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### 'Workchoices - Characterisation, Effects and Resistance: An AMWU perspective

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### Abstract

This article seeks to explore how the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) represented the Howard Government's 'WorkChoices' legislation in its official journal, AMWU News. Applying Kelly's (2008) study of industrial relations 'frames,' this paper seeks to explore the AMWU's characterisation of the legislation, the modalities of resistance it encouraged, and the level and nature of support given to the Australian Labor Party (ALP). It is argued that a consistent, total but untheorised vision of the negative impacts and key players of the WorkChoices legislation is forwarded, along with a campaign of resistance that is largely oriented to the political arena. When viewed as part of a broader timeline, both positions represent a marked departure from a historic tradition of critical political economy and industrial mobilisation, and are intimately tied to the political and economic transformations of Australian neo-liberalism.

### Keywords

characterisation, amwu, effects, perspective, workchoices, resistance

### Disciplines

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BRETT HEINO

*This article seeks to explore how the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) represented the Howard Government's 'WorkChoices' legislation in its official journal, AMWU News. Applying Kelly's (2008) study of industrial relations 'frames,' this paper seeks to explore the AMWU's characterisation of the legislation, the modalities of resistance it encouraged, and the level and nature of support given to the Australian Labor Party (ALP). It is argued that a consistent, total but untheorised vision of the negative impacts and key players of the WorkChoices legislation is forwarded, along with a campaign of resistance that is largely oriented to the political arena. When viewed as part of a broader timeline, both positions represent a marked departure from a historic tradition of critical political economy and industrial mobilisation, and are intimately tied to the political and economic transformations of Australian neo-liberalism.*

In 2005, the ruling Liberal Party/National Party Coalition introduced the highly controversial 'WorkChoices' legislation, which radically recast Australian industrial regulation. The trade union crusade against WorkChoices was a key factor in the removal of this government from office in 2007 (Brett 2007; Woodward 2010). Conducted under the auspices of the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU), the 'Your Rights At Work' campaign simultaneously focused public opposition to WorkChoices and '... placed unions once again at the forefront of public consciousness' (Bramble 2008: 235-236). The movement's success, sheer size and its centralised ACTU leadership easily leads to the conclusion that the campaign was monolithic. Focusing on the image of unity projected by the union movement therefore runs the risk of being blinded to the different, perhaps competing, visions of WorkChoices held by various unions. This tension between the general and the particular representations of WorkChoices is one which has not been adequately mapped and explored. Whilst a general account of the trade union response to WorkChoices is well-sketched (see, for example, Bramble 2008; Wilson and Spies-Butcher 2011), the perspectives of individual unions are poorly understood. If left uncharted, we face real difficulties in understanding the obstacles and opportunities presented to efforts at building union solidarity, particularly insofar as these take legislative form. Given the election of a Coalition government in September 2013, along with strong indications that industrial relations reform is on their agenda (Wyborn and Vautin 2014), these questions of union solidarity and cooperation, key dynamics in the struggle against the neoliberal disempowerment of workers and resulting social inequality, will be particularly pressing in the coming months. It is thus an apposite

time to explore the characterisation and representation of WorkChoices from the perspective of a union we can expect to be in the vanguard of opposition to a conservative industrial relations agenda; the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU).

The AMWU came into complete being in 1995 after a long series of union amalgamations. Many of its historical component parts, such as the Amalgamated Metal Workers and the Food Preservers' Union, were firmly located in the left-wing of the union movement (Bramble 2008). Today, the union is still considered left-wing, most notably in its Victorian branch, with a fairly militant industrial record and a generally progressive stance on a range of issues. The contours of the left-right political spectrum are malleable through time and space, but for the purposes of this paper, Knapp and Wright's (2006: 6) definition of the distinction between left and right is adopted:

The politics of class is the single most important factor dividing Left from Right...with the former seeking social justice through redistributive social and economic intervention by the state, and the latter committed to defending capitalism and private property (and, it would argue, prosperity) against the threats thus posed.<sup>1</sup>

Given its left-wing political orientation, a tradition of militancy amongst its constituent parts and a large membership base (over 100,000), we could expect both a strong resistance to WorkChoices and an ability to mobilise this resistance at the industrial and political level.

