

Activism Amongst Workplace Union Delegates

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Developing activism amongst workplace delegates is at the heart of the shift to an 'organising' approach and to union renewal in Australia. We undertook two surveys, of 825 and 102 workplace delegates in the Finance Sector Union, and found that training is particularly important by comparison with experience in explaining delegate activism. Building confidence is critical – more so than building self-perceived skills. Women delegates are less confident than men, but on most measures any lower activism by women is due to lower training and their workplace location. Successful recruitment depends not just on developing the confidence to ask new employees to join, it depends on developing confidence and skills in undertaking a broad range of 'organising' behaviours. Managerial hostility increases activism, and contact between organisers and delegates is important to maintaining activism and developing commitment.

INTRODUCTION

For varying periods up until the late 1990s, union movements in the anglophone countries of Australia, the United States, New Zealand and the United Kingdom have been enduring severe declines in both density and, to a lesser degree, membership. In Australia, density

halved between 1982 and 2001, falling to just under 25 per cent (ABS Catalogue Numbers 6310.0, 6325.0). In New Zealand, the decline was greater, and concentrated over a shorter period following the introduction of the *Employment Contracts Act* in 1991 (May et al, 2001). Density in the United States halved between 1960 and 1989 to around 15 per cent, with slower declines thereafter (Lange and Scruggs, 1998; Bureau of Labour Statistics, 2002). In the United Kingdom, density fell by over two-fifths between 1980 and 2000, to around 29 per cent (Visser, 1991; Sneade, 2000). Membership in each country fell as well, though not by as much as density, given growth in the workforce in each country. In each country, structural change in the labour market and, more significantly, anti-union governments and aggressive employer campaigns aimed at reducing or removing union influence or presence in the workplace have adversely affected union membership (Carruth and Disney, 1988; Farber, 1990; Freeman and Pelletier, 1990; Mason and Bain, 1993; Peetz, 1998; Rose and Chaison, 1985, 1992; Visser, 1991).

In most recent times, however, in each of these countries the decline in density has markedly moderated, and the membership decline has halted. In New Zealand, the year 2000 saw the first estimated increase in union density since the mid-1980s (May et al, 2001). In the United States, which has traditionally had lower density than the other three countries, density continues to fall slightly but in 2001 membership, at 16.3 million, had at least stabilised at the same level as in 2000 (Bureau of Labour Statistics, 2002). In the United Kingdom, estimated density fell by only 0.1 percentage point in both of 1999 and 2000, and membership rose, though falling slightly in 2001 (Sneade, 2000; National Statistics, 2002).

In Australia, estimated density continues to fall, but by small amounts – just 0.2 percentage points between August 2000 and August 2001. Estimated membership grew in both 2000 and 2001. The movements are small: as these estimates are drawn from surveys, neither the small increase in membership nor the small decrease in density in 2001 was statistically significant (ABS Catalogue Number 6310.0). Notably, the decline in aggregate union density in 2001 was entirely due to continuing shifts in employment from the public to the

private sector. Density in the public sector grew by 0.5 percentage points, and in the private sector by 0.1 points, but the share of the public sector in total employment fell from 19.9 per cent to 18.5 per cent. As density in the public sector (47.9%) is nearly two and a half times that in the private sector (19.2%), this shift accounted for 0.4 percentage points of the decline in density. That is, if the public sector had retained its share of total employment, overall density would have actually risen from 24.7 per cent to 24.9 per cent, and membership would have grown by 30 000. These figures represented the first time density in Australia had risen simultaneously in both the public and private sectors, albeit by a small amount in the private sector, since the survey data were first collected twenty years and twelve surveys ago. Indeed, public sector density had risen only once before in that period, and private sector density had never risen before. This is good news and bad news for unions. The bad news is that structural change continues to exert a strong downward influence on union density. The good news for unions is that it looks as if they have started to find means of reversing their decline.

One factor in the levelling off of unions' fortunes may have been changed public policy regimes – at least in the United Kingdom and New Zealand, where Labour governments have replaced conservative governments and put in place new policy frameworks. However, this does not explain the changing situation in Australia or the United States. Even in the United Kingdom and New Zealand, the explanation is incomplete, as the new policy frameworks fall short of what unions would have wanted. Arguably, these new frameworks do not so much throw away the conservative governments' anti-union laws as remove the rough edges from them to produce a slightly more level playing field. To understand union 'revival' - that is, their coming back to life, which is still somewhat short of a 'resurgence' - we need also to look at what unions themselves have been doing. In particular, there has been a consistent theme, albeit with uneven application, in the responses of the union movements in these Anglophone countries to the decline in density. That theme is a shift towards an 'organising' model. In New Zealand, the shift was started by the Service Workers Union, which faced catastrophic losses following the introduction of the *Employment*

Contracts Act 1991, and Finsec, the New Zealand equivalent of the Finance Sector Union (FSU) (Oxenbridge, 1998). It has since been taken up by the Council of Trade Unions, whose new leadership comprises officials from these unions. In the United Kingdom, the Trade Union Congress established an Organising Academy (Heery et al, 2000) while in Australia the ACTU established the Organising Works program which, in 1999, was merged with the remnants of the Trade Union Training Authority to create the ACTU Organising Centre. In the United States, the shift to organising has been driven more by individual unions than a peak body, though the United Association for Labor Education is also influential in promoting the organising model.

