Union Effectiveness: Still Hidden from History?

Stewart Sweeney and Ingrid Voorendt

Labour Studies, University of Adelaide

This paper provides a brief overview and critique of aspects of the Australian trade union history literature focusing on the fifty or so books in and out of print. The paper highlights a concern that the existing literature is singularly limited in its assessment of trade union effectiveness in pursuing their objectives in relation to union organising, union democracy, union action and union gains, let alone the role of unions in economic and social transformation. In sum, it appears possible to read much of the literature and still be left with little or no idea of what contribution the union under study, has or has not made, to even some of the basics of union activity. These include maintenance or improvement of wages in relation to prices, average weekly earnings or other key benchmarks. This lacuna in the literature appears to apply equally to the effectiveness of trade union activity in other substantive areas of struggle including working hours, work intensity, occupational health and safety, political, social and cultural struggles and, perhaps above all, the battle over ideas and ideology.

It is not being argued here that there is no consideration being given in the literature to union influence on wages and working conditions (including working hours). Rather it is argued that the literature’s treatment of union effectiveness, even in such fundamental areas, is primarily descriptive and fragmentary and often lacks adequate explanatory power and useful insights. The existing literature contains much of value. However it is frustratingly limited in its description and explanation of union effectiveness in the past, and therefore in its usefulness for current and future challenges and struggles faced by unions and their members. It is argued that union effectiveness, or lack thereof, remains unnecessarily hidden from history, despite the now many and varied attempts to produce Australian union history. It is proposed in this paper that a clearer description, explanation and assessment of union effectiveness can be produced by using an approach that is comprehensive, systematic, sustained and comparative. Comprehensive in reviewing union organising, union democracy, union action and the results of union activities; systematic in reviewing a common and consistent set of independent and dependent variables or determinants of union effectiveness; sustained in reviewing variables and tracking evidence and findings over the entire period under study; comparative in relation to change and continuity, internal and external, in all pertinent aspects of union organising, union democracy, union action and the results of union activity. Finally, some ideas on approaches to trade union history that might provide more and deeper evidence and insights on union effectiveness are outlined. It is intended after the development and completion of this paper to extend the review to cover the trade union history literature of other countries.

Impressions of the Trade Union History Literature

The literature that has provided the catalyst for this paper comprises a total of approximately fifty books published in the period 1911 to 1999. The focus in this paper is on books whose subject is the history of an Australian trade union. It includes books by academics, union leaders and activists. It starts with Spence’s History of the AWU published in 1911 (Spence 1911). It ends (for the moment) with the publication in 1998 of Green Bans, Red Union: Environmental Activism and the NSW Builders Labourers Federation. (Burgmann and Burgmann 1998). This initial overview does not include books on peak union organisations, unions in general, biographies, or books on industrial conflict and strikes. Nor does it include unpublished doctoral and masters theses.

Overall, the existing literature on individual trade union histories has a strong focus on union origins, growth and consolidation; union struggles (internal and external); union achievements and defeats. The individual trade union histories tell interesting stories about men and women workers since white settlement of colonial Australia. They focus on particular crafts or occupations and the changing nature of working conditions in various industries over defined periods. Some of them provide vivid portraits (with or without illustrations) of the men and (less often) the women who established, managed or controlled their unions while recording the internal rivalry, stormy union meetings and political clashes. They commemorate important achievements – formation, registration, first awards, amalgamations, individual and group disputes and individual contributions. They also chronicle struggles against external forces (economic depressions, war and political pressures) as well as the losses experienced by individual members and the union. This, arguably, is the primary intention of most published trade union history books.

The best of the union histories extend beyond these principal aims. They provide absorbing, often inspiring and sometimes delightful accounts of the economic, political, social and cultural context of working life in Australia (Best 1990; Spierings 1994; McGill, 1998). Set against a background of broader industrial and political struggles of the Australian labour movement as a whole, they reveal the difficulties of organising, serving and representing workers whose occupations, industries, and terms and conditions of employment are undergoing constant change. Wittingly or unwittingly they track the evolution and impact of an industrial relations system which, until recently tended to promote arbitration and/or conciliation rather than individual bargaining, whilst providing detailed analyses of particular industrial disputes (Gollan 1963; Sheridan 1975; Merritt 1986). In addition, the best of the more recent Labour histories more fully address issues of gender, race, ethnicity, community and culture, as well as the more traditional aspects of unions and union organising (Ellem 1989; Spierings 1994; Burgmann and Burgmann 1998).