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To determine how the AMWU leadership 'framed' WorkChoices (Kelly 2008), I have turned to the official organ of the union, *AMWU News*, in particular focusing on the thirteen issues released over the lifespan of the legislation (from Summer 2005 edition – Summer 2008 edition). We can thus ascertain if AMWU attitudes changed over the lifespan of the legislation, particularly vis-à-vis certain temporal markers, such as the growing electoral fortunes of the political wing of the labour movement, the Australian Labor Party (ALP), in the face of public opposition to the laws.

### **WorkChoices: An Overview**

Before we can move to the particulars of the inquiry, however, we must explore the WorkChoices legislation itself. Although this analysis will be necessarily cursory, it will serve to identify and contextualise the main points of controversy whilst locating the legislation historically.

For the majority of the twentieth-century, Australian industrial regulation was based upon compulsory conciliation and arbitration. This system could broadly be described as a set of quasi-judicial arbitral tribunals that could compulsorily determine disputes between employers and unions, with the resulting determinations called 'awards'. From 1904 (when the original federal *Conciliation & Arbitration Act* was passed) until well into the 1980s, this structure was paramount in determining industrial outcomes. The system was highly collectivist, presupposing the existence and efficacy of trade unions (see, for example, Higgins, 1915). Importantly, the metal unions which would eventually form the basis of the AMWU were crucial to the architecture of the award framework; industrial strength was used to gain concessions from employers in the leading Metal Trades Award, which then typically flowed through to other awards (Cochrane 1988: 188-189).

Consequent upon the economic crisis and transformation that gripped Australia in the 1980s, this structure increasingly came under strain, especially from business quarters where it was regarded as overly centralised and inefficient (Heino 2014). In response, the Keating Labor Government began in the early 1990s to sideline the Australian Industrial Relations Commission (AIRC) and the award system through encouraging enterprise bargaining, and plant or firm-level bargains between employers and workers that, whilst subject to a public interest test, could diverge from the underpinning award. Importantly, the ALP government also established 'Enterprise Flexibility Agreements' that could be negotiated without union involvement.

These trends were intensified in the years of John Howard's Coalition Government, which ruled from 1996

until 2007. A qualitatively distinct act was the introduction of statutory individual contracts, known as Australian Workplace Agreements (AWAs). By breaking the collective nature of agreement-making, AWAs were highly effective in eroding union power, particularly when inserted into the more general strategy of de-unionisation engineered by many major employers in the 1990s; particularly in sectors such as mining and telecommunications (Peetz 2006). Moreover, responsibility for the overview of these agreements did not lie with the federal tribunal, but was vested in a separate body, further expediting the displacement of the AIRC as the dominant institution of industrial regulation.

The crushing victory of the Howard Government in the 2004 election, and its ensuing Senate majority, allowed for the passage of further legislative change, which had been previously stymied by Senate opposition in the late 1990s. *The Workplace Relations Amendment (WorkChoices) Act* 2005, which became known simply as WorkChoices, was complex, but the most important practical changes were:

- The removal of the 'No Disadvantage' test which had hitherto prevented AWAs from offering poorer terms and conditions than would apply under the relevant award;
- Removing access to unfair dismissal protections for employees who worked in a small business employing one hundred or fewer employees;
- Sideline awards through not updating them;
- Stripping the AIRC of its power to determine minimum wage rates, which was vested in a new body, the Australian Fair Pay Commission.<sup>2</sup>

According to the Howard Government, WorkChoices was a necessary bundle of reforms premised on a fundamentally consensual view of employer/employee relations. This view, combined with the legislation's emphasis on productivity improvements, workplace flexibility and decentralised bargaining locates WorkChoices firmly within the neoliberal paradigm that has dominated Australian public policy since the 1980s (Fairbrother et al., Svensen and Teicher 1997).<sup>3</sup> Essentially advocating the extension of the market principle throughout the social body (including the labour market) and the elimination of government intervention in economic life, neoliberalism has been one of the most powerful responses to the internationalisation of capitalism that had intensified since the 1970s (Ivanova 2011).