Our purpose in this article is not to undertake a comparative international study of union revival. However, the above data, in combination with various anecdotes of unions increasing their membership after adopting organising approaches (see Ellem, 2002), suggest that we are seeing the early signs that changes in union strategy and organising are starting to have an impact. Even if this is the case, there is still a long way to go. But it does make it worthwhile to examine some of the elements of organising and the relationships between them. Our purpose in this article is to examine one such element: activism amongst workplace union delegates. Initially, we need to locate this issue in the broader debate about organising and servicing models of unionism.

Traditionally, a 'servicing' model dominated union methods in recent decades in Australia and other Anglophone countries. Under this model, the union has a transactional relationship with its members: the union provides certain services in return for the payment of membership fees. These services may take the forms, for example, of representation in negotiations or advocacy, or the provision of various industrial or non-industrial benefits (ILO, 2001). The union is thus a 'third party' to the employment relationship. Paid union officials take responsibility for recruitment of members and for 'solving' members' problems. Accordingly, they also receive the 'blame' when the union fails to achieve members' objectives (TUTA, 1996). By contrast, in the organising model the union *is* the membership, so the relationship is not transactional but participatory or even 'transformational' whereby

'members change as they become involved in union activities to the point where they assume leadership roles, and in the process, transform union structures. The union, in turn, begins to better reflect its membership' (Oxenbridge, 1998: 76). The philosophy behind the organising model is that empowering workers will enable them to find solutions to their problems. The emphasis is on developing measures that will promote activism amongst members, including, critically, workplace delegates (TUTA, 1996). The Australian manifestation of the servicing model involved a particular reliance on industrial tribunals to grant improved pay and conditions to members on the basis of meritorious argument by union advocates – backed by industrial action, focused on industrial 'hot shops', to demonstrate the bargaining power of unions and their capacity to achieve gains in the field if tribunals did not arbitrate appropriately. Thus Australian unionism always embodied a combination of 'organising' and 'servicing' elements, as demonstrated militancy was always necessary to make arbitral methods work for unions. However, for many unions in many workplaces the servicing aspect dominated, and even in those workplaces where unions could arrange industrial action, 'militancy' did not always equate to 'organising' in the sense used here¹.

Though there is a common rhetoric surrounding the organising model in the Anglophone countries, it takes different forms in each country. In the United States, for example, it is based on the North American institutional framework of certification (and decertification) elections, requiring unions to form on a workplace-by-workplace basis (Walsh, 2002:3). It thus involved, amongst other things, innovative methods of directly involving members such as approaching potential members, for example through house visits. As an Australian organising model has developed it has taken on a different form. Indeed, Walsh (2002) demonstrates quite significant differences between organising techniques used by the Service Employees International Union amongst home care workers in the United States and those used by the Liquor, Hospitality and Miscellaneous Workers Union amongst similar workers in Australia. This reflects the very different institutional arrangements in the two countries.

At the core of the organising model, and of the more advanced interpretations of its applicability in Australia, is the issue of the development of workplace activism. It is this issue that we seek to explore in this paper – in particular, activism amongst workplace delegates. We examine several questions: How can activism be measured? What influences activism? What is the relative importance of experience and training? What is the relative importance of skill and confidence? How does contact with organisers influence activism? How influential is managerial support or hostility? Are women less activist than men? What is the impact of the workplace? Does it matter how delegates are recruited? What elements of skills and confidence matter the most? How does activism relate to methods of communication with members and awareness of union resources? What do activist delegates do? And, linking these issues together, what does it all mean?

METHOD

During 2000 we conducted a survey of workplace delegates (referred to as ‘representatives’ or ‘reps’) of the Finance Sector Union (FSU). The FSU covers employees in banking, insurance, credit unions, building societies and other finance institutions in Australia, but the bulk of its membership is in the four major banks. In August 2000 approximately 78 000 employees in the finance and insurance sectors were union members, a density level of 24.3 per cent, very close to the average union density across the economy as a whole of 24.7 per cent (ABS Cat No 6310.0). The industry has, however, been hit by prolonged periods of restructuring leading to large-scale closures of branches, the traditional heartland of the union. Hence, total union membership in 2000 was well below the 1994 figure of 129 000.

