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# Rethinking Unionism in a Changing World of Work, Family and Community Life

Barbara Pocock

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### Résumé de l'article

Cet article considère l'état du syndicalisme aujourd'hui et avance que dans la mise en oeuvre d'une stratégie pour un rapport de force favorable aux travailleurs et pour une représentation efficace de ces derniers, les syndicats se sont focalisés – sans surprise – sur les espaces de base occupés par les travailleurs : le marché du travail et les lieux de travail, mettant en oeuvre un répertoire particulier d'outils. Tandis que les conditions sociales, au-delà du milieu de travail à proprement parler, ont toujours compté et ont parfois été reconnus par les militants et les théoriciens, ces espaces sont souvent restés sous-évalués dans l'analyse et les approches stratégiques. L'article met en avant le fait qu'un contexte social approprié inclut les trois « microsystèmes » du travail, de la vie familiale et communautaire, leurs « mésosystèmes » à l'intersection, et le « macrosystème » plus large composé par la législation du travail, les normes sociales et les cultures de genres dans lesquelles ils sont situés. Ensemble, ceux-ci construisent un système qui affecte les manières dont les syndicats peuvent développer le rapport de force des travailleurs, les outils disponibles, et les questions qui concernent les travailleurs. Les changements cruciaux qui s'opèrent depuis le milieu des années 70 dans les trois domaines interagissant que sont la vie de travail, familiale et communautaire, de beaucoup de pays industrialisés ont changé le système duquel les travailleurs tirent leur force collective. Ceci est illustré par l'expérience australienne. La preuve est faite par les formes changeantes d'emploi, la transformation de la structure professionnelle de l'emploi, et les changements opérés au sein des ménages et des communautés dans lesquels les travailleurs australiens vivent. La mobilité croissante des travailleurs et les transitions professionnelles, familiales et communautaires rendent les véhicules traditionnels du rapport syndical dépassés – comme le modèle collectif basé sur l'occupation d'un emploi permanent ou sur l'affiliation professionnelle. De tels changements réclament de nouvelles formes de collectivisation des droits et créent de nouvelles priorités pour les travailleurs dans leurs négociations et leurs conditions de travail. Ils ont également des implications sur les outils – la négociation collective, les droits ou la sécurité sociale – qui amélioreront le plus efficacement la condition des travailleurs.

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# Rethinking Unionism in a Changing World of Work, Family and Community Life

Barbara Pocock

**This article considers the state of unionism today and argues that in strategizing for more workers' power and effective worker representation, unions have – unsurprisingly – focussed upon the primary domain that workers occupy: the labour market and workplaces, applying a particular repertoire of tools. While social conditions beyond the terrain of work have always mattered and sometimes been recognized by activists and theorists, these are often under-attended in analysis and strategy. Significant changes in the three interacting domains of work, household and community life since the mid-1970s in many industrialized countries have changed the circumstances in which workers' create collective power, and this is empirically illustrated by the Australian case. Understanding the three domains of work, home and community and the ways they interact and are changing is important to efforts to improve workers' lives. The article ends with consideration of implications for unions' industrial objectives, the tools applied and the way they build power.**

**KEYWORDS: unions, work, households, community, women, Australia**

Increasing the power of workers to affect the terms and conditions under which they work and live has become more difficult in industrialized countries as traditional forms of union representation have declined. Neo-liberal pro-market economic and social policies, intensified international competition in product markets and slower growth in many OECD countries have – for the most part – diminished structures that allow workers to significantly improve their wages and conditions, contest managerial authority or improve the social security arrangements that allow them to decommodify their labour – to care, learn, holiday or rest.

This article addresses this challenge. Its main argument is in favour of a more socially-embedded analysis of the challenge and its remedies, by enlarging analysis from the workplace and labour market, to the larger set of intersecting work, household and community contexts.

