WORKPLACE DELEGATES AND WORKER POWER

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In a survey of 2500 workplace union delegates in eight unions we examined the power of workers at the local, workplace level. We found local member power to be significantly related to a number of factors associated with the organising agenda. Local power was stronger where: unions were democratically organised; delegates were confident, active, had clear roles and had strong networks of support at the workplace and with the union office, particularly through the organiser; unions promoted common identity through inclusive policies than took seriously women's issues; the employer (and the delegates' supervisor) were supportive of the union delegate's role; and where job security was not declining. Training indirectly helped strengthen local power. Employer-related factors were only one eighth as important as union-related factors.

The employment relationship involves two direct parties: the employee and employer. The employer is typically a collective of capital – individual capitalists (shareholders) pool their resources to create a corporation with substantial resources but limited liability. The nature of the employment relationship is one of imbalance in power between the individual employee and corporation. This arises from the differential level of resources available to employee and employer, and the fact that the employer has the capacity to hire, determine the hours of and fire the employee. Employees seek to offset his imbalance through collective organisation, thereby pooling their resources and bargaining power. The central goal of trade union organisation is to increase worker power. The power of employees, as evidenced by wage levels, increases in workplaces as union density increases (Baarth, Raaum and Naylor 1998; Wooden 2000). Australian unions' response to union decline has focused on attempting to build union power trough an 'organising' approach that focuses on the role of workplace union delegates, one that has gained currency amongst a number of unions in North America and the UK (Bronfenbrenner and et al 1998; Carter and Cooper 2002; Ellem 2002; Erickson, et al. 2002; Findlay and McKinlay 2003).

This paper examines workplace union delegates in Australia and their relationship to worker power. In particular, it focuses on the factors that influence the power of members at the workplace as perceived by workplace delegates.

Data sources
Data presented here come from a survey of 2506 current and former workplace delegates undertaken in late 2003 and 2004. Of those, 2350 were current workplace delegates, the remaining 156 were former delegates. The data reported here come from the 2350 current delegates (hence N=2350, minus "don't knows", in the charts). Delegates were surveyed in eight unions: the Australian Education Union (AEU), Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU), Australian Services Union (ASU), Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU), Independent Education Union (IEU), Liquor Hospitality and Miscellaneous Workers Union

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(LHMU), National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) and Rail, Tram and Bus Union (RTBU). Approximately 325 current delegates were surveyed in each of seven of the eight unions, with a smaller number coming from the RTBU because of its smaller membership base. Delegates were selected using systematic random sampling from lists provided by unions (mostly state branches). Interviews were conducted by telephone by the ACTU Call Centre, Member Connect. Interviewers were briefed by the researchers before hand on the survey instrument. The refusal rate was low, generally below 10 per cent. Further details are contained in an earlier paper (Peetz and Pocock 2005). We generally phrased questions about the union in terms of their (state) branch or division of the union, as this was the key operational level of the union with which delegates had interaction.

Local power
On average, delegates reported that union density was about two thirds amongst employees in their part of the workplace, though for about a third density was less than fifty per cent. Some 58 per cent of delegates agreed that the union had power in the workplace (20 percent disagreed), and likewise 62 per cent agreed that the last round of enterprise bargaining here produced outcomes that members were happy with (19 per cent disagreed). These items were strongly correlated (r=.35). Again, there was a general view that these things were improving for unions, but with some setbacks. On another measure, 46 per cent reported an improvement in the success rate of their union on issues at their workplace, and just 11 per cent reported a decline. Two thirds had a sense of self-efficacy, and felt that by being a delegate, they can really make a difference to what happens to people where they work (Table 1). Thirty five per cent estimated that the level of unionisation in the workplace had increased over the preceding two years, while 19 per cent perceived a decrease.

We constructed an index of local member power at the workplace, based on the first four of those items (α = .62). The index had 18 potential values. For analytical purposes in regression equations we used the full range of this index, but for descriptive purposes, in crosstabulations that follow we divide the sample into three groups: those with high local power (comprising about 51 per cent of the sample); those with medium power (33 per cent); and those with low power (17 per cent).

We then used OLS regression to predict local power (based on the full index), using a range of variables depicting various elements of collectivism and union behaviour as explanatory variables. The results are summarised in Table 1, which omits those variables which were not significant in the final equation. The entered variables explained 43 per cent of the variance in local power, which is respectably high for a cross-sectional dataset.