The survey sample was 3200 FSU workplace representatives. Some 825 (26%) completed replies were received. Amongst the respondents 73 per cent were female (reflecting the high female concentration in the banking and insurance industry); 59 per cent had been delegates for less than three years; and 69 per cent worked in retail banking (that is,

bank branches). The survey covered: demographics; whether respondents had been trained; their activity levels; their self-perceptions of strengths and weaknesses; their knowledge and understanding of member services; and their level of contact with other delegates, the union office and other union structures. We refer to this as the 'main' survey. There was also a 'follow-up survey' conducted in 2001, of 322 delegates who had been trained in the previous year, from whom 102 (33 per cent) completed surveys were received. Although much smaller and therefore of more limited statistical use, it sought some data that are pertinent to the research questions and so we refer to it on occasion. We analysed the data using both bivariate and multivariate techniques - ordinary least squares (OLS) regression for the continuous dependent variables and logistic regression for several dichotomous dependent variables.

VARIABLES

We measured activism through five correlated indices. The '*current activism*' index (CA) was based on a count of the range of activities performed by delegates. Respondents were asked if they had done any of the following within the previous two months (or since becoming a delegate): recruited someone; answered queries from members; participated in a reps meeting; sat in with a member in a dispute; handled a dispute for a member; gathered input from colleagues to feed back to the union; met with management about an issue/dispute; mobilised colleagues for some form of collective action; organised a workplace campaign; made a presentation to members; run a meeting of members; distributed union information or updates; or read awards or enterprise agreement. For each item that they ticked as having been performed within the previous two months a point was added to the CA score. CA thus measured the breadth of their activities, not their depth. Likewise, a '*long term activism*' index (LTA) was based on a count of the range of these items that they had undertaken since becoming a delegate.

Table 1 Correlation Matrix of Main Dependent Variables

	CA	LTA	INV-LO	INV-HI	EFF-NO
LTA index-done ever	.557***				
INV-LO low involvement	-.414***	-.486***			
INV-HI high involvement	.349***	.301***	-.303***		
EFF-NO no time on union activities	-.297***	-.528***	.340***	-.098**	
EFF-HI over half hour on union activities	.305***	.318***	-.391***	.342***	-.215***

Source: Main survey

- *** Correlation is significant at the 0.001 level (2-tailed).
- ** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).
- * Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).
- # Correlation is weakly significant (at the 0.1 level (2-tailed)).

A third behavioural measure was *effort* (EFF), measured by responses to a question on the average time spent per week on union activity. For analysis purposes, we created three categories of effort: those who replied ‘none (yet)’ (we identify this group through a dummy variable EFF-NO); those who said they spent some time but less than thirty minutes per week; and those who said they spent at least half an hour per week (identified in the dummy variable EFF-HI). A fourth measure was respondents’ perception of their *involvement* (INV) in union activities. This was recorded on a three-point scale, which we have analysed using two dichotomous variables. Possible responses were: very involved (INV-HI); quite involved; and not involved (INV-LO).

Each of these measures comes from the main survey. Our final measure comes from the follow-up survey. *Change in commitment* (CHCOM) is the self-perceived change in commitment in response to the question ‘how do you feel about being a rep’, with the possible answers being: more committed; the same as when I did training; and less committed. Because it is in the follow-up survey it is limited to delegates who have been trained.

A correlation matrix of the variables in the main survey is at Table 1. All correlations are significant and in the direction that would be

expected. The positive relationships between CHCOM and two of the other activism indicators are shown in Table 2.

Table 2 Relationships between CHCOM, INV and EFF

	CHCOM: How do you feel about being a rep?		
	more committed (%)	same as when you took the course (%)	Less committed(%)
<i>INV: how would you rate your current level of involvement?</i>			
▪ very involved	27	10	5
▪ quite involved	67	61	37
▪ not involved	7	29	58
Total	100	100	100
<i>EFF: time per week on union activities</i>			
▪ at least 30 minutes per week	43	24	5
▪ less than 30 minutes	57	76	90
▪ none yet	0	0	5
Total	100	100	100

Source: Follow-up survey

Confidence and self-perceived skills were both measured as indices of responses to several questions. *Confidence* was the sum of responses to a seven-item question asking ‘For each of the following activities, please tick the box that best represents how confident you feel about doing them?’, with responses measured on a four point scale from ‘very’ confident to ‘not at all’ confident. The items were: participating in a reps (delegates) meeting; answering queries from members; being involved in a workplace campaign; organising a workplace campaign; running a meeting of members; meeting with management about an issue or dispute; and approaching a colleague about becoming a member. *Skill* was the sum of responses to a six-item question asking ‘Please rate your skills in the following areas by ticking the appropriate box for each skill’. The items were: communication; campaigning; presentation; negotiation; problem solving; and facilitation. Responses were on a three-point scale: well developed; adequate; not very strong in this area.