By contrast, the trade union movement correctly sensed that WorkChoices entailed both further individualisation of workplace relations and the effective sidelining of the AIRC and unions, both of which struck at the heart of

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declining union power. Mobilising against the legislation was thus necessary if unions were to mitigate or reverse its damaging implications.

With this account of the content and historical context of WorkChoices in hand, we can move on to the crux of this paper; the framing of the legislation by the AMWU.

### 'Framing' and Union Politics

A thorough survey revealed no prior research that specifically investigated AMWU representations of, and attitudes to, WorkChoices. The conceptual genesis of this paper is owed to an article in this journal by Diana Kelly, 'The 2007 Federal Election in Australia: Framing Industrial Relations' (2008) and Tom Bramble's *Trade Unionism in Australia: A history from flood to ebb tide* (2008). Of key significance in Kelly's (2008) article was her understanding of the processes by which industrial relations are 'framed' by the media and major political parties. Kelly defined framing as,

The patterns of selection of issues, of exclusion and emphasis, of what is covered and how much coverage is given to an issue or concept or value frame, what is seen and what is hidden, and what is important ... Framing is thus a twofold process – it offers (selected) information or ideas and indicates the ways in which these should be evaluated (2008: 34).

Although Kelly does not focus specifically on trade unions, there is not a *priori* reason why her methodology can't be employed in assessing their approaches, both collectively and individually, to representing WorkChoices.

Bramble's book (2008) elegantly identifies and systematises the left-wing/right-wing divide in the union movement and its historical significance from the 1940s through to the present. The AMWU, and its collection of predecessor unions, largely come down on the left-wing of the movement (Bramble 2008; Kuhn 1986). Kelly's model, anchored in Bramble's historical matrix, is thus a potentially fruitful line of inquiry into how political orientation impacts upon a union's construction of WorkChoices. In the present case, a study of how the AMWU frames WorkChoices must place this frame within an understanding of the union's political orientation and industrial history.

### Methodology

The analysis, underpinned by Kelly's (2008) frames, proceeds on three fronts; how *AMWU News* characterises the WorkChoices legislation, its effects and who is

responsible; what opposing actions it advocates; and what level and modality of support is offered to the ALP.

The decision to concentrate on the official organ of the AMWU is obviously limited in a number of ways. Through focusing on the journal we gain a thorough understanding of the official stance of the union, but at the cost of neglecting informal but perhaps equally important indicators of union attitudes, such as strikes, demonstrations, radio interviews etc. Moreover, it must be remembered that the nature of the representations we see in the journal may in themselves serve a political agenda. For example, Bramble (2008: 225-226) suggests that from the outset of the WorkChoices campaign, union leaders of all political persuasions sought to avoid direct industrial confrontation. A deliberate show of restraint in the union journal may therefore serve the image of a willingness to abide by the law, rather than reflecting the true perspectives of union members. If this were the case, however, it is in itself a valuable insight into influential factors shaping union framing.

Suffice it to say here that space constraints do not allow for a more holistic analysis. Such work is of course necessary in comprehending the full gamut of union perspectives, and is in the author's scope for future research.

