The paper will explore how the principal public sector union in the Australian Public Service (APS), the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) has engaged in the process of rebuilding its capacities at workplace level after more than a decade of anti-union legislation and a hostile bargaining environment. Debates about union futures and union renewal have focused on union organisation and union capacities. Voss and Sherman (2003) develop an account that identifies three conditions for union mobilisation: events (crisis), leadership and resources. The concern has been about the conditions for union renewal, the development of the capacities and organisational forms that will enable unions to address the challenges they face.

One aspect that is addressed in some of the literature has been whether these processes of union renewal have their origins in the local and the immediate or whether they are top down processes, driven by the leadership and vision of leaders and the imperatives on unions as institutions. What is missing is an analysis of the interrelationship between the local and the national in this process. It may be that the pressures at a local level, coupled with the pro-active actions at a national level in relation to the overall organisation and position of the union, create the circumstances for renewal.

We aim to contribute to this debate by exploring how the CPSU has responded to the opportunities and challenges presented by the election of the Rudd Labor government. The bargaining framework and industrial relations legislation in operation under the Howard conservative government from 1996 to late 2007 facilitated a management assault on union organisation and collective bargaining. The new federal industrial relations legislation, Fair Work Australia (2009), and a new bargaining framework for the APS, provides an opportunity for the union to develop its capacities in a more supportive environment. Nevertheless, agency managers face intensified pressures to deliver annual efficiency dividends to government. Pressure on staffing levels, workloads and budget cutbacks have resulted in more stressful and more intensive workplaces and have limited the scope for bargaining. We will explore the extent to which a more financially constrained, but also more benign legislative and bargaining environment, offers union leaders and activists the opportunity to refine union structures and to more organically regrow union membership and workplace activism.