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Community Unionism and Regional Australia:
Organising in the 21st Century

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Abstract

WorkChoices and the general assault on working families by the Howard Government provided the trade union movement on the South Coast and other regions with an enormous challenge as well as an opportunity to organize working people in our communities. As we move into a new era and the prospect, at least, of a change in the industrial, social and political environment that we operate in, many unionists have turned their attention to the role of the movement in the future. An important part of that discussion will address regional unionism, the role of peak councils and the plethora of District Committees and YR@W Groups that have been established.

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Arthur Rorris

Overview

WorkChoices and the general assault on working families by the Howard Government provided the trade union movement on the South Coast and other regions with an enormous challenge as well as an opportunity to organize working people in our communities. As we move into a new era and the prospect, at least, of a change in the industrial, social and political environment that we operate in, many unionists have turned their attention to the role of the movement in the future. An important part of that discussion will address regional unionism, the role of peak councils and the plethora of District Committees and YR@W Groups that have been established.

This paper is intended to contribute to this discussion and argues that the current campaign has enabled an organizational infrastructure to be established which needs to be maintained and consolidated into the future. In doing so, consideration needs to be given to expand the *Unions Australia* program to enable physical resources to be deployed in regional areas in consultation with Regional Labour Councils. It is also argued that the role and program of these District Committees and Regional Labour Councils may need to refocus in a new environment to put a much greater emphasis on regional development and the opportunity to play a greater role as major stakeholders and being the voice of regional and local labour.

The Role of Regional Labour Councils Beyond the Federal Election

Regional unionism and the role of regional peak councils has been well entrenched in many parts of Australia for the best part of a century. Whilst structures may vary from region to region, the essential ingredients for general effectiveness and

survival include:

- A strong local presence and identity,
- commitment of local activists and preparedness to take ownership and responsibility for regional issues and campaigns,
- the capacity to generate unity and solidarity within the regional union movement,
- Support and recognition from affiliated unions, State Councils and the ACTU,
- Their ability to assist and reinforce local organising campaigns run by their affiliates,
- A strong capacity to generate support from the local community in campaigns,
- Being able to intervene as a community stakeholder and the voice of local working families in issues and disputes *and*
- To present a powerful image of labour unity to workers and employers alike in those communities and encourage membership of the union movement.

The real advantage that regional union bodies have and the value they can add, however, lie in the unique role they can play as key stakeholders in building their communities and the decisions that are made at the local level in the development of industries. As the voice of local labour, regional councils can lay claim to a seat at the regional table and demand a say in the political, economic and industrial affairs of their region. Moreover, regional labour councils can take a leadership role in building alliances with other stakeholders including local business and industry representatives in campaigns of common regional interest. On this basis and as the largest constituent group or stakeholder in many communities, regional labour councils can leverage significant political power in civic and regional affairs. In general terms, then, a significant role regional labour councils can play in movement is to create the industrial and political space within which their affiliates can organize in regional Australia.

The real challenge for regional councils is to realise this potential in regional communities particularly by utilising and strengthening the network of district committees and groups established throughout the R@W campaign to extend the

influence of regional unionism in areas where it has not been as visible or effective previously. The South Coast Labour Council has historically been at the forefront of regional development initiatives in the Illawarra. Our objective is to ensure that our newly formed District Committees are supported and encouraged to develop their capacity to intervene in their respective areas and play an active role in building their communities. This would require, among other things, the continuation, of financial support from affiliates, Unions NSW and the ACTU for this purpose—beyond the federal election. It also raises perhaps the most critical issues facing regional unionism, the availability of resources and the ability of regional Councils to leverage greater support directly from their affiliates and from peak councils at the state and national level. This in turn is dependent on the ability of the regional movements to convince those bodies that the future of the union movement lies to a significant extent in the growth and empowerment of regional union organization and the entrenchment of community unionism principles that have proved to be a decisive factor in the success of the R@W campaign.

Regional Organising, and Membership Growth: Expanding Unions Australia

Another key challenge for regional unionism is translating a union presence in regional communities to a growth in union membership in relevant industries. Historically, factors affecting the success or otherwise of these attempts include:

- The ability and willingness of unions to invest organizing resources in regional areas and in industries which have been under-unionised,
- The ability and willingness of unions to target growth industries in regional areas.
- Demarcation disputes in growth and emerging industries preventing multi-union strategies.
- The inability to address the paradox in some regions where there is a history and culture of union organization in traditional industries but a low levels of membership and organization in emerging and growth industries.

Central in addressing these issues is the allocation of resources and strategies to reach the critical mass required

to organize effectively. In many regional areas where numbers of workers in many industries is small, it may be difficult to justify full time organizers. Enter Unions Australia, a national one stop shop for organizing and recruitment. Whilst it is still in its infancy, it operates through a national call centre and deals with basic enquiries from potential members as well as having the capacity to sign up members and/or refer them to relevant unions.

One proposal that needs to be considered is the expansion and extension of this approach so that Unions Australia has a physical presence in regional areas and hence be able to more effectively organize in a local multi-industry environment. This concept is not new and has been attempted with varying degrees of success in both specific projects as well as regional areas for example the Unions 2000 model developed for the Sydney Olympics and the ACTU organizing project in the Pilbara region.

The allocation of resources to a regional, multi-union organizing program however will not in itself result in membership growth. In order for regional industries to be organized effectively through this approach the organizers need to have a close relationship with the region and the regional movement. That does not necessarily mean that the organizer(s) need to have been born and raised in the area but rather that they operate with and preferably through regional councils that have an historical association and accepted role in their local community. Both resources and an organic regional organizing approach are required to progress the movement and capitalize on the gains made by the R@W campaign. Both are necessary conditions to the future growth of the movement in the regions and neither on their own is sufficient to achieve our movement's objectives.

Conclusion: Moving Forward

For the South Coast union movement to be successful in expanding its organizational capacity and further developing its program of community unionism both within the Illawarra and the other districts it covers, it must be prepared to engage in a broader conversation across all levels of the union movement and across regional areas about the importance of place and community in organizing.

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