### AMWU News

Before a more specific interpretation of WorkChoices is proffered, it is worth noting that the union's left-wing political persuasion is quite obvious from the language of the journal and the implicit values that underlie it. The phrase 'solidarity' is oft-used, and the back-page editorial of each issue often introduces political opinions of members and delegates that exceed the bounds of the workplace. For example, in the Summer 2005 edition (12), Paul Gunner, an AMWU delegate, comments that the Government instils fear in the public of people who challenge the **status quo**, extending the legitimate trepidation surrounding terrorism to other issues such as immigration and collective action in the workplace. Moreover, the journal publicises community events that are often of a distinctly left-wing political character, such as the 'Advance Australia Fair-Building Sustainability, Justice and Peace' meeting, the explicit aim of which was to 'Unite against economic rationalism, corporate globalisation and war' (*AMWU News* Winter 2005: 11).

The journal also has a distinctly internationalist segment, usually towards the rear of each issue, which tells of struggles faced by foreign manufacturing unions and international labour coordination and cooperation. This is quite telling considering the long association between left-wing ideology and working class internationalism,

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beginning with Marx and Engels' (2002: 258) historic exhortation for working men of all countries to unite.

### **Characterisation of WorkChoices**

On the whole, *AMWU News* presents a comparatively total (though, as we shall see, untheorised) vision of the causes, actors and consequences of WorkChoices. The union is quick to fit the industrial relations reforms into a longer pattern of behaviour evinced by the Howard Government. As early as Autumn 2005 (2), Doug Cameron, the National Secretary of the AMWU, contends, 'The Howard government is not likely to want to sit down and talk to us. Howard and Costello, in particular, have never made any secrets about their pathological hatred of unions.' In the following edition (*AMWU News*, Winter 2005: 2), Cameron builds on this characterisation, talking of Howard's, 'deep-seated desire to take away people's rights in order to give business more power to exploit workers'. Often, this impression is reinforced visually: the journal frequently used satirical cartoons to demonstrate the Government's anti-worker agenda.

Key to Kelly's (2008) process of framing is the legitimatisation of a value frame by selective emphasis and a pattern of exclusion/inclusion of data. The attempt to show WorkChoices as one episode in a long history of conservative government attacks on workers is central to the AMWU's framing of the legislation. The value frame, a government ideologically opposed to trade unionism, is validated by a deliberate pattern of undermining the stated policy justification for the legislation. This is apparent as early as Autumn 2005 (2), when Doug Cameron describes Howard's silence on industrial relations in the 2004 election, and then contrasts it with Howard's intent for it to be a central plank of his fourth term in government. The Spring 2005 edition dedicates an entire article to identifying government lies, debunking eight apocryphal claims the Coalition used to legitimise its reform policies. The attack on the government's credibility is bolstered by an objective identification of the faulty economics on which the laws are founded. A range of articles are produced proving that the stated economic justifications for WorkChoices are not only fallacious but will be done a disservice under the legislation.<sup>4</sup> This approach is Kelly's (2008) framing par excellence; offering selected information whilst also structuring the interpretation of that information in desired ways.

Importantly, the AMWU does not always limit itself to workplace issues in its charges of dishonesty. A piece in the Spring 2007 issue draws a visual timeline of perceived Howard Government treacheries, placing WorkChoices in the context of other abuses, such as the war in Iraq, the introduction of the GST, the squandering of the fruits of the resource boom, and the Wharf Dispute of 1998

(Anonymous, 'We must continue to fight for our rights at work beyond the election: 6-7). This is demonstrative of a perspective that relates the economic and political moments of neoliberalism, conceiving it as something much more than a narrow set of economic prescriptions.

Importantly, the AMWU acknowledges that the government is not alone in its crusade, and is aided and abetted by business interests. Cameron states in the Winter 2005 (2) edition that, 'John Howard is not operating in a vacuum. The employers are right in the thick of it, providing him with all the ammunition he needs to go to war with working people ... The government and business have lined up against workers.' In Winter 2006 (2), Cameron adds that 'Big Business and the wealthy elite have supported Howard's wage and condition cutting laws.' The AMWU construction of the causes and key actors of WorkChoices depicts a government/employer conspiracy, in which both are portrayed in an overwhelmingly negative light. Employers seem to be lumped together as a (un-theorised) class whose interests are in profit maximisation irrespective of worker rights and conditions.

