Barriers to Unions as Regional Development Actors: Deindustrialisation and Industrial Regeneration in Australia

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Industrial Regeneration and Union Capacity

• Regions based on traditional industry beginning to undergo change.

• But what happens when there has been deindustrialisation?
  – The manufacturing unions that have been the mainstay of the labour movement decline.

• Evidence:
  – New models of regeneration
  – Devolution of governance
  – Varied union responses
Where are the Unions?

- Dean and Reynolds (2009) Unions at the centre of a revival of labour politics through regional activism
  - Three aspects
    - Deep coalition building
    - Research and policy work
    - Aggressive political action
- Union Organisation and Capacity a central theme but not often linked to economic transition and development.
A Case: A Puzzle

1. North west Tasmania, Australia
2. Area of relatively active industrial unionism
3. Over the last two decades – deindustrialisation
4. Unions appear to become marginal and inward looking, addressing displacement but little else.
5. What is happening and why?
A Case – North West Tasmania

- Hydro industrialisation
  - 1930’s onwards new heavy industry
  - Often polluting eg Pulp and Paper Mill, Tioxide Plant, Acid Plant
  - 1980s onwards gradual process of deindustrialisation

- Growing environmental awareness

- Islandness - isolation
A Case - North West Coast of Tasmania
The Old and the New?
Who are the Unions and What do they do?

- Unions Tasmania

- Dominant unions
  - CFMEU Forestry and Furnishing Products
  - Australian Workers Union – mining and manufacturing
  - Australian Education Union – teachers
  - Community and Public Sector Union

- Declining Unions
  - Australian Manufacturing Workers Union
  - CFMEU Pulp and Paper Division
Barriers

• Decline of Union Capacity
  – RTLCs
  – Individual unions
  – Unions Tasmania

• Divisions within union movement
  – Tasmania vs Mainland
  – North vs South
  – Environment
Challenges

• ‘You have to be the voice of working Tasmanians. If you’re not the voice of working Tasmanians, who the hell are you? … You need to be the voice of people who just lost their jobs and you need to have a vision towards creating the next lot of jobs’, (Former Unions Tasmania Official, February 2012)
Assessment – A Future for Unions?

• Unions: Declining and waning influence/ Disengaged from political processes of regeneration

• The Problem: Unions neither organised to act as economic development actors nor do they have capacities to transform

• The Outcome: their purpose is defined in instrumental and defensive ways

• Conclusion: Need to reassess their approach and role. The first step is organisational revival
Questions