One of the strongest predictors of local power was the level of activism amongst delegates, based on an index of activism that divided delegates into three roughly similarly sized groups based on how many activities they had undertaken in the preceding six months. Figure 1 shows the strength of this relationship in a crosstabulation: high activism meant high power, and low activism meant low power.

Another key ingredient in local power was delegate confidence. We asked delegates how confident they felt in undertaking three activities (answering queries from members, participating in a meeting of [delegate / representative]s, and being involved in a workplace campaign) and summed responses from these questions to create an index of confidence (α = .79). The more confident they felt about undertaking various activities, the greater was local power.

Table 1 Predictors of local member power

	Unstandardized Coefficients		t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error		
(Constant)	6.287	.543	11.587	.000
In an enterprise bargaining campaign, **members** here have a lot of say in **determining the content** of the claim	.548	.050	11.012	.000
Delegates have a lot of **influence in this branch**	.439	.058	7.625	.000
(change over last 2 years in) the amount **of influence that members** have within the union branch	-.638	.099	-6.434	.000
your *organisation's* **attitude** to your activities as a delegate – (hostile/neutral/supportive)	.332	.074	4.503	.000
not enough **support from members** (obstacle to being more involved in the union)	.474	.109	4.364	.000
index of **activism**	.148	.040	3.740	.000
It is **clear** to me what is expected of me as a delegate	.205	.066	3.132	.002
(change over last 2 years in) the **support** you get from the union office	-.282	.093	-3.043	.002
My **organiser has taught me** many valuable things about being a delegate	.148	.051	2.886	.004
(change over last 2 years in) the **security** of employment in your part of the workplace	-.212	.075	-2.824	.005
(index of) **confidence**	.072	.027	2.628	.009
boss is obstacle (to being more involved in the union)	.316	.128	2.472	.014
This branch of the union pays a lot of attention to **women's issues** amongst its members	.124	.055	2.257	.024
(effectiveness of union support in) **showing me how to develop networks** of people who can help me	.110	.055	2.007	.045
I am allowed to take **paid time off** work to do union activities	.056	.037	1.522	.128
R squared	.437			
adjusted R squared	.432			
F	83.606			.000
N	1631			

Role clarity was also important in explaining power. While 59 per cent of those who were clear about their role (that is, they agreed that it was clear what was expected of them as a delegate) were in workplaces with high local power, only 27 per cent of those who were unclear about their role were in workplaces with high local power.

**Figure 1   Delegate activism and its effect on union power**
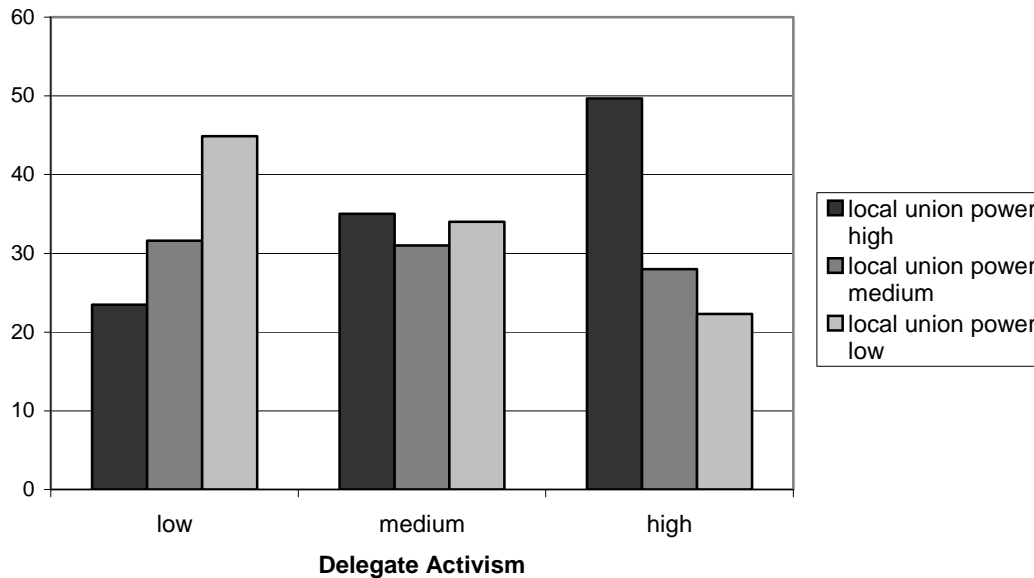
Local power was higher where the union was seen as paying attention to women's issues. Local power was high for 58 per cent of delegates who agreed with this proposition, but only for 30 per cent of those who disagreed. Interestingly, while this relationship was stronger for female than for male delegates, it was still significant for both genders.