It is, however, important not to overstate this point, particularly in light of the AMWU's militant past. Bramble (2008: 117-119) notes how up until the late 1970s, class analysis and class struggle were central to AMWU (Amalgamated Metal Workers' Union) publications, while the Communist Party of Australia remained a force in leadership positions within the union (Kuhn, 1986). As late as 1979, an AMWSU (Amalgamated Metal Workers & Shipwrights Union) publication entitled *Australia Ripped Off* forwarded a thoroughly Marxist conception of surplus value (without, however, using the term 'Marxism') and discussed the desirability of Australia's transition to a democratic socialist state (AMWSU 1979: 10-11, 56). By the early 1980s, however, this ideological tradition had waned almost completely, at least in official union literature (Bramble 2008: 119). At no point in any of the journal issues studied here is the analysis framed in terms of explicit class struggle and combating capitalism. The AMWU analysis of the causes and actors of WorkChoices, although comprehensive, does not go to this depth. It is in this sense that I describe the AMWU's characterisation of WorkChoices as untheorised. Whilst crying out at government and employer excesses and their crystallisation in WorkChoices, it does not place this critique within a political class theory. Rigorous class analysis has collapsed into the broader populist treatment of the economic system noted above, which is itself symptomatic of the neoliberal stultification of the concepts of class and their substitution by more general notions of fairness and social justice.<sup>5</sup> This is evidence of the AMWU abandonment of a historical position over the past several decades, and further gives a temporal aspect to 'framing'. The exclusion of a class value-frame that

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previously structured the intended audience's responses in specific ways both informs and limits AMWU responses to WorkChoices.

The effects of the WorkChoices legislation are portrayed as overwhelmingly negative. As early as Autumn 2005 (4), the union develops a schematic of likely workplace consequences, including increased use of guest labour to drive wages down, cutting back the award system, restrictions on industrial action and union right of entry, and increased individualisation resulting through the diffusion of AWAs. A comprehensive outline is provided in the Winter 2005 (6-7) article 'Taking Away Our Rights' which also describes the pernicious strangling of union rights and health and safety laws. Emphasis is placed upon the wage-reducing and union-destroying aspects of the legislation.

The AMWU's tendency to internationalism is apparent in its comparing the Australian experience of WorkChoices to other countries utilising similar laws, with parallels drawn with New Zealand, the Philippines and particularly the US. WorkChoice-esque styles of industrial relations are the target of their ire and are placed in the framework of international threats to worker and union rights, particularly in relation to manufacturing. By broadening the frame to include the experiences of labour in other countries, the negative characterisation of WorkChoices is further legitimated.

The impact of WorkChoices is primarily discussed at the workplace level, but the AMWU does delve into the effects of WorkChoices outside of the employment relationship. Cameron outlines the effect the legislation has on family economic life, making tasks such as buying petrol, mortgage repayments and providing health and education services for children all the more difficult (*AMWU News* Winter 2006: 2). The Summer 2006 (8) edition includes an article (Work-family balance set to get worse) detailing the detrimental effect WorkChoices will have on employees' work/family balance, while elsewhere they link the kind of contract and casual labour that is given predominance under the Howard Government to a declining birth-rate (anonymous, 'Casual and contract labour are contributing to decline in childbirth', *AMWU News* Autumn 2005: 11).

### **Resistance to WorkChoices**

Key to the AMWU framing of WorkChoices is the need for a collectivist, inclusive struggle against the legislation. In almost every issue, reference is made to the utmost need for members, delegates and the wider union movement to co-operate and become involved in the campaign. Collective strength and efficacy is emphasised, with Cameron stating at one point, 'Let's stick together in 2006 to fight these laws and help each other. Collectively

we are strong' (*AMWU News* Summer 2006: 2). The National Days of Action (NDAs) are advertised in the journal, while an AMWU 'Help Desk' is established to answer employees' concerns and provide a vehicle of empowerment. Photos of the NDAs are utilised, whilst campaigns in all sectors of AMWU activity, from rural workers to employees of large and small corporations, are documented to totalise the impression of resistance. Readers are assured in every issue that the AMWU is at the forefront of the campaign.