Nevertheless although many of the trade union histories provide some useful and significant insights into aspects of the influence and effectiveness of individual trade unions there appears in the end, to be a failure to comprehensively and systematically assess effectiveness. It seems that this lacuna in the literature is the result of a combination of a number of factors including the failure of trade unions themselves to clarify objectives, assess performance and effectiveness, the often celebratory role and purpose(s) of the trade union histories, the approaches and methods used in the study of trade unions and of course the inherent difficulties of undertaking such an analysis.

In sum, despite the broad focus and many inspiring stories and interesting insights to be found in the literature the extent to which union(s) organised and acted effectively during the past remains hidden from history. The contribution of the union(s)
to change is often left overly tangled up with other factors, be they demographic, economic, social, political or cultural. It is often clear from the literature that a union presence in itself makes a difference. It is more often left unclear just what the difference is, and to what extent specific union strategies, campaigns and actions made a difference. In a nutshell what worked? What didn’t work? What was effective? What was less effective?

Assessing Union Effectiveness

Assessing union effectiveness has always been a complex and controversial activity. It can quickly become bogged down in debates about the inherent potential or more often the inherent limitations of unions as agents for change, particularly revolutionary or transformative change. In this paper the ambit of the framework outlined below extends to cover union effectiveness both within and beyond the confines of capitalism. For the moment it would be a useful step forward to develop a better understanding of union effectiveness even within the confines of capitalism. Even this more limited ambit for reviewing union effectiveness has, perhaps for some union leaders, smacked too much of accountability and for some academics, too much of positivism or even managerialism. However in the light of the intensifying challenges faced by unions around the world, it is surely clear that the importance of assessing union effectiveness can no longer be sidelined. Recent analyses and initiatives from the ACTU, the ILO and individual unions testify to the heightened need and urgency of this task (ILO 1998; ILO 1998; ILO 1999; ACTU 1999; AMWU 1997).

There are arguably five main related areas where union effectiveness needs to be described, explained and assessed. They are, firstly, effectiveness in relation to organising including creating a union where none existed before, extending an existing union’s coverage to new locations, maintaining union coverage and declining areas that had been lost to union coverage. The second and related area is effectiveness in relation to union democracy, including developing democratic structures, democratic processes, democratic culture and activities. The third area is effectiveness in relation to union and membership action including forms, scope, intensity and duration of the action. The fourth area is effectiveness in relation to a wide range of substantive areas of struggle including industrial influence (on wages, hours and working conditions); economic influence (on policy and outcomes micro and macro); political influence (on parties, parliaments and legislation); managerial influence (on management philosophy, prerogative and practices); cultural influence (on the classical, the modern and the post-modern); and intellectual and ideological influence (on the battle for ideas and policy). The fifth and final area is effectiveness in relation to the role of unions as agents for revolutionary or transformative change, using perhaps a combination of Ginzberg’s categories of reformist reforms, revolutionary reforms and reactionary reforms (Gorz 1975) and Arrighi and Wallerstein’s concept of anti-systemic movements (Arrighi, Hopkins et al. 1989).

It is acknowledged that there are real challenges in describing, explaining and assessing individual union influence and effectiveness, even in such fundamental and relatively measurable areas such as organising, wages campaigns and the struggle over working hours. Key challenges, as noted above, include the lack of clarity and consistency of union objectives in relation to organising, union democracy and substantive issues; the limited extent that unions themselves measure their influence and effectiveness; the availability of data; problems of what to measure; problems of how to measure and problems of causation and assessing independent union influence. In a recent review of labour history, with which we concur, Patmore concluded that, “the preferable approach is to combine a variety of methods (archival, oral, visual, cultural, quantitative) where possible” and to use, “a variety of sources for cross-checking” (Patmore 1998, p. 226). Crucially, such a combined approach also has the potential to generate new insights and new hypotheses. It is further proposed here that an approach to specifically assessing union effectiveness is required (as outlined above) that is comprehensive, systematic, sustained and comparative.