Management attitudes were measured by the question: 'How would you categorise your manager's attitude to your rep activities?' Possible responses were: hostile; neutral; and supportive. Respondents were also asked 'how long have you been a rep' and 'who approached you about becoming a rep (possible responses were: my organiser asked me; I volunteered; a colleague suggested it; another FSU rep asked me; other, please specify).

RESULTS

As noted earlier, OLS regression was used to predict CA and LTA, while logistic regression was used to predict the discrete variables INV-LO, INV-HI, EFF-NO and EFF-HI. The results are shown in Table 3 and discussed below. For ease of exposition, key results are also presented in cross-tabulation or correlation format in subsequent tables.

What is the Relative Importance of Training and Experience in Explaining Activism?

We found that both training and experience correlated with activism, as shown in Table 4. (This table shows summary figures from cross-tabulations, indicating the proportions of particular types of respondents with particular activism scores. For example, the bottom right hand cell indicates that 28 per cent of trained delegates had 'high' effort scores, while just 8 per cent of untrained delegates had 'high' effort scores.) However, once training was controlled, even in a simple two-explanatory variable equation (not shown), experience had no impact on activism as measured by either: involvement (INV-LO, INV-HI); high-effort (EFF-HI); or the current activism index (CA). After controlling for training, experience still helped predict: long term activism (LA), because longer-serving delegates had more opportunities to do the things that comprise the index; and no-effort (EFF-NO), because it identified delegates who devoted no time 'yet' to union activities.

Table 3: Complete Regression Equations for Activism

Type of equation	OLS regression			Logistic regression			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
Equation number	CA	LTA	INV-LO	INV-HI	EFF-NO	EFF-HI	EFF-HI
Dependent variable	CA	LTA	INV-LO	INV-HI	EFF-NO	EFF-HI	EFF-HI
(constant)	.684 (.602)	-.186 (.607)	4.022*** (.653)	-16.114 (22.179)	1.803* (.819)	-3.29*** (.746)	-3.81*** (.731)
how long been a rep	.026 (.071)	.835*** (.072)	-.061 (.070)	.025 (.152)	-.597*** (.107)	.031 (.086)	.012 (.084)
trained	.715*** (.219)	1.905*** (.221)	-1.17*** (.204)	9.519 (22.133)	-1.53*** (.359)	.968*** (.272)	1.119*** (.265)
skills	-.009 (.041)	-.074# (.042)	.040 (.041)	-.048 (.106)	-.016 (.051)	.005 (.054)	.025 (.053)
confidence	.100*** (.030)	.243*** (.030)	-.226*** (.035)	.284*** (.084)	-.146*** (.037)	.169*** (.042)	.160*** (.041)
approached by organiser	.848** (.290)	.499# (.293)	-.568* (.283)	.906 (.589)	.071 (.356)	-.734# (.378)	-.638# (.367)
volunteered	.460* (.223)	.076 (.225)	.004 (.220)	.339 (.536)	-.469 (.298)	-.652* (.279)	-.588* (.272)
manager oppose	.875* (.366)	1.050** (.369)	-.692# (.370)	2.360*** (.602)	-.781 (.593)	1.053** (.393)	1.217*** (.380)
manager supportive	-.024 (.213)	.083 (.215)	-.309 (.209)	.140 (.509)	-.202 (.274)	.164 (.266)	.244 (.259)
female	.019 (.233)	.093 (.235)	.094 (.227)	.058 (.484)	.459 (.338)	-.342 (.269)	-.534* (.255)
retail	-.580* (.257)	-.709** (.260)	.215 (.252)	-.941# (.507)	-.099 (.353)	-1.02*** (.281)	
call centre	.157 (.472)	.385 (.476)	-.498 (.472)	-.127 (.689)	-.776 (.866)	-.380 (.465)	
adjusted r ² (OLS)/ Nagelkerke r ² (Logistic)	.103	.468	.332	.468	.377	.263	.230
N	604	604	595	595	600	600	604

Source: Main survey

*** significant at the 0.001 level (2-tailed).

** significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

weakly significant (at the 0.1 level (2-tailed)).