The actual mechanics of resistance, however, are harder to identify as definitively. The rhetoric seems to be an admixture of advocating removal of the Howard Government, and participation in campaigns to this end, and strong 'on-the-job' unionism. The balance appears to be fluid through time. The first issues manifest a somewhat vague desire to fight. Cameron writes that the AMWU intends to fight the Howard Government '... every step of the way' in the summer of 2005 (*AMWU News* Summer 2005: 2). In the following issue Cameron is more powerful in his editorial, maintaining that '... we have no intention of lying down and doing nothing. Unions exist to fight for the interests of working people and if we are faced with different conditions then we will adopt different strategies' (*AMWU News* Autumn 2005: 2). The article 'What to expect after July 1' emphasises the necessity of workers belonging to the union, with strong, on-the-job unionism being the only way to 'demand and achieve respect from the boss' (*AMWU News* Autumn 2005: 4). As late as Summer 2006, a piece entitled 'Taming the Beast' maintained that one aspect of resistance was to, 'Be Strong – these laws are repressive and we could face harsh penalties for going about our business. This should not stop us doing what is right' (*AMWU News* Summer 2006: 7).

Over time, however, the *AMWU News* seems to focus less on the rhetoric of on-the-job unionism (with its implicit undertones of industrial struggle) in favour of a more electorally-based campaign of resistance. The emphasis shifts, subtly but perceptibly, to the primary goal of removing the Howard Government from office. By Winter 2006, Cameron argues that, 'The only solution is to remove Howard from government' (*AMWU News* Winter 2006: 6). In subsequent issues, this message is reinforced, with the NDAs and community protests aimed at discussing means of defeating the Howard Government electorally. By Autumn 2007, organiser Dave Oliver suggests, 'The most important thing we can all do as workers at the next election is vote for parties that have promised to restore our rights at work' (*AMWU News* Autumn 2007: 4). To this end, a 'Union Marginal Seats' campaign was established, investing the efforts of union activists in marginal electorates.

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This noticeable change in emphasis is significant, as it evinces the dominance of a mentality dedicated to working within the political system. The frame of resistance subtly changes from admitting a certain, somewhat vague, confrontationist attitude to one which strongly emphasises a political fix. This shift is particularly significant when read in a broader historical context. Bramble (2008: 41-45) shows just how different the metal union mindset used to be when it was at the forefront of a massive industrial campaign to secure the release of union leader Clarrie O'Shea and the defeat of the Penal Powers provisions of the *Conciliation and Arbitration Act* in 1969. Whereas industrial strength was an antidote to government intransigence at the height of union strength, the situation described in the pages of *AMWU News* is evidently different. In no issue was industrial action encouraged as a means of combating the laws. WorkChoices was thus framed largely as an issue which must be dealt with politically rather than industrially, a marked shift in historical perspective.

### **Role of the ALP**

The support given to the ALP was more reserved than one might anticipate. Although there are definite pro-Labor articles, they tend to be qualified by a call for the ALP to regain a working class character and are, at times, subsumed into the wider task of removing the Coalition from office.

The first distinctly pro-Labor articles appear in the Autumn 2006 issue.<sup>6</sup> In the following issue, the AMWU approves of Kim Beazley's plan to abolish AWAs and cites with approval his statement that, 'We need you to carry Labor's message ... so that when Australians cast their vote next year they'll be convinced that only Labor can stand up for them and only Labor can make Australia the kind of place they want it to be' (*AMWU News* Winter 2006: 4). By Spring 2006, the systemic association of the ALP with fair collective bargaining rights and the Coalition with cost-cutting individual contracts is starting to take shape. Cameron turns implicit support into an explicit endorsement in a Summer 2007 (2) editorial entitled 'Core values must underpin new leadership' insisting that, '...we will work tirelessly to assist the ALP to win the next election and reinstate social justice, fairness and equity, as the underpinning values of Australian society' (interestingly deploying the more vague populist notions of social justice and equity noted above). It is clear that as the election draws closer, AMWU support for Labor becomes more substantial. In the penultimate issue before the country went to the polls, *AMWU News* makes a direct comparison between the ALP and Coalition, explaining why the former offers a far superior industrial relations package (*AMWU News* Winter 2007: 4).

