

New figures show Australian union membership in free-fall

By Terry Cook
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Figures released by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) last week show that the decades-long decline in Australian union membership continues unabated, despite the efforts of the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU), the country's peak union body, to stop the slide.

The ABS report reveals that trade union membership has dropped to 25.7 percent of the total workforce, down 2.4 percent in just 12 months. Out of a workforce of 7.3 million, less than 1.9 million workers belong to a union.

The public sector contains the vast majority of union members—approximately 50 percent—but this number is about to plunge with a new round of downsizing and privatisation that will eliminate thousands more public sector jobs.

In the private sector, the number of unionised workers fell to just 19.6 percent, down 2 percent on last year's figure. This means that less than one in five workers in private enterprise are unionised. The exodus from the unions has become so great that the ACTU needs to recruit 210,000 new members each year simply to maintain current membership levels. To increase their membership by just one percent the unions would need to double recruitment to 420,000 a year.

Previous ABS reports show that the most recent figures are part of a general trend. During the past six years not even a slight recovery has been recorded.

In 1992 the unions covered 39.6 percent of the workforce or 2.5 million workers. By 1998 this had fallen to 28.1 percent or 2.03 million. Even in traditional union strongholds, such as manufacturing and construction, the pattern has been the same. In manufacturing, union membership fell from 44.4 percent to 34.5 percent and in construction from 42.1 to

25.2 percent.

The latest ABS figures were released as the ACTU launches yet another campaign to attract new members. According to an ACTU media release, the new plan, entitled "Unions at Work," was conceived after a top level union delegation traveled overseas "to see what leading unions in other countries were doing about organising and recruitment."

Based on the delegation's observations the ACTU has announced it will allocate greater financial resources to recruiting new members in industries where the workforce is increasing. It will also create "specialist" recruitment teams, upgrade its organising methods and send even more union officials overseas "to gain experience".

But despite the ACTU's glowing reports of "overseas" measures, unions internationally are suffering the very same problems as their Australian counterparts.

Interestingly enough, one of the countries visited by the ACTU delegation was the United States. The ACTU reports an increasing amount of union funds there being directed into organisation and recruitment. Typical of this process is the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) that operates in both Canada and the US. Apparently, it directed nearly half of its \$80 million budget into recruiting at non-union workplaces. Even so, the SEIU was able to attract less than 250,000 new members over a three-year period. Other unions in the US spent similar amounts, yet union membership in the country's private sector stands today at barely 10 percent of the workforce.

Notwithstanding the fanfare, the ACTU's "Unions at Work" differs little from its past recruitment campaigns. Only two years ago the organisation spent millions of dollars on a high profile advertising

campaign to boost recruitment and to put a squad of young go-getters into the field to drum up business. Workers were offered all kinds of incentives and gimmicks, including access to a range of discounted retail goods and cheap holidays. As the recent ABS figures demonstrate, this was all to no avail.

So dismal has been the response that the NSW Labor Council has come up with a solution of its own. Lacking any standing to appeal to workers directly, the Labor Council has hatched a deal with one of the country's biggest private job agencies to sign up to the union the clients it places into jobs. The agency Job Futures will be paid \$25 a head for every new union member it snares.

Introducing “Unions at Work” on February 18, ACTU secretary Greg Combet declared: “It is unions that fight for better pay, improved living standards, secure employment and safer work places. It is unions that provide service, strength and security for their members, preventing employers from exploiting their workforce. It is unions that argue—along with others—for more jobs, better education, health, child care and community services.”

If Combet's claim in any way corresponded to reality, there would be little need for glossy advertisements, promotional gimmicks or high-powered recruitment teams to attract members. In fact, over the past two decades workers have increasingly turned their backs on the unions because, far from defending their interests, the unions in Australia and internationally have overseen the wholesale destruction of conditions won by past generations. The thousands of youth in the so-called growth industries—tourism, hospitality and call centres—working under extremely harsh conditions, justifiably view these organisations, with their army of well paid, well-heeled functionaries, as having little relevance to their daily lives and struggles.

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