Table 4: Relationships Between Training, Experience and Activism: Proportions of Respondents with Indicated Activism Scores

	CA (high score – 3 or more items)	LTA (high score – 7 or more items)	INV -LO	INV -HI	EFF EFF-NO	EFF -HI
How long have you been a rep?						
▪ 3 years and over	40%**	61%***	45%**	6%	7%***	16%
▪ up to 2 years	35%	21%	79%	4%	28%	16%
Have you done reps training?						
▪ yes	48%***	58%***	59%***	12%***	5%***	28%***
▪ no	30%	23%	69%	0%	30%	8%

Source: Main survey

Note: CA and LTA: ‘high’ scores indicate ticks to 3 and 7 items respectively.

How to read this table: Numbers in cells indicate proportions of categories with relevant score in the column category, eg the bottom left hand cell indicates that 48 per cent of trained reps had a high score on CA, whereas only 30 per cent of untrained reps had a high score on CA.

*** Difference is significant at the 0.001 level (chi-squared test).

** Difference is significant at the 0.01 level (chi-squared test).

* Difference is significant at the 0.05 level (chi-squared test).

Difference is weakly significant at the 0.1 level (chi-squared test).

Why Does Training Matter?

Training matters in no small part because it enhances self-perceived skills and confidence. For example, 45 per cent of trained reps scored highly on the skills index, compared to 29 per cent of untrained reps. Experience influences confidence though it does not enhance self-perceived skills – hence, while 38 per cent of reps with three or more years experience scored highly on the skills index, this was also the case for 33 per cent of reps with less than three years experience. In turn, skills and confidence are associated with activism. For example, 59 per cent of reps with high confidence scores also scored highly on the long-term activism index, compared with 16 per cent of reps with

low confidence scores. Some 48 per cent of reps with high skills scores also scored highly on the long-term activism index, compared with 29 per cent of reps with low skills scores.

As shown in Table 3, once confidence is held constant, skills levels do not independently enhance involvement or effort. That is, if skill was increased without any increase in confidence, there was no increase in activism. Again, the non-significance of self-perceived skills persists even in equations (not shown) with just two explanatory variables: skills and confidence. But the influence of training generally goes beyond confidence and skills, as shown again in Table 3. Only in equation 4 (INV-HI) is there no independent effect from training after confidence and skills are controlled. One possible explanation is that training also motivates participants, perhaps by making them more aware of the importance of union activism, and/or by making them more aware of the impact that unionism and activism can have.

Does it Matter how Delegates are Recruited?

Data were collected on who approached respondents about becoming a delegate. On some measures, organisers seem to do slightly better at picking activist delegates than did other workplace delegates. Delegates recruited by organisers were more activist in the current activism index (and slightly more activist in an involvement index). The explanation is unclear: it may indicate that organisers are better trained in recognising the skills required or that many incumbent delegates are retiring and looking for a successor without giving as high priority to suitability as an organiser might. The situation is clouded by a change of sign when effort is examined: this is weakly but negatively related to approach by an organiser in equation 6. Those who volunteered scored more highly in the CA and LTA indices. But again there was a change of sign with effort: they were significantly less likely to be in the 'high effort' category. (In simple correlations, relationships with EFF-HI are non-significant.) In trying to make sense of these results, we should bear in mind the meaning of statistical significance: if something is significant at the 5 per cent level, there is

one chance in twenty that the relationship that appears to be indicated does not actually exist – or to put it another way, one in twenty such ‘statistically significant’ findings are ‘false positives’. Further research using other datasets is needed to better understand the relationship between delegate recruitment methods and activism. Being elected (tested in a separate question) did not seem to make any difference to any activism measures. (Note the question was not testing whether elections could be held for the position, merely whether the position was contested or the successful delegate ‘accepted the nomination’.)

How does Contact with Organisers Influence Activism?

Turning for the moment to the follow-up survey, changed commitment (CHCOM) was strongly and positively related to the existence of post-training contact with an organiser. This is shown in Table 5. Changes in commitment were also positively related to the frequency of post-training contact with an organiser. As we would expect, then, contact was also linked to involvement (Table 7) and effort. Post-training contact with other delegates also had a positive sign (but was weaker, and hence non-significant, due to the small N in the follow-up survey).

Table 5: Post-Training Organiser Contact and Change in Commitment

	<i>Have you had contact with your organiser since you attended the course?</i>	
	yes (%)	no (%)
How do you feel about being a rep?		
▪ more committed	38	11
▪ same as when you took the course	45	44
▪ less committed	16	44
Total	100	100
Perception of involvement		
▪ very involved	19	0
▪ quite involved	64	33
▪ not involved	17	67
Total	100	100

Source: Follow-up survey

How Influential is Managerial Support or Hostility?

Managerial hostility was associated with higher levels of effort, current activism and long-term activism. For example, 30 per cent of reps with hostile managers reported high effort, compared to 13 per cent of those with neutral managers and 17 per cent of those with supportive managers. Similarly, 19 per cent of reps with hostile managers reported high involvement, compared to 3 per cent of those with neutral managers and 4 per cent of those with supportive managers. It appears that bad managers create issues that lead to union activism, while they seek to oppose unionism. On the other hand, managerial support did not influence any measures of activism. That is, activism is not retarded by managerial support for unions.