Power and democracy
The most powerful set if influences on local power concerned measures of democratisation within the union. As shown in Table 1, the three strongest explanatory variables were all related to this concept: whether members had a lot of say in determining the content of claims made in collective bargaining ('enterprise bargaining'); whether delegates have a lot of influence in the union branch; and whether the influence of members in the branch has been increasing over the past two years.   The strength of these relationships in crosstabulations can also be seen in Figures 2 and 3. Clearly, the more power that members and delegates have in the union, the more power they have in the workplace as well.

Figure 2   **Member involvement and its effect on union power**

In an EB campaign, members here have a lot of say in
determining the content of the claim
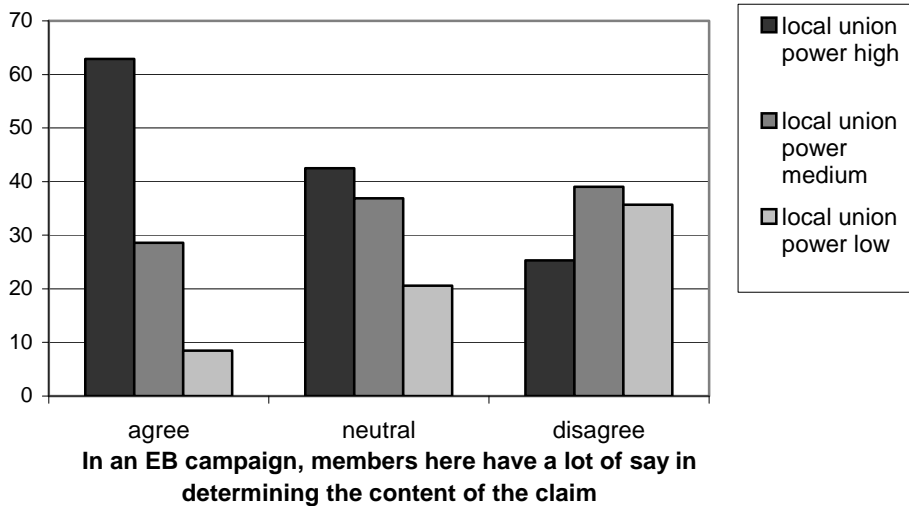
Power and networks of support

An important source of support for delegates is the networks they develop – with union staff, other delegates and members. Several variables related to these networks were significant independent explanators of local power (Table 1). Local worker power was significantly lower where delegates reported that lack of support from their fellow members was an obstacle to their being more involved in the union. Local power was significantly higher where delegates reported an increase in the level of support that they received from the union office. It was higher where they agreed that their organiser had taught them many valuable things about being a delegate. And it was higher where they scored the union as being effective in showing them how to develop networks of people who can help them.

Figure 3   **Delegate influence and its effect on union power**

Delegates have a lot of influence in this branch
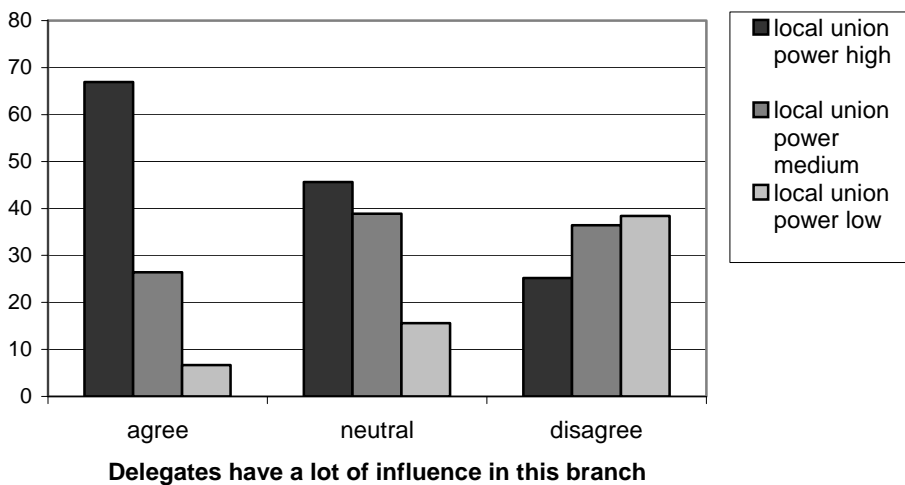
Union offices provide a variety of support to their delegates. We asked delegates to rate, on a scale of 1 to 5, how effective several types of support were for them: supporting industrial action;