This construction of ALP support is certainly instructive as an act of framing, particularly insofar as it excludes certain material which could support an alternative conception of WorkChoices. There is a considerable body of scholarly literature which sees in the Howard Government's approach to industrial relations a continuation of policies initially conceived and executed by the Hawke and particularly Keating ALP governments (see, for example, Fairbrother et al., Svensen & Teicher, 1997; Quinlan, 1998; Ludeke, 1998). Indeed, the freezing out of unions from industrial relations actually began in a formal sense under the Keating government with the previously discussed 'Enterprise Flexibility Agreements'. This history of policy is noticeably absent from the pages of *AMWU News*, an omission that directly affects the capacity of the audience to develop alternative conceptions of the provenance of the WorkChoices legislation.

This act of framing does not imply, however, that support for the ALP is unqualified or total. At certain points this support seems to be subsumed under the broader task of removal of the Coalition. Although the practical effect of this may be to draw support to the ALP, the conceptual distinction is nonetheless significant. A case in point is the article 'Taming the Beast,' which provides that one answer to the legislation is, '... to toss out every Coalition member and Senator who supports it and elect replacements, *from whatever Party*, who still believe in a Fair Go [my italics]' (*AMWU News* Summer 2006: 7). The back page editorial of the Autumn 2007 (12) issue sees union delegate Colleen Gibbs maintain that, 'We really need to get rid of our MP and get someone in our area who wants to do something for the workers. So I'm doing everything I can to convince people *not to vote Liberal* so that we can get rid of these laws'.

As the election draws closer and the ALP's prospects of winning firm, a sense of returning the Labor Party to its mission is inflected. Cameron states this unequivocally: 'Kevin Rudd must restore the ALP as the defender of working families and this can only be done if the ALP's traditional values and branding are restored' (*AMWU News* Summer 2007: 2). He reaffirms this position upon his entering the election race for a Senate seat with the ALP, arguing that 'I think there are more than enough voices in parliament for Australia's wealthy and business elites, both in the Liberal Party and in some parts of the Labor Party' (*AMWU News* Summer 2007: 4). In Spring 2007 (6-7), the AMWU makes a veiled criticism of the ALP's industrial relations programme, noting that, although superior to Howard's agenda, it is only a first step and needs to be strengthened in some areas. Moreover, the need for continual AMWU campaigning even after the election of a Labor government is stressed, largely in the form of pressuring the ALP to improve the protection of working families (*AMWU News* Spring 2007: 6-7).

There thus seems to be a generally pro-Labor frame over the course of the thirteen issues, but one that is qualified at points and is not always linked to the removal of the Howard Government at the conceptual level (although this may be the practical effect). In light of the rightward drift of the ALP since the 1980s (Bramble, 2008), this qualification is perhaps not surprising, and speaks of an awareness of underlying tension between the industrial and political wings of the labour movement.

### Conclusions and Future Research

This paper has explored the framing of WorkChoices in the pages of *AMWU News* in terms of characterisation, the need and methods of resistance, and the level and modality of support offered to the ALP. A consistent, total but untheorised vision of the negative impacts and key players of the WorkChoices legislation is forwarded. Initial hints at strong, 'on-the-job' unionism as a mechanism of resistance are quickly subsumed to a predominant tale of struggle through electoral mobilisation. Both of these elements of the frame tell a story when placed in a broader historical context. They represent a marked departure from the perspectives of the predecessor metal unions which constitute a large part of the current AMWU. In the 1970s in particular, these unions explicitly employed a critical political economy in explaining social phenomena (as seen in AMWSU publications such as *Australia Up-rooted 1977* and *Australia Ripped Off 1979*) and evinced a marked willingness to resort to industrial strength (as opposed to political intervention) to secure desired results. Both of these elements are noticeably absent in the AMWU framing of WorkChoices. Moreover, support for the ALP, whilst qualified, is unchallenged by a cogent alternative.

