Stemming The Tide

It's official: the union movement is in crisis. By the end of the 1990s it could be reduced to a quarter of the workforce.

But it's easier to diagnose the malaise than to suggest cures. The Clothing and Allied Trades Union, and secretary Anna Booth, have become well-known for innovative forms of unionism. ALR asked them for their views on the crisis.

Involved in the discussion were: Anna Booth, federal secretary of CATU; Sonia Laverty, resources officer for the CATU federal office; and Sue McCreddie, national economic research officer for the TCF unions. They were interviewed for ALR by David Burchell.

Can I start by asking you about the recent ACTU Congress. The outstanding feature of that Congress for me was Bill Kelty's gloomy forebodings about the future of the union movement. A lot of things which, if they had been said not very long ago by a magazine like ALR would have been considered rather controversial, now seem to be accepted wisdom in the ACTU. The ACTU-endorsed booklet Can Unions Survive?, puts the case at its baldest. By the year 2000, it says, on current trends the union movement will cover less than a quarter of the workforce, the centralised wage-fixing system will have collapsed and we'll have enterprise bargaining. But what I found most striking about Can Unions Survive? was that, while it identified the problems very accurately, it didn't seem to go any further...

ANNA: Yes, I think that's right. It's got a quite complex analysis of the cause of the union movement's problems. But at the same time it's got a very one-dimensional approach to the solutions. Its main answer seems to be amalgamations, whereas I'd argue that's just one element of a comprehensive range of things which have to be looked at. And we have to recognise that there are different solutions for different areas.

SUE: Some people portray amalgamations as a kind of cure-all to our problems. But many union members feel that in amalgamations they're losing something in their relation to their union. We have to face the fact that unions can actually become more removed from their members through amalgamations.

In Can Unions Survive? the authors argue strongly that the main barrier to amalgamations is the self-interest of certain union officials. But the experience of the recent BWIU-FEDFA amalgamation ballot might seem to suggest that there was a lot of resistance from the rank-and-file there as well...

SONIA: In many cases amalgamation proposals have been dragging on for years, because many union memberships are understandably cautious about the idea. Often they oppose amalgamation for reasons which are very important to them. They want their own union; they have a sense of belonging to it. And they are often worried about being swallowed up by another union and losing their identity.

ANNA: I'm all in favour of amalgamations as a solution to various problems of under-resourcing for unions in particular industries. But it's not always the only solution, especially where the membership feels particularly attached to their own union. In many cases perhaps the same can be achieved by networks of unions sharing resources, rather than by putting all our eggs in the amalgamations basket.

So what are some of the other solutions to the problems of membership decline?

ANNA: To some extent they vary from industry to industry. The biggest
area of employment growth in the economy is the service sector, an area which even before the rapid increases in employment of the last few years was not well-unionised. Thus even if unionisation rates in the service sector held up, the union movement as a whole would still be going backwards. Conversely, the areas with historically high levels of unionisation, such as the manufacturing sector and the public sector, are shrinking. Those are the areas where unions have historically achieved closed shops and strong preference clauses with employers, and where they’ve had a high profile in the workplace. But they’re now unionising a shrinking base. These are trends which would exist even if the union movement had no other problems. But the fact is that the movement is also having difficulty in generating support across a whole range of occupations and industries, and the shifts in the workforce as a whole simply serve to exacerbate that.

A lot of people refer to unions as having an ‘image problem’.

SONIA: A while ago I visited a number of high schools in Sydney’s inner west which mostly cater to kids from non-English speaking backgrounds. There was a lot of real anti-union feeling among those kids. Often it was a response to the bad times their parents had experienced when they’d been on strike and there was no money coming in. The strongest impression those kids had of unions was that they expect a lot from you, but they don’t do much for you. And of course they cause you hassles - like being without pay for instance. As we know, when unions are out on strike it’s often the case that they don’t articulate the reasons adequately to the media. Nor, for that matter, do they often articulate the reasons adequately to their members.