providing news and information ; providing advice and expertise; directly dealing with individual grievances; speedily responding to an issue
keeping in contact with me; making training available; and showing me how to develop networks of people who can help me. In total, 24 percent of respondents described the overall level of support the union gave them as being 'very effective', and 8 per cent gave one of the lowest two ratings.

We also entered each of the forms of support into a regression equation to see which were the most important influences (Table 2). Given the high degree of collinearity between these measures, it was notable that all but three retained independent significance when entered together. Notably, the most important form of support was the one on which unions performed worst – their support in showing delegates how to develop networks of people who can help them.

Table 2   Types of support and their influence in predicting local power

|	Unstandardized Coefficients		t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error		
(Constant)	7.071	.326	21.717	.000
show how to network	.374	.064	5.821	.000
support industrial action	.403	.072	5.613	.000
dealing with grievances	.296	.076	3.914	.000
advice & expertise	.303	.082	3.671	.000
keeping in contact	.173	.065	2.669	.008
speedily respond	.088	.079	1.113	.266
making training available	.049	.058	.844	.399
news & information	.003	.077	.043	.966
R squared	.223			
adjusted R squared	.220			
F	63.197			.000
N	1766			

Within-workplace links
As shown in the overall regression equation (Table 1), internal networks of support were important in predicting local power. We have already seen how a significant role is played by the union office's support in showing delegates in how to develop local networks. Figure 4 shows two other similar relationships in cross-tabulation format. The laft hand part of the figure shows that local power is higher when delegates report that it is easy to get other members to help share in union tasks. The right hand part of the table shows that local power is lower where members report that they do not get enough support from members and this is an obstacle to their being more involved in the union.

Community links
We asked delegates whether they held an activist position outside the workplace, either in the union or elsewhere, such as delegate to a union branch council or an activist in a social group or community association. Some 13 per cent had a position in a social group or community association, including 3 per cent who also had an external union position. We called this 13 per cent 'community activists'.

Amongst delegates, community activists were better networked – they were more likely to report having a lot of contact with delegates in other workplaces or from other unions. They were more often in contact with their organiser, and more often in contact with someone else from the union office. They felt more involved in the union, were more confident, and were less likely to perceive opposition from their boss as something preventing their becoming more involved in the union. They were more likely to have mobilised their colleagues. The felt higher efficacy as a delegate and, principally because of this, scored slightly higher on local power.

Figure 4: Involvement & support of union members and their effects on union power
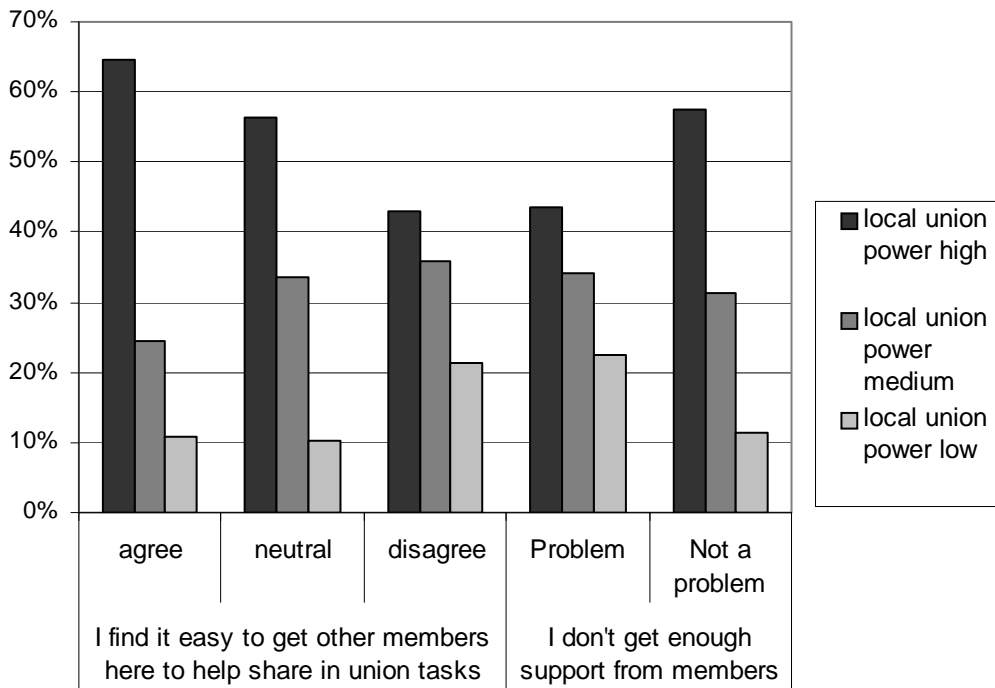