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The article proceeds in four parts. First I consider the state of unionism today and argue that in strategizing for more workers' power and effective worker representation, unions have (not surprisingly) focussed upon the primary domain that workers occupy: the labour market and workplaces. They have applied a particular repertoire of industrial tools in this context. However, changes in the labour market now challenge their efficacy. Second I consider how union action and the practices of employee representation are made in a socially "embedded" context, amidst long-lived employment and work institutions and that this shapes and constrains strategy. While social conditions beyond the terrain of work have always mattered and sometimes been recognized by activists and theorists, I argue that they are under-attended in diagnosing the current challenges that face unions and applying strategies and tactics to increase workers' power. Third I argue that since the mid-1970s, there have been significant changes in the larger social terrain within which work and its institutions, including union representation, are embedded. I refer to the Australian case to illustrate this empirically, and argue for the importance of better understanding the larger context of workers' representation, particularly in the three intersecting domains of work, household and community. The traditional domains of union preoccupation – workplaces and the labour market – are being shaped in new ways by settings in households and community life more broadly (and vice versa), and by the ways in which they mutually interact.

While recognition of the socially embedded context of unionism and its practices is not new, understanding the changing context and interaction of this larger social context is now very important to the crafting of appropriate strategies to improve workers' lives and the tactics used in their realization. Thus the article ends with a fourth section that considers the implications of the current work, home and community contexts for unions' agendas, tools and power.

### **The Current Context: The Traditional Focus and Tools of Unionism, and Union Decline**

The struggle for power and voice for working people in industrialized economies has traditionally occurred through the vehicle of trade unionism and aimed to improve the terms of paid work. In Beatrice and Sidney Webb's conception a union "is a continuous association of wage earners for the purpose of maintaining or improving the conditions of their employment" (1894: 1). These conditions include the "pure and simple" union objectives of better wages, hours and leave provisions but extend to the important issues of work organization and managerial relations (Flanders, 1970; Braverman, 1974): that is, "the processes of discipline and control established by the employer in order to secure and monitor work performance" (Hyman, 2001: 14). While the tools applied to creating

power and voice have varied in time and place, ranging across workplace, industry and national levels and embracing a range of mechanisms, their focussed site has been the employment relationship and the places where labour power is exercised: workplaces and the labour market.

While different stylized types of union movements can be distinguished, this focus is consistent. For example, Hyman's stylized "geography" of European unionism (2001) distinguishes unions in relation to the three poles of market, class and society, with "market" unions more oriented to narrow representation of the "bread and butter" interests of workers, "social" unions (including many with a Catholic-religious orientation) functioning more as vehicles for integrating workers' interests in "socially just" economic processes, and "class" unions oriented more as "schools of war" for socialism and more radical social change. Despite this recognizable diversity of types, most unions, national peak organizations and larger labour movements have focussed upon improving the economic interests of members – whether through improvements in their income or social supports (like publicly available education, health or social security).

### **Employee Representation and Union Power Today**

Changes in the forms and structure of employment now greatly complicate the task of collectivizing workers and mobilizing their voice. Declines in union density and union power throughout the industrialized world since the mid-seventies have been pervasive and consistent (OECD, 2011; Visser, 2011), making forms and patterns of worker representation a major focus of union activism and academic research across the globe (Stewart, 2005; Haiven, Lévesque and Roby, 2006). This interest extends to developing countries where workers are increasingly engaged in paid labour, and seeking voice about their terms and conditions of employment (Cooke and Wood, 2011).

In many industrialized countries, increasing proportions of workers are precarious, including many part-time and/or casual workers<sup>1</sup> and those engaged as "independent contractors" (Evans and Gibb, 2009: 20-32; Buchanan *et al.*, 2009). Given their form of employment, many of these workers are difficult to recruit by conventional union organizing methods (Evans and Gibb, 2009: 55) and their employment issues are often different from those affecting workers who are more permanent and secure.

The industry and occupational composition of the workforce has also changed substantively. Across the OECD the services sector now accounts for over 70 percent of all employment (OECD, 2005: 2) and the share of managerial and professional jobs is increasing in a wide range of nations, polarizing the workforce structure. The traditional crucibles of early unionism in many countries – factories, mines, ships and construction – are no longer the heartlands of union potential and growth.

Unionization amongst these growing groups of workers (managers and professionals at the top of the labour market and precarious workers, part-timers, service sector workers towards the bottom) is relatively low. It is not surprising, then, that union density has declined in almost all OECD countries since the mid-seventies, reflecting these structural shifts. In Australia, for example, it fell from just over 50 per cent in the mid-seventies to only 18.3 per cent in 2010 (Visser, 2011; ABS, 2010) perfectly illustrating Crouch's "parabola" of working class power over the 20<sup>th</sup> Century (Crouch, 2004: 5).

