving union democracy free reign, the union splintered along sectional and regional lines. Only with the centralisation of both union power and bargaining were substantial gains achieved. Without this centralised approach to industrial matters, the campaign to oppose the use of temporaries and casuals probably would also have faltered, exposing the union to a membership loss similar to that which has afflicted the coal unions.

**Discussion: Reconsidering Union Organizing**

The American scholar, Victor Clark, having recently visited Australia and New Zealand, in 1906 reflected on how arbitration was reshaping industrial relations in these countries. Clark (1907: 226) observed that its most marked effect was to ‘standardise terms of employment’. He also concluded that the main beneficiaries of this system were not the workers who enjoyed some exceptional labour market placement, but ‘average’ workers (Clark: 229). Unions primarily focused on servicing their needs as they were always ‘in a majority’. The ‘organizing’ literature, we have previously noted, argues that any benefits of arbitration came at the cost of ‘workplace unionism’ (Peetz, 2006). However, numerous union histories (Hagan, 1966; Sheridan, 1997; Gollan; 1963, Beasley, 1996; Hearn and Knowles, 1996; Bowden, 1993; Ellem, 1989) have come to conclusions similar to those of Clark. Unions supported arbitration not because they lacked organizing capacity (most union histories highlight the considerable extent of workplace organisation) but because they wished to extend the benefits of unionism to the many, rather than the few. As Beasley (1996: 92) notes with regard to the Miscellaneous Workers Union, the union’s ‘industrial philosophy was based on the ideology that the strong ought to be used to assist the weak’. Workers who were in a strong position undertook strike action, not simply for their own gain, but to ensure that all within the industry received the same benefit.

In looking for the reasons for the decline in Australian union strength, the early 1990s – when enterprise bargaining displaced awards as the principal mechanism for determining employment conditions – are clearly critical years. Workers’ capacity, or willingness, to
engage in industrial action collapsed, never to recover. Between 1990 and 1996 the union movement lost more than 465,300 members (almost half the total loss suffered between 1990 and 2007). This decline is perhaps best seen as evidence of a general erosion of the union movement’s ability to achieve its historic regulatory objectives, rather than simply an organizing failure. In the short term it was the weak, those located in small businesses and/or economically marginal positions, who suffered most. In the longer term, however, the strong also suffered. As our study of the coal industry demonstrated, in the absence of regulatory oversight (and standardised employment conditions) employers found it easier to displace permanent unionised workers with contractors or other forms of contingent labour.

Advocates of the Organizing Model, in emphasising a workplace focus, appear to have made some dubious assumptions. Rather than union strength resting on workplace organisation, it is more likely that workplace strength reflects favourable product and labour market factors. If unions lose the capacity to regulate the overall occupational labour market, then their workplace influence will inevitably wane. Many of the problems faced by workers since the mid-1980s – down-sizing, firm restructures, out-sourcing – were not amenable to workplace solutions. This was particularly the case in the public sector where, as our study of the UFU showed, the protection of employment security requires a whole of sector approach. Between 1992 and 1997, public sector employment fell by 205,100. When new jobs were added, they were increasingly part-time. In 1992, part-time workers made up 17 percent of the public sector workforce. Fifteen years later, they comprised 26.2 percent. These two trends – the massive down-sizing of the early 1990s and the steady increase in the percentage of part-timers – were the primary reasons why union density fell so hard in the public sector. As late as 2005, most full-time public sector employees were still in a union. But, even in 1992, most part-timers were not. (ABS, 2007, 2008a).