Managerial opposition

While managerial opposition to unions is important to explaining union outcomes, few data have been collected on what level of management is most hostile or matters most.   We asked respondents how they would categorise their supervisor's attitude, and their company's or organisation's attitude towards them. The overall regression equation (Table 1) showed the greater importance of the company's position to that of the delegate's boss in explaining union power. Both were significant, but the company's position was more so. Interestingly, when we look at the former relationship in crosstabulation format (Figure 5), we see that, compared to employer neutrality, employer support made a bigger difference to local power than did employer hostility. This probably reflects a complex relationship between managerial attitude and activism. Bad managers created issues that led to union activism, while they seek to oppose unionism. Higher activism in response to employer misbehaviour can in turn lead to higher power, partly (but not fully) offsetting the negative direct impact of employer hostility on local power. Job insecurity also reduced local power.

While managerial opposition to unions is important, it is important to put this in context. In total, union-related variables explained eight times as much of the variance in local power than did management-related variables.

Figure 5   Employer opposition and its effect on union power
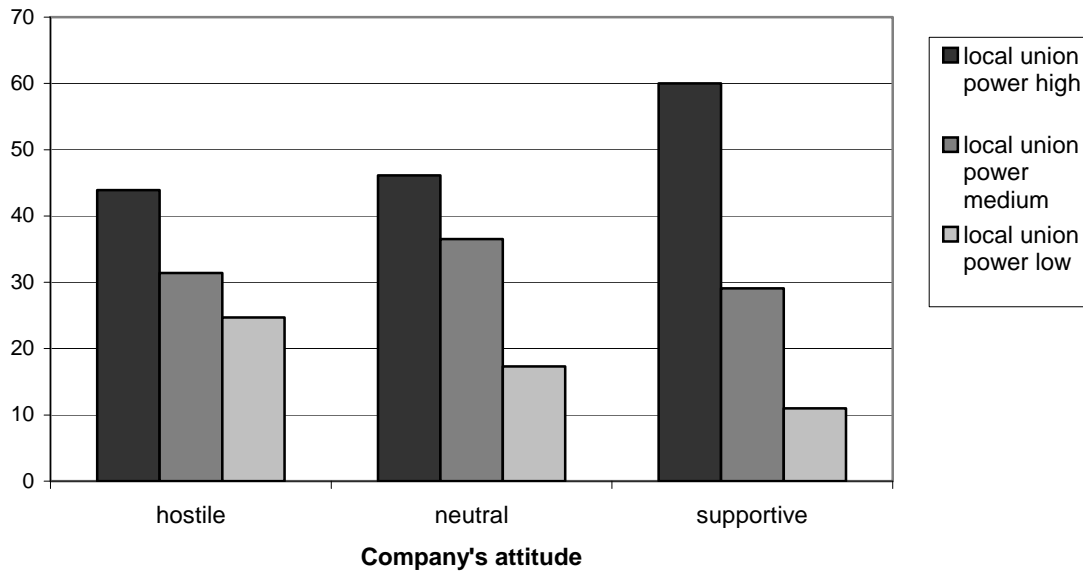
Training

Training did not appear as a separate explanatory variable when we entered it into the overall regression equation explaining local power, hence it does not appear in Table 1. This is because training affects the variables that in turn directly influence local power. That is, training's influence is strong but 'indirect'. Some 57 per cent of delegates who had received training were in workplaces with high local member power, compared to only 42 per cent of delegates who had not received any training.