The gender composition of unionists (and workers) has also changed since the mid-1970s so that union density amongst women has now overtaken that of men in the UK and Australia and approaches it in the US (Visser, 2011). In Australia in 2010, union density amongst women was for the first time higher than amongst men (18.7 per cent compared to 17.9 per cent) and women made up just under half of all union members (48.0 per cent) (ABS, 2010). Bronfenbrenner has made the point that, in the US, women have made up the majority of new union members for at least the last twenty years and that women in the expanding professional technical occupations "offer the greatest growth potential" to US union growth at present (2005: 1).

While in many countries union movements still exert considerable industrial and political power, they offer direct voice and representation to smaller proportions of workers in almost all industrialized countries, and the occupations, forms of employment and gender composition of these workers has changed. Beyond the influence of unions in setting minimum conditions, they are of diminishing relevance in a day to day sense to the growing numbers of precarious, self-employed and young workers, many of whom now have very limited cultural or familial experience of unionism and are fearful about joining unions (Evans and Gibb, 2009: 11). There is, in new generations of workers, no easy expectation that they can be drawn in to union membership confident of their job security, and no easy appeal to union affiliation based on an intergenerational memory of the merits and class solidarities of union membership.

Structural changes in the labour market greatly complicate the task of union leaders. Their strategic response to the decline in union density has focussed on changing recruitment and the internal practices of unions, involving the reallocation of all forms of union resources (human, financial, political, discursive), changing the methods and mechanics of recruitment and mobilization, and improving internal management, strategy and leadership of unions (GURN, 2011; Frege and Kelly, 2004; Crosby, 2005). However, the question remains whether this will be enough to reverse workers' loss of power, and what else might help to strengthen workers' power resources and voice.

## Unions' Tools and Power Sources

Over the last century, the tools for achieving improvements in workers' circumstances have varied, but most have involved the assembly of workers – whether through collectivization in a workplace, industry or labour market or through collectivized political party representation or affiliation – to build and mobilize power to affect the economics of the wage-effort bargain in workers' favour, or to contest managerial or state power.

In applying their collective power, workers and their unions have traditionally drawn on particular tools to improve the circumstances of workers: four can be delineated in broad terms, and their efficacy depends on particular local workplace and labour market circumstances (as well as family and community conditions, as I argue below). First amongst these tools is collective bargaining at workplace or industry level, built on union representation and organization at the workplace or industry level. This has been a primary means of improving working conditions and enabling worker representation, including union capacity to withdraw labour and/or monopolize its supply.

A second set of tools is provided through substantive rights (that is rights established at law that set particular standards of employment like minimum wages, leave, and working time). These tools arise from power created through collective organization or political partnership with parliamentary entities, often accompanied by the discursive framing and projection of workers' interests through public campaigning.

A third set of mechanisms relate to procedural rights that create a platform from which workers can contest managerial prerogative. These include processes that enable collective organization, protection from unsafe or unhealthy work, rights to flexible working conditions or consultation, and rights to contest discrimination, sexual harassment or unfair dismissal.

A fourth set of tools is provided through social security and the opportunities it creates to decommodify oneself from the sale of one's labour power, and to socially reproduce: to withdraw from paid work and be sustained by other forms of support like unemployment benefits, workers' compensation, disability support, paid parental leave and access to education and health services independent of an employment relationship.

## Employee Representation, Social Embeddedness and Path Dependency

Each of these sets of tools can be a means to improve workers' circumstances in a range of different contexts. However, their settings, and the balance between them, vary in time and place and reflect established pathways and institutions

and the changing nature of class forces and social norms. Unions do not exist or make their strategies in a social or historical vacuum. The practices of employee representation are made in the context of embedded systems and deep historical sediment, some of which is negative, some of which is pregnant with possibility. Determining new strategies to increase employee representation is in many ways dependent upon the habits of the past: responses are path dependent. They are, however, far from “path-determined” (Crouch and Farrell, 2004). New paths are made possible by crisis and the perception of a need to change, “institutional borrowing”, revitalizing strategies out of past repertoires, mobilization of dormant resources and the discovery of “hidden alternatives” (Crouch and Farrell, 2004). A more perceptive analysis of current circumstances is also likely to help.