Migrant workers in particular often find the experience of being on strike alienating. They don’t understand the philosophical position occupied by unions and the left generally: the rationale behind the welfare state - inasmuch as we have one - for instance. And we often don’t explain to them why we want our union membership. So migrant people in particular often only see the down side, not the up side. They tend to take for granted four week’s annual leave, sick leave and so on - indeed, they often think they’re given by the government. The biggest problem for unions in this country is that we’ve lost the ability to recruit, to organise, and to sell ourselves - to explain what we’re on about in a realistic kind of way.

ANNA: Some of the solutions to these problems are in essence very simple. They about doing more of what the best of us do, and better. Resources are important. If you are going to communicate better, you should be doing so not only at the time of disputes. Every union organiser visiting workplaces should consciously stress the gains that have been made by that union and the unions generally over the years.

If you’ve got a branch full of organisers whose job it is to be out on the road every day, with the exception of the odd executive meeting, it requires real effort to ensure that they’re regularly brought up to date on some of the quite complex issues we have to deal with in a union like this - on the relative of merits of structural efficiency, broad-banding, minimum rate adjustments and so on, just to cite the example of the recent wage decision - so that these sorts of things can be communicated to the workers. And this means developing the skills to be able to communicate these kinds of issues in ordinary language, as well as the back-up material to illustrate them. In our case, that means providing regular information about these issues in ten to fourteen languages.

Add all that up, and you’ve got a major resource problem. There just aren’t enough organisers, they’re not skilled enough in communicating in English and other languages, and they may not have the information that they need.

SONIA: Because the trade union agenda has become much more compli-
When you work in places like hospitals, it puts much more weight on the old shopfloor network to educate and inform members. If the membership continues to fall, this will erode its base. Resources will remain relatively constant, or may even diminish, if the membership continues to fall. This raises major problems in servicing the membership which unions will have to play a much larger role in individual worker issues, if or when the unions are going to have to play a much larger role in servicing the membership which unions will have to face. This raises major problems in servicing the membership which unions will have to face. In the service sector, people often work around the clock; they're not organised in large workplaces; they're often outside the major cities. Take the tourism industry, for instance: quite probably all the relevant union offices in Queensland are in Brisbane. Have they thought to put any, for instance, on the Gold Coast? The same queries apply to shift work and to some union meetings, often they'd be easily enabled.

ANNA: It's clear that workplace reps are going to have to play a much larger role in individual worker issues, if organisers are to be freed from constantly fighting bushfires, so they can develop long-range campaigns.

SONIA: But that's still only the start of the problem. Even if you get together a good network of shopfloor delegates, you have to ensure that their experiences of union life are positive ones. We have to deal with the question: how can you run meetings which are interesting and meaningful, where everyone gets a chance to speak, and where everyone's views are represented? For many women, getting onto their union executive is only the first battle. They don't get listened to, they never get to speak, everything's too structured, they don't know the rules and nobody helps them to understand them. Here we are talking about getting young people into unions. But if you actually did get them along to some union meetings, often they'd be out the door in ten minutes...

ANNA: It would seem worse than school!

SUE: A lot of women do find it very alienating. They find that the men are always pulling stunts: using meeting procedure to quash discussion, stacking votes and the like. Now, those women may be as good at pulling those kinds of stunts as the men. But when they look at how those kinds of meetings work, and the kinds of human relations involved, they often ask themselves: is it really worth it? And often they simply walk away.

This discussion raises an issue which I've often heard voiced. A lot of people who fundamentally oppose the whole direction unionism has taken over the 'eighties - often for reasons they're not able to clearly articulate - commonly link that direction to what they see as the unions' reduced presence on the shopfloor. They argue that the fact that the unions have taken on a far greater strategic role, which entails them taking on far more complex issues than they used to, has been the direct cause of this alleged reduced presence on the shopfloor. In other words, they're saying that ultimately strategic unionism and all that goes with it is simply a process of bureaucratization.

