Susan Gray argues that while enterprise bargaining has its dangers, it also has great possibilities.

The debate about enterprise bargaining is certainly not a new one. However, it has been given added impetus by the Industrial Relations Commission, and by the current focus on microeconomic reform.

Enterprise bargaining can provide a mechanism for employers, obsessed with the balance sheet, to force shortsighted change onto a resistant workforce without consultation or information. Or it can be taken up by the trade union movement as an opportunity for union members to play an informed and unprecedented role in improving their working environment and job security.

The not-so-hidden agenda of the employers is the erosion of hard-won conditions in the drive to reduce costs: elimination of penalty rates, 12 hour and evening shifts, banking of overtime hours, and the creation of a casual seasonal workforce. For many on the Left this makes enterprise bargaining a danger to be resisted at all costs. Yet enterprise bargaining has been given the imprimatur of federal and state industrial tribunals and is now a feature of many industrial awards.

But unions need to more than just react to the employers’ agenda. We can now simply go down the path of damage control, or we can attempt to turn the process to members’ advantage. Enterprise bargaining can offer the opportunity for the workers in an enterprise to raise matters like work-based childcare, occupational health and safety, special purpose leave, job redesign and work organisation, job sharing, and training, promotion and career opportunities.

Many workers, especially women, find flexible working hours, evening shifts and part-time hours attractive. Unions in the past have treated workers as an homogeneous group. The task for the union movement today is to take greater account of the diversity of workers’ needs, and particularly those of women, young workers and workers from non-English-speaking backgrounds, and to increase the participation of these groups in unions.

Unions need to address directly a far broader range of members’ concern than they have traditionally, and to take greater account of the diversity of their needs. Unless they do this, membership will continue to fall rapidly, particularly among young people, women and part-time and casual workers.

So how can unions ensure that enterprise bargaining provides positive results for their members? Firstly, they can establish ‘national standards’ and identify award conditions which are clearly not up for debate - such as award wages, the 38 hour week, rest breaks, leave entitlements and redundancy pay.

Secondly, it is fundamental that unions establish in awards agreed procedures and consultative mechanisms as a prerequisite to enterprise bargaining. Of course, establishing such procedures in a national framework is not enough in itself. They must be made to work to ensure that consultation is not a sham.

Are unions and workers well enough equipped to withstand the drive to erode hard-won conditions and turn enterprise bargaining to their advantage? On the one hand, union resources are strained. Negotiation of new skill structures and wage rates, new training arrangements and career paths have added another layer to the workload.

At the same time, the culture of the Australian workplace has traditionally excluded workers from participation in decision-making. Many workers, including union delegates, lack the skills, confidence and support necessary to negotiate enterprise agreements. Workers do not have access to information about the operation of their enterprises. Australian management is notoriously reluctant to surrender ‘managerial prerogative’.

In this context union education becomes all-important. The Textile, Clothing and Footwear (TCF) unions have
trained approximately 1000 members in the skills of participating in consultative committees. The courses examine the impact of the TCF plan and the links between award restructuring, work organisation and the production of higher value-added quality products. Workers do not get this information from their employers. And yet all these factors affect the work they perform and on their job security. Until they get access to this information they cannot fully participate.

There is a need to ensure that workers have a legitimate and recognised right to consult with all fellow workers concerning any proposals to be discussed by the consultative committee. In TCF workplaces this requires translation of proposals into languages spoken at the workplace. Decisions which affect workers in an enterprise must no longer be taken by management in isolation and without consultation or discussion of workers' concerns.

If handled badly, enterprise bargaining could be a backward step for workers. If handled well, it could be one factor in widening the reach and relevance of the Australian trade union movement.

SUSAN GRAY is the federal organiser of the Clothing and Allied Trades Union.

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