If the ‘organizing’ thesis was correct we would expect to find that unionism survived best in those sectors noted for their traditions of workplace recruitment and bargaining. However, in 2007, education was the most highly unionised industry (38.9 percent of those employed in this industry were union members); but, within the education sector, there were marked differences. Only 25.8 percent of those in the tertiary sector were unionists, while 47.4 percent of those employed in pre-schools and schools were in a union (ABS, 2008a). Was this variance due to the fact that the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) and the other unions covering the sector were poor organizers? Or was it due to differences in product and labour market factors? The latter seems more likely. The tertiary sector has seen a proliferation of private providers, and a significant increase in contingent employment. These trends have been much less pronounced in primary and secondary school education. Similarly, in the transport sector, density levels in 2007 were much lower in road transport (24.2 percent) than in rail transport (69.5 percent). Again, this variation is more likely to be explained through reference to the innate difficulty in maintaining effective regulation under a system of enterprise bargaining in road transport – where there are few barriers to restrict new entrants – than to the ‘organizing’ failings of the Transport Workers Union.

Perhaps the greatest challenge that unions face today is that of (re)-regulating contingent employment which, in its many guises, has done much to undermine their capacity to organize occupational labour markets. One category of contingent labour which has assumed significant proportions in recent years, but whose growth has largely escaped research attention, is that provided by temporary migrants with insecure resident rights. In 2007, more than 500,000 visitors or students entered Australia with working rights. Another 110,570 workers and their dependents entered the country on temporary ‘457’ visas in 2007-08. The latter were bound by contracts which did not need to meet any industrial standard. The labour market impact of these groups, along with an increase in ‘skilled’ permanent immigrants (133,500 for 2008-09), cannot be under-estimated. In 2007, they met nearly 50 percent of all labour market growth. In May 2008, federal Budget papers identified this inflow as a decisive factor in containing wage growth. Announcing a major expansion in ‘temporary immigration’, including a ‘short-stay’ guest worker program, Labor’s Immigration Minister described it as essential to Australia’s participation in ‘the internationalisation of the labour market’ (Commonwealth Parliament, 2008: 15; Australian, 2008: 1, 19).

If the union movement’s principal regulatory purpose is directly related – as Commons, the Webbs, Clark and numerous union historians believed – to their ability to regulate and standardise employment conditions, then the workplace-focused strategies enshrined in the
Organizing Model will clearly not suffice. Conversely, if unions are no longer able to achieve these historic goals then they have arguably outlived their usefulness. As Markey (2007) has forcibly argued, employee ‘voice’ and participation can occur at the workplace or enterprise level through non-union staff committees, works councils and joint consultative councils as well as through registered trade unions. Indeed, as union density declines, this becomes increasingly the only way of achieving these enterprise or workplace objectives.

**Conclusion**

At a time when union membership in Australia is approaching levels last seen in the nineteenth century, no-one who is interested in their survival will argue against a greater organizing focus. Union renewal has always depended on successful organizing. As the Webbs (1902: 463) observed, ‘the branches of a Labour Union are, for one reason or another, always crumbling away; and the total membership is only maintained by perpetually breaking fresh ground.’ What is contentious is the Organizing Model’s assumption that union survival also requires a workplace focus. In 1998, in reviewing arguments that Australian union growth depended upon a workplace orientation, Issacs (1998: 712) concluded that ‘if the object of union growth is to secure a better economic and social deal for workers rather than growth for its own sake, it is far from clear whether workers generally … will necessarily be advantaged by decentralised wage determination. Indeed, the available evidence suggests the opposite’.

This article concurs with Issacs’ scepticism. There is no evidence to suggest that the adoption of the Organizing Model, and a greater workplace focus, has delivered Australian unions any substantial benefit. Membership and union density have continued to fall. The standardised pattern of employment conditions that characterised Australia twenty years ago has broken down. This has exposed even the best organized sections of the union movement to destruction as employment is outsourced to lower-cost suppliers. In all likelihood the Australian trade union movement will, in future, find itself confined to ever smaller strongholds where, for some peculiar reason, the deregulated market forces that have decimated unionism elsewhere are held at bay.
References


Johnson, L (2002) Correspondence from Commissioner Queensland Fire Service to Mark Walker. 11 April.