The existing social framework constrains choices and system evolution. Different forms of capitalism and national union “types” reflect this social “embeddedness” (Hyman, 2001: 4, 32). In this sense, it is not new to suggest that social context beyond the workplace and labour market matters to union strategy and possibility. For example, referring to Giddens (1973) and Touraine (1987), Hyman notes that the “relationship between work and non-work-identities” is important to class coherence and that workers’ identities and class affiliations are increasingly diverse and affected by diverse “cultural and social pursuits” which fracture class identities: “the spatial location and social organization of work, residence, consumption and sociability have become highly differentiated” he comments, affecting “traditional proletarian” union identities (2001: 34).

However, the social settings of unionism do more than fracture class identity: they affect the core capabilities and aspirations of workers and which tools and strategies of unionism and employee voice will best advance workers’ interests. The benefits that collectivization through work-based activity and unionization can confer on workers are fundamentally shaped by the relationship between work and non-work activities – in the ways that workplaces, households and larger communities and their intersection, affect workers’ lives at work and beyond.

This analytical approach is relevant to many industrial events and habits, though it is not often fully explored – because household and community settings are frequently taken for granted. For example, the use of the strike weapon has usually relied upon particular household and community settings that allow workers (most commonly men) to withdraw their labour and find other sources of support. Similarly work organization around a full-time male breadwinner for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, relied on a female wife and carer at home, sustaining the household and community beyond work (Williams, 2000, 2010). Union practice has always occurred in the context of three domains – workplace, household and community – though most union strategy and analysis has focussed on the

first, leaving the latter two domains out of analytic view. The significance of this occlusion grows when what is “taken for granted” in the hidden spheres of home and community changes, and when the intersections between the three spheres become unsettled and conflicted.

In sum, what goes on in each of these domains and at their intersections shapes how workers build power and what tools will work best to improve their lives – whether through traditional collective bargaining, substantive rights, procedural rights or social security arrangements. In changing work, home and community circumstances, increasing workers’ power and improving their conditions may require different settings of traditional tools and reliance upon new sources of worker power in workplace, industry or other institutions: this requires analysis of non-work activities, and their industrial and social implications.

### **A Changing Work, Home and Community Context**

Changes in the form of employment and occupational structures like those described above, are thus only part of the challenge of increasing employee representation and improving workers’ circumstances. Significant change in the ways that working life intersects with life beyond the workplace for workers and their families since the mid-1970s raises other important challenges for employee representation. These challenges are especially potent when the proportion of women (and thus working carers) in the labour market increases. Addressing these hinges upon a deeper understanding of the context of workers’ lives beyond the workplace, especially in their homes and in their communities.

The form and strength of worker representation are shaped not only by the contingent balance of class forces and the material processes of production at work, but also by workers’ social context and the practices of social reproduction, including the family and community arrangements within which workers are located. And just as class forces are never settled but in constant flux, neither is this social and reproductive context. This context reflects the balance of gender, racial/ethnic and other forces, including the role of the state. Thus, to understand the sources of union power and potential forms of employee representation, we need to understand both the shape of class forces and their historical legacy (and their impacts at workplace and labour market level on the processes of material production, regulation and the distribution of profits), and the processes and places of social reproduction especially in the family and the community contexts within which workers live.

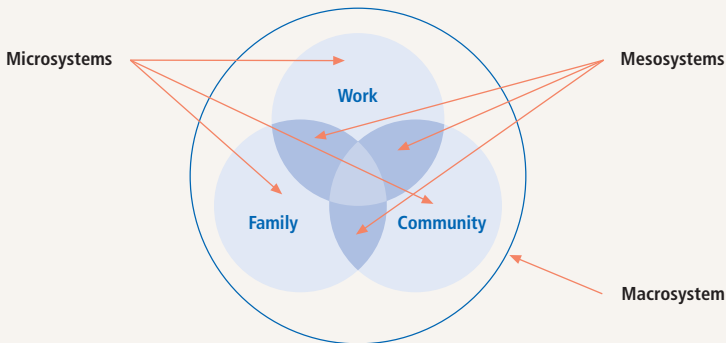
In considering the social context of employees, it is useful to distinguish the three domains of work, family (or household) and community. While these three domains can overlap (for example, work is sometimes done at home; community relationships are often constructed at work), it is useful to distinguish them



