

The Missing Middle in Union Renewal

Professor Peter Fairbrother
and
Professor Michael O'Donnell

Centre for Governance, Work and Technologies

RMIT University

and

University of New South Wales

Introduction

- Public Services – neo-liberal agenda
- Control and regulate Labour
- Unions refocus and reorganise
- Tension: Local and National
- Australia: Community and Public Services Union

Debates

- Union Organisation and capacity
- Capacity – power resources
- Tension: local and national/participative or hierarchical
- Capacity-building – leadership at the middle

Australian Experience: Overview

- Background
- The Neo-conservative/neo-liberal years: 1996 - 2007
- The Social Democratic neo-liberal revival: 2007 -

The Neo-conservative/neo-liberal years: 1996 - 2007

- Marginalise unions
- Limit union roles
- Limit representation

Union

- Representation
- Organisation
- National leadership

Technologies and Communication

2009: Established a call centre, or Member Service Centre, in its Sydney headquarters.

Runs from 8.00am to 8.00pm, five days a week. Industrial organizers handle inbound calls that involve a combination of minor administrative issues (approximately 60-65% of calls) and industrial matters requiring the provision of advice and potentially referral to an industrial officers in the 'field' (35-40%).

Staffed by mainly junior industrial organizers who tend to move into 'field' organiser positions after 18 months phone experience

Benefits: assist with recruitment of new members and ability to stem the flow of resignations of existing members.

Social-Democratic Neo-Liberalism: The Rudd Government

1. Expectation of change
2. Legislative initiatives – limited
3. Recentralisation of bargaining

Union

1. Central leadership
2. Limited membership involvement
3. Middle level leaders in a dilemma

Debates about Union Strategy and Union Purpose

- Our union operates on what's called the organising model...And we've found, over time, that organising for the sake of organising and organising for recruitment, it gives you short term benefits but ultimately, in this day and age, members actually expect that we provide them with some sort of a service... Our position was that we wanted to see less centralisation of authority. We had an idea that was taken from the New South Wales Teachers Federation which was called Strategic Servicing...we believe that it would be far more effective if we actually picked out particular issues that affected large numbers of people and that we'd actually run disputes for them and... demonstrate that on certain issues we were prepared to stand up and fight on behalf of members rather than have members take onboard the entire campaign themselves. (Union activist, Centrelink, December, 2009).

Assessment

- **Power relations**
- **Crisis**
- **Missing middle**

Conclusion

- Neo-liberal context
- Union organisation
- Union capacity
- Union purpose