In the follow-up survey, managerial support or hostility did not influence change in commitment. Also in that survey, only 4 per cent of trained delegates cited their manager as a main obstacle to greater involvement, whereas 20 per cent said they would like to feel more confident and 17 per cent said they needed more support from the union. Management matters, but it is not as significant a factor as others.

How do Workplace Issues Influence Commitment?

In the follow-up survey, delegates who had issues they were working to resolve at the time of the survey were more likely to report post-training increases, and less likely to report post-training decreases, in commitment. Amongst those who were working to resolve issues, falls in commitment were more common when the organiser was not working with the rep, though this relationship was non-significant due to the small N. Likewise increased commitment was possibly more (albeit non-significantly) common where the organiser and rep had developed a strategy to win.

How do Workplace Types Differ?

In the sample there were three distinct workplace types: (1) retail branches, the traditional bulwark of union density, but the part of the industry which is in employment decline; (2) head offices and other workplaces (for example, loan processing centres); and (3) call centres (the smallest sector in terms of delegate representation in the survey).

Distinctive patterns of behaviour were observable in these workplace types. Category 2 – the head offices and other workplaces – were located in the middle in most respects (other than having the lowest density of female employment). Retail branches, the dominant sector, were characterised by: the highest female employment (80%); low management opposition (6%) to union activities; high management support (39%), with many branch managers being former branch employees; low union training (35%); and low activism (even after controlling for training, opposition, etc) – just 2 per cent scored high on involvement, 70 per cent scored low on involvement, and only 11 per cent scored high on effort.

Call centres, which also had high female employment (70%), though not as high as the branches, were by contrast characterised by: high employer opposition (32%); low management support (22%); high union training (67%); and high activism (though the differences between call centres and the head office/other workplace group were non-significant after control for training, opposition, and other variables in Table 3). In call centres, as many as 16 per cent of delegates scored high on involvement, 37 per cent scored low (barely half the retail branch figure), and 34 per cent scored high on effort.

How does Gender Influence Activism?

Female delegates were less likely than male delegates to have undertaken reps training (39% v 48%). They were also more likely to score themselves lower on skills and confidence than male delegates, even after controlling for training and experience. They were less likely to have volunteered to be a rep (34% as opposed to 50%) but no less likely to have been chosen by an organiser. Being concentrated in retail

branches, they were also in less frequent contact with organisers and more likely to perceive management as being supportive of their activities.

In bivariate analysis, female delegates were less activist on several but not all measures. They were less activist on the long-term activism index (but not after controlling for training). They were more likely to see themselves as 'not involved' (67% for women as opposed to 58% for men) and as having spent no time 'yet' on union activities (21% as opposed to 14%). However, they were no less activist on the current activism index.

These patterns again reflect the workplace patterns of female employment. All gender differences on activism disappeared in regressions once factors such as training, workplace type and confidence were included in equations (see Table 3). In equations 6 and 7 it is apparent that women's lower score on INV-HI is due to their concentration in retail banking. When confidence and skills were excluded from the equations depicted in Table 3, gender differences on CA, LTA and INV were still non-significant, though there were weakly significant differences on EFF. Women delegates *may* have spent less time on union activities than men (presumably a domestic labour effect) but they were no less active or involved.

What Elements of Skills and Confidence Matter the Most?

The 'confidence issue' that was consistently most useful in predicting activism was confidence in participating in a delegates meeting. Other important areas of confidence were: answering queries from members and being involved in a workplace campaign (Table 6). Confidence in 'approaching a colleague about becoming a member' was, as one would expect, strongly associated with whether a delegate had actually recruited anyone in the preceding two months ($r=0.19^{***}$) or recruited someone since becoming a delegate ($r=0.32^{***}$). However, it was not actually the strongest predictor of recruitment behaviour. Instead, confidence in participating in a reps meeting was, by a small margin, the strongest predictor of both these recruitment measures ($r=0.20^{***}$ and 0.32^{***} respectively). This suggests that successful recruitment depends

on more than having the confidence to walk up to a new employee and asking them to join, it depends on confidence in undertaking a broader set of 'organising' behaviours.