SUE: Opponents of strategic unionism always think of it as a top-heavy thing: to them it's all about the ACTU negotiating with the government somewhere behind closed doors, while the membership's left out in the cold. But to me strategic unionism fundamentally means going beyond the old agenda of wages and conditions - not just at the national level, but also at the shopfloor level. And that's precisely how the unions can regenerate their support at the workplace level: by raising questions such as consultative committees, industrial democracy, unions' and workers' access to companies' investment plans and training plans, and so on. That will immeasurably broaden the range of issues on which unions can make themselves relevant to their members' lives. Obviously organisers can't take all that burden on themselves, because their won't be any extra organisers. So it's all about empowering people on the shopfloor, and getting them involved in those structures.

That raises another conundrum. A lot of the people who've been least well catered for in unions in the past, and who work in areas the ACTU has now identified as those where unions need to lift their game - married migrant women with kids, for instance - are those who have the fewest human resources in their own lives to be easily enabled.

SUE: I think we've tried to address that in this union. A lot of workers get quite frightened by the thought that not only will they have their job, but they may also be on consultative committees, and have to ask their boss to see the company accounts, and do other, often quite terrifying, things. They think to themselves: I haven't got the time; there are the kids to think of; I might lose my job...That's why the question of the legitimation of unions is so important. While the far left might carry on about the co-option of unions, we're not nearly as legitimate as we should be. There are countries where doing those kinds of things isn't thought to be extraordinary, and yet here it's seen as thoroughly outrageous.

ANNA: It's also a matter of the way you handle the big issues. I can think of three ways we could have handled the TCF Industries Plan. First, we could have opted out. Second, we could have simply formulated a position with a few economists; trooped off to Canberra, had meetings with the government and got the best deal we could get; and had this conveyed to the workers through the national media and by bosses on the shopfloor. Or we could do what we actually did. We formulated a simple seven-point strategy and sought the approval of the workers for it. This showed the government that it wasn't just the creation of a few union bureaucrats, and it also meant that the workers understood and identified with the plan.

Then, when the TCF plan was finally
announced, it didn’t come as a great surprise to them. We also took the women onto the streets in support of our plan, and that showed them that direct action can have positive results. I draw from that a theoretical conclusion: positive direct action leads to more confidence in positive direct action. I’d qualify that immediately, however, by saying that the worst possible thing you can do is have workers on strike for weeks without pay, and then lose. You’ll never get them out again.

If I may summon up our critic of strategic unionism again, I can see them - probably him - saying at this point something like this: ah, but all of those mechanisms which have been set up in the last six years just undermine the ability of workers to discover their true consciousness as workers, in that very way, through the wage struggle. You hear that sort of thing quite a lot, don’t you?

SONIA: I’ve heard it often. Usually it’s just a good excuse for sitting back and doing nothing. And at the same time that kind of person sits there telling us that the reason for struggle’s gone there are an enormous range of new issues just waiting to be picked up. We mightn’t have to get out there on wages, but instead we’re out there on health and safety, on maternity leave, or any one of a number of things.

Out in the marketplace how should the unions go about getting themselves good publicity? I’m thinking here particularly of the current TV ads for the ACTU Minimum Wage campaign. Now, those ads were done with the best of intentions. And it’s certainly a good thing that the ACTU is trying to reach out like that to the general public. But what struck me was the disparity between the arguments of the ACTU about who they’re not successfully reaching out to at present, and the style and content of the ad.

On the one hand we’re arguing that the unions are seen as trapped in the past, and as not able to service new and different parts of the workforce. But then the ads themselves seemed to summon up all the images of the past, and to say very little about the future.