In part this framework for assessing union effectiveness draws inspiration from Kelly’s recent adaptation of Tilly’s theory of mobilisation and counter-mobilisation and the idea of “long waves” of economic development (Kelly 1998; Tilly 1978). The idea of five components of mobilisation and counter-mobilisation appears to provide a comprehensive and systematic framework for thinking and writing about trade unions. In From Mobilisation to Revolution Tilly proposed that, “a useful theory of collective action (and its absence) must have five components, dealing respectively with interests, organisation, mobilisation, opportunity and the different forms of action. The fulcrum of the model is interests and the ways in which people (particularly members of subordinate groups) come to define them” (Tilly, pp. 26-32). The process of interest definition was in turn broken down by Kelly into two key questions, “how and why do people acquire a sense of injustice or grievance and second, how do they develop a sense of their grievance being collective?” (Kelly, p. 24). We have here proposed the addition of a third question, “how do we assess the effectiveness of efforts to mobilise and to deal with counter-mobilisation”?

Aggregate Union Effect(s)

In contrast to the few efforts and the limited success of efforts to describe and assess the effectiveness of individual unions there have been many attempts to measure aggregate union effects (if not effectiveness) using primarily econometric methods (Freeman and Medoff 1984; Hirsch and Addison 1986; Mishel and Voos 1992; Booth 1995). There have however been few, if any, efforts to date to systematically link the findings and speculations of this literature to efforts to write individual trade union histories.

A recent Australian review of the econometric literature concluded that: Australian unions raise the wages of their members relative to non-members by about 10 per cent, or broadly in line with estimates for most European countries, but about half that generally estimated for the US; the majority of Australian studies show that unionists have a significantly lower probability of quitting than non-unionists; unions are found to have lower job tenure and lower lay-off rates than non-unionists; unions are found to have more fringe benefits than non-unionists; unions have a small but negative effect on productivity and the rate of return to capital in firms in competitive product markets and finally, that the literature on the determinants of union membership has produced few clear findings (Miller and Mulvey 1993). In addition, aggregate level studies of the Accord, the social wage, union amalgamations, enterprise bargaining, wage restraint, wage cuts, declining union density, defeats and victories, has produced an extensive experience and literature ranging from uncompromising defences of the strategy to robust critiques (Stilwell 1986; Ewer, Hampson et al. 1992; Lewis and Spiers 1990; Singleton 1990; Bray and Walsh 1995; Evatt Foundation 1995). Finally, a new aggregate level resource and accompanying critical literature has emerged in the form of the two Australian Workplace Industrial Relations Surveys undertaken to date (Callus, 1991; Morehead, Steele et al. 1997). Modelled on the British Workplace Industrial Relations Surveys these studies provide a comprehensive set of benchmarks against which to assess individual union’s experiences.

The aggregate level studies in themselves provide some
valuable insights. For example, in *Unions in a Contrary World*, Peetz provides a detailed aggregate analysis of the determinants of union membership in Australia over the last twenty years (Peetz 1998). Three key causal factors are identified. They are structural change in the labour market; withdrawal of government and employer support for, or at least compliance with, compulsory unionism; and "the failure of some unions to provide the infrastructure or act with sufficient vigour or cohesion to prevent employer strategies from leading to a decline in union reach and membership" (Peetz, pp. 175-177). Peetz noted that, "the critical issue for unions, however, is likely to be their ability to recreate themselves in forms that are democratic, efficient and effective" (Peetz, p. 193). Peetz concluded that, "unions are more successful in recruiting where they already have a presence and are active". In the case of non-union workplaces, "successful union recruitment appeared to be associated with poor management, with badly managed workplace change, and with lack of money" (Peetz, pp. 128-130). In relation to the union amalgamation strategy, it is concluded that, "single unionism and union cohesion promote unionisation; that multiple unionism, union in-fighting and (possibly) the proliferation of small unions, other things being equal, retard it" (Peetz, p. 195).

More importantly, for our purposes, the aggregate level studies also provide some new points of comparison or benchmarks for studies, including histories, of individual unions. However there is, as yet, little evidence that union histories have made use of this accumulating resource.

