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 that and said 'We've been treated in the same way because we're gay, or black, or women'. It became a coalition around a broader human rights issue, rather than the rights or wrongs of the dispute itself.

Which raises the environment. That's an issue where the unions have actually been perceived to be behind public opinion, not 'held back' by it - although the members' opinions in certain industries are obviously another question...

ANNA: Well, the members' opinions in those industries have carried the policy of the whole trade union movement with them, unwittingly to the bulk of the movement. Now obviously it's impossible in those instances to decide every matter of immediate policy from the grassroots - it would make it impossible to make quick comments on issues, apart from anything else. But a proper union leadership should be able to develop draft policies on issues of public importance, if they're mindful of their members' concerns. What really becomes a travesty of democracy is when a small portion of the movement can carry the policy of the whole movement with them, simply by virtue of their prominence. That's why I think the environment policy passed at Congress was a big step toward a policy with some integrity. And it also indicated an interest in our members' concerns not just in terms of their immediate interests as workers, but in terms of quality of life issues as well.

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A Brave New World?

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 percent 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
it has taken them into the Rubik’s Cube of complex wage systems since 1987.

The unions will be confronted with propositions for internal restructuring, to change the way their own officials operate, to increase subscriptions and offer new services to members, and to introduce supportive provisions for female employees with children. Perhaps most importantly, there will be pressure on the trade union seniority system which has given the union movement a top layer of ageing senior officials which could remain in place for at least another half dozen years - perhaps the time span which will make or break the strategy.

But if the ACTU pushes too hard, it will face a backlash. Long terms in senior posts and appointments to the ACTU executive are regarded as sacrosanct at the end of long union careers: the young must bide their time.

If the revitalisation is not underway within a few short years, there is little chance of a turnaround. But there are many middle managers in the union movement who use their positions for personal political power. Ferguson is now exercising, as has Simon Crean before him, something of the voice of caution.

In the crash-through strategy, Kelty is partnered by Laurie Carmichael - perhaps the most remarkable character the union movement has spawned, and a man who perceives the need for change even more keenly than Kelty. Other senior unionists backing Kelty - and whose support is central to the credibility and acceptance of his strategy - are the left’s Tom McDonald and Tas Bull and the right’s Jim Maher. In addition, there is the emergent younger, cross-factional leadership group around Kelty which includes Martin Ferguson, Greg Sword from the National Union of Workers, Michael Easson from the NSW Labor Council, Steve Harrison from the Ironworkers and Greg Harrison from the Metalworkers.

The strategy as it has unfolded so far has reflected similar emergency measures in the UK, where the British union movement has sunk deep into decline under a decade of Thatcherism. The prospects for Australian unionism under a future conservative government are mixed. An onslaught against the unions could provoke a sudden reawakening and a return to militancy. But by the same argument, militancy is unlikely to appeal to many of the now ununionised and more conservative sections of the workforce.

In the UK a group of leading unionists has gone so far as to propose a form of ‘associate membership’ in an attempt to recruit workers outside the normal union organisational structure. This associate membership would enable these workers (professionals, part-timers, casuals) to buy a range of professional services from unions without requiring involvement in the collective activity of the union.

Whether a similar scheme would appeal to Australian unions remains to be seen. Perhaps the real test of local survival instincts will not come unless a conservative Australian government - now a looming possibility in February or March - dishes out the British anti-union medicine first.

Pamela Williams

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