Table 6 Correlations Between Elements of Confidence and Activism

Confidence in:	CA	LTA	INV-LO	INV-HI	EFF-NO	EFF-HI
▪ Participating in a reps meeting	.267***	.471***	-.394***	.227***	-.346***	.259***
▪ Answering queries from members	.226***	.415***	-.362***	.192***	-.361***	.229***
▪ Being involved in a workplace campaign	.228***	.373***	-.340***	.195***	-.293***	.229***
▪ Organising a workplace campaign	.193***	.316***	-.308***	.181***	-.234***	.200***
▪ Running a meeting of members	.214***	.317***	-.268***	.163***	-.289***	.192***
▪ Meeting with management about an issue or dispute	.135***	.308***	-.237***	.162***	-.204***	.191***
▪ Approaching a colleague about becoming a member	.168***	.252***	-.243***	.098**	.256***	.147***
Skills in:						
▪ Campaigning	.118***	.177***	-.233***	.142***	-.159***	.172***
▪ Communication	.113***	.158***	-.163***	.125***	-.162***	.181***
▪ Presentation	.135***	.157***	-.207***	.141***	-.130***	.134***
▪ Problem solving	.092**	.140***	-.183***	.125***	-.122***	.145***
▪ Negotiation	.099**	.148***	-.139***	.080*	-.130***	.150***
▪ Facilitation	.090***	.138***	-.136***	.098**	-.150***	.162***

Source: Main survey

Items listed in order of their average ranking in each column. Organising a workplace campaign and running a meeting had equal average rankings.

*** Correlation is significant at the 0.001 level (2-tailed).

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Correlation is weakly significant (at the 0.1 level (2-tailed)).

The skills that correlated most strongly with activism were skills in campaigning and communication. Skills in presentation also ranked surprisingly high (Table 6). While it may be expected that skills in communication should be best at predicting successful recruitment, the best predictors of the two measures of recruitment behaviour were skills in negotiation ($r=0.14^{***}$ with recruitment in preceding two months) and in campaigning ($r=0.12^{**}$ with recruitment since becoming a delegate). This again suggests the importance of a range of organising skills in successful recruitment. As mentioned, though, confidence is more important than skills, and most of the skills measures correlated less strongly with the activism and recruitment indicators than did each of the confidence measures.

How does Activism Relate to Methods of Communication with Members?

Activism was associated with direct rather than indirect contact with members. It was also higher where delegates had the authority to use a noticeboard and advertise the fact that they were a union delegate. Delegates who handed out union information/updates personally were more activist than those who did not. Delegates who used notice boards, and delegates who had a sign on their desk, were also noticeably more active than those who did not. By contrast, inactive delegates were more likely to put union information in a file that was passed around. These things were closely associated with confidence: delegates with noticeboards and signs, and those who handed out information personally, had significantly higher confidence than those who did not. Passing a file around had a non-significant, negative relationship with confidence.

What Activities do High-Effort Delegates Do?

Using correlation analysis we can see which activities increase most in frequency as delegates' scores on activism indices increase – that is, what are the differences in the activities of high-effort and other

Table 7: Relationships Between Effort, Involvement and Specific Activities

	Proportion who have 'ever' done this	Correlation of 'have ever done' this with EFF-HI	Correlation of 'have ever done' this with INV-LO	Correlation of 'have ever done' this with INV-HI	Correlation of 'have done this in previous 2 months' with INV-HI
Distributed union information or updates in workplace	84	.176***	-.273***	.098**	.152***
Answered queries from members	73	.294***	-.305***	.109**	.232***
look through award	70	.219***	-.273***	.145***	.244***
Gathered input from colleagues to feedback to the Union	65	.149***	-.341***	.126***	.186***
Recruited someone to the Union	54	.246***	-.349***	.182***	.283***
Participated in a Reps meeting	46	.239***	-.300***	.173***	.254***
Made a presentation to members	34	.123***	-.301***	.165***	.138***
Mobilised colleagues for some form of collective action (eg signing petitions/going on strike)	31	.090**	-.284***	.205***	.160***
Run a meeting of members	29	.078*	-.269***	.156***	.109**
met with management about an issue/dispute	28	.141***	-.305***	.212***	.206***
Handled a dispute for a member	18	.187***	-.277***	.252***	.321***
Sat in with a member in a dispute	15	.097**	-.228***	.274***	.182***
Organised a workplace campaign	9	.083*	-.221***	.323***	.125***

Source: Main survey

*** Correlation is significant at the 0.001 level (2-tailed).

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Correlation is weakly significant (at the 0.1 level (2-tailed)).

delegates (Table 7). Generally speaking, the activities that correlated most strongly with high-effort scores were also the most common tasks (that is, those that have the highest overall frequency counts)². 'Distributing union information' and 'gathering input from colleagues' are items that have high frequency counts but do not rank so highly in the correlations with EFF-HI, suggesting either that they are not time-consuming activities or that most delegates do these things anyway regardless of how much time they put into union activities. By contrast, 'handling a dispute' is relatively infrequent (the third least common activity) but has a relatively high correlation with EFF-HI, suggesting that when dispute handling takes place it is very time consuming. As we would expect, high-effort delegates are more likely to do each activity, but especially answering queries, recruitment, and attending delegates' meetings. The first of these three (answering queries) is also the second most common activity anyway. However, recruitment and attending delegates' meetings rank only fifth and sixth on the frequency count, indicating that these represent real areas of difference between high effort and low effort delegates.