**A Very Brief History of Critiques of Labour (and Trade Union) History**

There has been no shortage of efforts to review and critique the existing labour history literature in Australia and elsewhere, with much of the early criticism centering on the priority given to the role of institutions, primarily trade unions and political parties (Merritt 1981; Merritt 1982; Patmore 1991; Burgmann 1991; McKibbin 1994; Patmore 1998; Burgmann 1999). A predominant theme has been the need to move from narrow union histories to broader histories that encompass work and the labour process, gender, ethnicity, aboriginality, community and the social and cultural dimensions. However, despite the breadth and depth of debates within Labour history and critiques of the literature from without, little attention has been paid to issues of union effectiveness. While contributing to an necessary broadening of the scope of Labour history, including trade union history, the debates so far appear to have left little time or energy for a focus on union effectiveness. Indeed some of the critiques particularly from the USA come close to suggesting that a Labour history without unions might provide the best way forward.

In some recent literature emerging from the depth of the 'trenches' in the USA and elsewhere the focus has shifted back to debating the need to 'bringing the unions back in' (Zeitlin 1987; Kimeldorf 1991) to the centre of analysis, and has extended to an effort to describe and explain, 'success while others fail' (Johnston 1994) and 'organizing to win' (Bronfenbrenner, Friedman et al. 1998). Both Johnson and Bronfenbrenner start by acknowledging the need for research that assesses union effectiveness and note that, "until recently, very little research (quantitative or qualitative) examined the effectiveness of union organising strategies and tactics" (Bronfenbrenner, p. 10). In summary, the two main points emerging from this recent literature are: that union tactics and actions make a large difference in organising success; and that unions must remake themselves into organising bodies, with a focus on the need for grassroots activity by existing union members and community supporters. This literature reflects on, and highlights, the new models of unions that have emerged from the struggles of the last twenty years, above all perhaps, the 'organising model', but also including the 'social movement model', the 'community model', and even the concept of the 'cyberunion'.

This new literature and these new models of unions provide inspiration, insight and illustrations of practical changes. However even these recent studies tend to focus on one area of union effectiveness -- the need to organise and recruit. There is little doubt that more effective organising can, and must, provide a starting point for rebuilding and revitalising unions. However it is of concern that a comprehensive, systematic, sustained and comparative focus on union effectiveness will again be lost sight of, in the face of the urgency to -- Organise! Organise! In any case, as with the aggregate studies of unions, much of this more recent literature is yet to make an impact on the writing of union history.

**Union Effectiveness, Now and in the Future**

Building effective unions has always been hard and it's not getting any easier. In a recent contribution to the ILO's *Conference on Organised Labour in the 21st Century*, Richard Hyman argues that a starting point for unions is to win the battle of ideas. Hyman argues that this requires the construction of trade union programs with which vertically and horizontally differentiated groups of workers can identify, based on a redefinition of what interests are represented (Hyman 1999). Hyman concludes that, "if on the one hand, unions must be alert and receptive to (possibly altered) expectations and aspirations on the part of actual and potential members, on the other hand, a priority must be to construct an agenda which can unite rather than divide" (Hyman, p. 15). To do so unions must scrutinise the concepts which have inspired the offensive of employers and the political right and attempt to reclaim these for different purposes.

The focus for the battle of ideas and alternative thinking and struggle identified by Hyman includes the meaning of key concepts such as flexibility, security, opportunity and democracy and even more fundamentally concepts of freedom, fairness, moral leadership and the general interest. Hyman concludes that the necessary development of such a new unionism requires, "a kind of unionism that replaces organisational conformity with coordinated diversity " (Hyman, p. 16). Less noticed perhaps in all this is the prospect of 'the autumn' of the USA dominated 'long century systemic cycle of capitalist accumulation' and the emergence of a new systemic cycle based in South-East Asia and probably centred in China, with Shanghai playing a role of the role previously occupied by Genoa, Amsterdam, London and New York. In sun, the scope, scale and intensity of working-class formation and re-formation is now arguably at an historic high simultaneously in the old core, the periphery and semi-periphery of the global economy.