The process of framing clearly does not occur in a vacuum, and the current weakness of the trade union movement, a collapse in a viable left-wing alternative to neoliberalism and the declining fortunes of Australian manufacturing have all changed the parameters upon which this process occurs. Such an understanding is particularly crucial today, given the election of a Coalition Government in 2013 with one eye on industrial relations reform (indeed, a major review into the workplace laws is due to commence in the near future; Massola and Lucas, 2014). How individual unions characterise the Coalition's policy and ensuing legislative change will have a major impact on the mechanics of solidarity.

To this end, future research can further canvass the articulations between the general union campaign against WorkChoices and the representations and perspectives of individual unions. Inclusion of other left-wing unions in such a study, such as the Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union and the Maritime Union of Australia, would allow us to ascertain if there is a cogent left-wing

union representation of WorkChoices. Moreover, if we encompass traditionally more right-wing unions, such as the Australian Workers' Union and the Shop, Distributive and Allied Employees' Association, differences in attitudes can be compared and contrasted. Applying the three assessment criteria used for the AMWU, it could be determined if there was a causal relationship between the nature of WorkChoices framing and political orientation/ideological heritage. Further research could also address the related issue of how the relationship between political and industrial mobilisation more generally is framed, and how this construction changes through time.

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#### End Notes

1. This definition has the advantage of being broadly acceptable for people on both the left and the right.
2. For an excellent overview of WorkChoices and its place in the history of Australian industrial regulation, see Creighton & Stewart (2010).
3. For a useful example of how the Howard Government justified WorkChoices, see Abetz (2005).
4. See, for example, anonymous, 'Did you hear the one about interest rates and industrial relations?', *AMWU News*, Autumn 2005: 7; anonymous, 'Making it easier to sack people won't increase employment', *AMWU News*, Spring 2005: 6.
5. Primarily a product of the fact that modern neoliberal societies, by both design and accident, 'have a declining capacity...to produce social identities around economic interests' (Leighton, 2011). Having been co-opted into the nascent neoliberal policies of ALP governments of the 1980s and 1990s, unions were thus not in a position to fight for a rigorous class-based identity.
6. See, for example, anonymous, 'Labor Governments act on manufacturing strategy': 9; anonymous, 'Labor pledges no fees for apprenticeships': 11.

#### Author

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#### Standoff

The crowd of what remains unspoken  
rustles restlessly —

static crackle drowning out those words  
that rise to our lips, falter,

go no further.

DAVID ADÈS  
PITTSBURGH, USA

#### Thank you for your submission

thank you for the opportunity to consider it  
very sorry to have kept these so long  
please accept our apologies for the delay  
I normally reply within 12 months  
regretfully, I am unable to place your poem  
I'm afraid we haven't used them  
we are unable to use the enclosed material  
we receive a very large number  
all of which are refereed blind  
many of them of very high quality  
yours haven't been selected  
it's impossible to reply more specifically  
it's either too obvious or too obscure  
lines 5-6 let it down  
it's a bit too long  
it isn't right for us  
it isn't what we're looking for  
it wouldn't fit with our editorial policy  
it wouldn't 'fit', if you know what I mean  
please submit again in the future  
we look forward to reading future submissions  
I encourage you to continue to submit your poems  
unfortunately, the next issue is full  
there is no more space for the next 12 months  
there is definitely no space in the coming year to  
publish your work  
good luck with your writing

CHRIS PALMERA  
EVATT, ACT