ANNA: It’s always going to be difficult for something like the ACTU to advertise successfully on TV. To start with, most TV advertising works by repetition, and yet it’s so tremendously expensive. The ‘Do the Right Thing’ campaign, for instance, combined with a heightened environmental consciousness, has in fact stopped a lot of people from throwing scraps of rubbish on the ground. But it’s been on TV every night for ten years. And this ACTU ad campaign ran for three weeks. So there’s not a big chance that those ads are going to alter people’s perceptions of trade unionism. What they might do is push more unions into communicating better to the general public the positive things they’re doing. I think CATU has done a reasonable job on that score. And we’ve in fact got very good treatment from the media. When you communicate with the media in a positive way, even in the haphazard way we do, you get a very good response. Some people are almost a lost cause - A Current Affair, for instance. But the ABC and the industrial news reporters actually look for positive things, and they’ll give you fair treatment if you give them half a chance.

SONIA: I wonder whether in the ACTU and the local labor councils they shouldn’t attempt to be a bit more cosmic in their public comments; to take on issues outside the narrow industrial field. Take Fred Nile’s demonstration in Sydney recently, for instance: a demonstration deliberately targeted against a particular community, actually in that community. It’s something that everyone should be outraged by as citizens, and perhaps the unions should reflect that. The unions could become more of a movement of people who have something to say about principles and morality, about the kind of society we want to have, the priorities we think are important - and fit into that the things that affect people’s lives like their working conditions. It’s not easy to do, but it’s not impossible. You could get a reputation for making comments on a whole range of issues - often controversial ones. And that way young people in particular would start to feel that the unions have something to say on issues that they can understand and have an opinion on.
SUE: There would be problems, of course. In the Fred Nile example, given attitudes to homosexuality in the community, if you put that to a vote on the shopfloor, you mightn't get the response you'd hoped for!

SONIA: I'd suggest you'd try and argue through those issues. You'd have to address the issue as a case of a minority group being targeted for intimidation. Most of our members could identify themselves with the description 'minority group' in one way or other.

SUE: That was the case in the miners' strike in Britain a few years ago. When the miners were being targeted by the government as 'the enemy within', a lot of other minority groups drew links with the miners who were being targeted by the government as 'the enemy within'.

Bill Kelty's grand vision to reverse the shrinking fortunes of Australian unionism is well-documented. The question now is whether the trade union movement is capable of rejuvenation, or whether, like much of its officialdom, it is reclining in its twilight years.

The survival clock is ticking, with the rate of unionisation down to 42%, according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics. This represents a fall of 17% since 1954, with an accelerated crash of nine percentage points during the life of the Hawke government. The ACTU itself believes the level of unionism is now less than 40%, and the doomsayers have predicted a twenty-five per cent rate of unionisation by the year 2000 if the decline is not arrested.

The August ACTU Congress was the forum to relaunch the revival strategy in earnest, after a response to the 1987 Future Strategies document which Kelty sarcastically described as 'a big yawn from the union movement'. An arresting publication, Can Unions Survive?, was distributed to Congress this year by the BWIU's ACT secretary Peter Berry to document the crisis. It charts the collapse of unionism's traditional manufacturing base, the boom in the service sector, and the woeful performance of unions in all growth sectors of the economy.

But curiously, and despite the statistical omens and the gloomy outlook, the Congress went off with more of a whimper than a bang. Fiery speeches by secretary Kelty and solid support from the ACTU's left/right leadership group failed to move the masses to more than an orderly response. If there was a shuffling of feet it seemed more in response to the hard seats and the gloomy surroundings of the Sydney Town Hall than a rippling of fear and interest.

With not a word from those, such as John Halfpenny, who had expressed opposition to the strategy outside in the corridors, and only a modicum of debate, the ACTU proposals to reshape unions into industry blocs through membership trading and amalgamations and to dramatically lift services to members, were easily carried. But it was a weary audience, and observers casting an eye over the wall-to-wall sea of ageing and mostly male trade union officials could be forgiven for asking if this were really the team to build the brave new world, to recruit the young, the women, the part-timers and the professionals.

The Congress theme, 'Taking Trade Unionism into the 1990s', rests on Kelty's futuristic and ambitious agenda. The chances of it succeeding seem slim unless there is dramatic change inside the unions themselves within one or two years.

The union movement faces a conundrum. On the one hand the ACTU intends to push and provoke, to wheedle and coax the unions to reform, much as