What Makes Delegates Think They are Involved?

For some items, involvement was better predicted by whether the respondent had 'ever' undertaken these activities (that is, since becoming a union rep). For others, involvement was better predicted by whether the respondent had done these activities 'in the last two months'. The correlations of activities with the involvement measures are shown in Table 7. The patterns are quite different to those shown in relation to effort. Activities that ranked low in terms of the frequency with which delegates do them (and which therefore tended to have relatively little influence on perceptions of time spent) had the strongest influence on perceptions of involvement. Thus the correlation between the rank of an item on the frequency count (in terms of having ever engaged in the activity) and its ranking in terms of influence on perceived high involvement was $r=-0.92$. That is, in general, a sense of involvement was best increased when delegates

became involved in some activities that were relatively uncommon for delegates. In particular, a strong correlate of perceptions of high involvement was having ever organised a workplace campaign, which had little influence on *average* time spent on union activity. Other strong correlates were having ever sat with a member in a dispute, having handled a dispute in the past two months, having met with management about an issue or dispute – and slightly against the pattern discussed above, having recruited someone in the past two months. Low self-perceived involvement was most strongly linked to not having recruited anyone since becoming a rep.

CONCLUSIONS

Union membership and density have declined markedly in countries such as Australia that have faced aggressive anti-union employer and government behaviour, and structural labour market change. However, the rate of decline in union membership and density has slowed or even halted where unions have started to move towards workplace-focused ‘organising’ approaches (though this is not necessarily the only factor). Developing activism amongst workplace delegates is at the heart of the shift to an ‘organising’ approach and, it would appear, to union renewal in Australia. We should always be cautious in generalising from a sample of delegates in one particular union. Nonetheless, the relationships between variables are illuminating, and several important points concerning activism emerge from this study. One is the importance of training. Training is particularly important by comparison with experience in shaping activism. Generally, the only reason that delegates with longer experience as a delegate are more active was that they had had more opportunities to participate in delegate training.

Second, building confidence is critical – more so than building self-perceived skills. Activism was higher where delegates had the confidence to have direct rather than indirect contact with members, and the confidence associated with having the authority to use a noticeboard and advertise the fact that they were a union delegate.

Third, training in turn is a powerful influence on confidence, though training also has other benefits for activism – perhaps (thought this is yet to be tested) through increasing awareness of the importance and potential gains from activism.

Fourth, workplace characteristics matter. While how this works will vary between unions, what we found in this case was that activism was lower in decentralised branches than in larger centralised sites, despite the branches' high density levels.

Fifth, women delegates are less confident than men and have lower assessments of their own skill levels, but on most measures any lower activism by women is due to lower training and their workplace location. After controlling for training and location there is a hint that women may spend less time on delegate activities, but they are no less active on any other measures.

Sixth, successful recruitment depends not just on developing the confidence to walk up to a new employee and asking them to join, it depends on developing confidence and skills in undertaking a broad range of 'organising' behaviours.

Seventh, delegates who put a lot of time into union activity tend to be those engaged in recruitment and having meetings with other delegates. They are also the delegates who get involved in dispute handling. However, a sense of involvement was best increased when delegates became involved in some activities which were relatively uncommon for delegates – such as organising a workplace campaign and (more commonly) dispute handling. Engagement in recruitment was also associated with a sense of involvement in the union.

Eighth, contact between organisers and delegates is crucial to maintaining activism and developing commitment.

Finally, management attitudes matter, but what unions do is what matters most in terms of shaping activism. Managerial hostility influences (increases) activism: bad management creates issues that lead to activism, while it seeks to oppose unionism. Managerial supportiveness made no difference: activism is not retarded by managerial support for unions. But it is what unions do in relation to training and developing confidence amongst delegates that is most

important in creating an activist workplace delegate culture that is conducive to effective organising.

ENDNOTES

1. For discussion of why arbitrators may make accommodative decisions reflecting the prevailing balance of industrial power, see Dabscheck (1980) and Romeyn (1980). For empirical evidence on the impact on wage structures, see Rowe (1982), Norris (1980, 1983) and Brown et al (1978).
2. The correlation between an item's ranking on EFF-HI and its ranking in the frequency count (in terms of whether delegates have 'ever' done this activity) is $r=.65$, and indeed the correlation between its ranking on EFF-LO and its ranking in the overall frequency count is $r=.93$.

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