It is the contention of this paper that the greater challenges faced by unions themselves, in conjunction with the possibility of an eminent fundamental transformation of the global economy, provides even greater challenges for Labour historians in describing, explaining and assessing unions and in particular union effectiveness.

**A Way Forward for Labour History: Bringing Union Effectiveness In**

The writing of trade union history is then faced with clear challenges and opportunities. The challenges highlighted here are threefold: firstly, to recognise the limitations of the literature to date, particularly in relation to union effectiveness; secondly, to develop more effective approaches to describing, explaining and assessing trade union effectiveness; and finally to deal with describing, explaining and assessing union effectiveness at a time when the demands on unions are more intense, complex, diverse and contradictory.

The first opportunity is to provide a comprehensive,
systematic and sustained focus on union effectiveness in relation to all aspects of organising. For example, reviewing:

- membership data in relation to occupation, industry, enterprise, workplace
- membership data in relation to age, gender, ethnicity, aboriginality
- membership data in relation to old and new occupations and industries
- membership data in relation to employment status including permanent, part-time, full-time, casual or contract
- union expenditure by category, including expenditure on full-time officials and organisers, part-time officials and organisers, support for workplace delegates, training, motor vehicles, research, campaigning, publicity and media, industrial and legal costs, and
- change and continuity in union recruitment strategies and their impact.

The second opportunity is to provide a comprehensive, systematic and sustained focus on union effectiveness in relation to union democracy. For example, reviewing:

- change and continuity in union representative and decision making structures
- change and continuity in union rules, on union officials tenure, role and payment of officials
- role of workplace delegates and members
- the profile of membership involvement in meetings, branches, conferences and training
- scope of issues raised, and processes of decision making in various forums
- membership involvement in industrial and community action
- community involvement in union processes and action, and
- membership involvement in union publications and social activities.

The third opportunity is to provide a comprehensive, systemic and sustained focus on union effectiveness in relation to union and membership action including types, scope, intensity and duration of the action. For example, reviewing:

- change and continuity in the types of industrial action
- change and continuity in the scope of industrial action
- change and continuity in the timing, intensity and duration of industrial action
- use of community and other forms of collaborative action
- use of social and culturally based action
- use of new and emerging technologies, and
- use of research to support action.

The fourth opportunity is to provide a comprehensive, systematic and sustained focus on union effectiveness in relation to substantive areas including industrial influence (on wages, hours and working conditions); economic influence (on policy and outcomes micro and macro); political influence (on parties, parliaments and legislation); managerial influence (on management philosophy, prerogative and practices); cultural influence (traditional, popular, highbrow); and intellectual and ideological influence (on the battle for ideas). For example, reviewing:

- key wage rates for the union membership compared to multiple benchmarks including movements in average weekly earnings and prices, movements in comparable occupations and industries, movements in other states and movements in the pecking order
- change and continuity in working time compared to multiple benchmarks
- change and continuity in key working conditions compared to multiple benchmarks
- change and continuity in information provision, consultative, grievance and appeal processes
- change and continuity in union backed parliamentarians
- union influence on existing legislation
- union influence in the introduction of new areas of legislation, and
- union influence on core ideas in relation to the economy, democracy, management and culture.

The fifth opportunity is to provide a comprehensive, systematic, sustained and comparative focus on union effectiveness in relation to the role of unions as agents for revolutionary or transformative change. This could use perhaps both Gorz’s categories of reformist reforms, revolutionary reforms, reactionary reforms and Arrighi and Wallerstein’s concept of anti-systemic movements. (Arrighi, Hopkins et al. 1989)

Researching and writing Labour history has never been hard and it is not getting any easier. There is no one best way to go about union history. However it is the contention of this paper that there is potential value in undertaking a series of studies of unions and union effectiveness using a comprehensive and consistent framework. The industrial relations literature has usefully employed such an approach (Frenkel and Coolican 1984; Frenkel 1993; Locke, Kochan et al. 1995; Verma, Kochan et al. 1995; Kitay and Lansbury 1997). A practical way forward therefore could involve undertaking a series of individual trade union histories using a common framework and combination of methodologies. For example, a proposal to research and write the histories of all current ACTU affiliates could provide a starting point for the next decades worth and more of trade union histories.

References