We entered several training related variables – concerning the content of their training, when it had been undertaken, and the perceived usefulness of it – into a regression equation to identify the most important factors (Table 3). As you would expect, there was a high degree of multicollinearity, so many of the forms of training became non-significant in the presence of other content variables and so are not entered into the equation shown in Table 3. The non-significance of these signs should not be interpreted as meaning that these forms of training had no impact; rather, it just signifies the relative ranking of the importance of those particular forms of training. The most significant predictor of union power was the overall quality or usefulness of their training, as rated by the delegates. The most valuable forms of training, for promoting local power, were training in collective bargaining and in campaigning skills.

The currency of training was also important. Local power was highest in workplace where delegates' training had been most recent (Figure 6). This might be because of a general decaying of some skills over time. However, it probably also reflects changes in the quality of training over time, as union training has taken on more of the principles of organising and learnt from the successes and failures of the past.

Table 3   Training predictors of local power

	Unstandardized Coefficients		t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error		
(Constant)	-70.531	32.008	-2.204	.028
Overall rating of usefulness of training	.717	.086	8.290	.000
trained in enterprise bargaining	.755	.147	5.148	.000
trained in campaigning skills	.558	.144	3.883	.000
Year of last training	.042	.016	2.600	.009
R squared	.106			
adjusted R squared	.103			
F	39.097			.000
N	1328			

Figure 6:   Year delegate last received training and its effect on union power
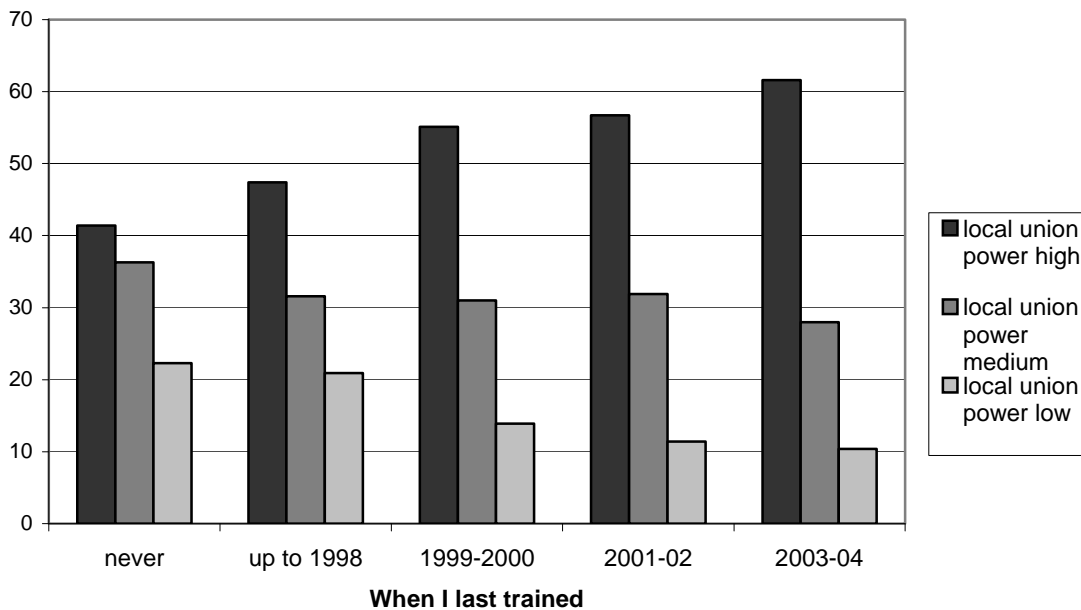
Conclusions

We found local member power to be significantly related to a number of factors associated with the organising agenda. Local power was stronger when unions were democratically organised, with power increasingly in the hands of members and delegates. It should be emphasised that democratic organisation did not refer to particular structures in place; rather it referred to a situation where delegates and members had influence in the decisions of the union, including those that directly affected them (such as the content of claims against the employer) and their influence was increasing. Local power was also stronger where delegates were confident, active, had clear roles and had strong networks of support at the workplace and with the union office, particularly through the organiser. Local power was stronger where unions promoted common

identity through inclusive policies than took seriously women's issues. Training indirectly helped strengthen local power, as did broad solidaristic orientations amongst delegates.

Local power was stronger where the employer (and the delegates' supervisor) were supportive of the union delegate's role, and where job security was not declining, but employer-related factors were only one eighth as important as union-related factors. The fate of unions is thus not in employers' hands: it is in unions' own hands.

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