analytically to highlight the effect of different configurations between the three. Building on Bronfenbrenner's (1979) analysis of the "socio-ecological" systems that shape human development and Voydanoff's (2007) use of this framework to explore work and family interactions and the demands and resources they create, I and my colleagues have proposed a model of work, household and community to illuminate the social domains shaping employment outcomes (Pocock, Williams and Skinner, 2011). This model (set out in figure 1) is useful in analyzing employment issues related to unionism and employee representation in particular.

**FIGURE 1**

**An Ecological Systems Model of Work, Family and Community**



Each domain, and each intersection, creates demands and resources

Note: based on Voydanoff's (2007) adaptation of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems model.

It distinguishes the three "microsystems" of work, family and community, remembering that "work" is a multi-level domain that includes the workplace, the enterprise, the industry and the labour market. Beyond what happens in the three domains of work, family and community, the nature of interaction between them (in their four intersecting "mesosystems"), also affects the circumstances of workers. Together these domains and their interaction, as well as the larger macrosystem within which they are located, affect work-related possibilities including the scope and nature of employee representation, the appropriate tools to address workers' needs and the priorities of workers.

To illustrate the model, in a society where female participation in the sphere of paid work is increasing significantly, and a traditionally gendered division of labour prevails, the demands arising for women in the family microsystem might mean that a large number seek part-time working hours, flexible working time or sometimes want to work from home. This is likely to affect the labour process, household life and the nature of community relationships, which in turn affect the nature and possibilities for worker organization and employee voice. As many

unionists know, traditional union organization – like face-to-face meetings and contact with a union delegate or official – will not work well for many such workers. New forms of employee representation and union practice are called for or, in their absence, unionism declines. The relevant analytical context includes the domain of work, as well as circumstances in household/family and community life. In such contexts, with more female workers making up the workforce and their strong orientation to both worker and carer identities and tasks, unions that agitate for secure flexible work or for secure careers that enable transitions between work and care, are likely to appeal, while strategies that rely on the withdrawal of labour or antagonism to the boss at work have less salience. When work is one of several pressing priorities, disciplined union action at work is harder to engineer.

In the model in figure 1, possibilities for employee voice are constructed by the domains of work, family and community, the way they interact or fit together, and the larger “macrosystem” in which they are located (which includes, for example, the nature of the gender order, social norms, the role and stance of the state, and social security arrangements). Separately and together this “socio-ecological system” constructs the balance of demands and resources facing individuals, and this balance affects the possibilities for their representation, voice and power in a paid work context.

### **Evidence from the Australian Case**

Australian experience helps illustrate the nature of work, household and community change since the mid-1970s, and its implications for collective organization. In outlining this experience I draw on Australian Bureau of Statistics survey data and the results of several additional studies conducted at the Centre for Work + Life since 2007. The latter include four annual surveys (2007-2010) ( $n = 2800$  approximately each year) of representative samples of Australian workers about how work fits with the rest of life (see Pocock, Skinner and Pisaniello, 2010 for methodological detail about these surveys and an overview of four years of findings). I also draw on a study of how workers and residents in ten Australian suburbs are “putting together” their work, home and communities in four traditional suburbs, four adjacent master planned communities and two inner-urban harbour-side master planned communities, spread across four Australian cities (Adelaide, Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane); this includes analysis of interviews, survey and focus group responses from 961 residents, workers, business people, service providers and teenagers (see Williams, Pocock and Bridge, 2009 for methodological detail and a summary of findings).

Considering first the nature of changes in the domain of work, Australia well illustrates the changes in forms of employment and occupational structure

underway since the mid-seventies in many OECD countries. For example, the occupational shift from manual, “blue collar” work to professional and service sector work has been profound. Employment in manufacturing – a crucible of Australian unionism in the post-war years – now makes up less than ten percent of the Australian workforce; on the other hand, the service sector accounts for three-quarters of all employment with significant growth in managerial and professional jobs (ABS, 2011b). The “wage-effort” bargain in many of these jobs is far from clearly determined: interviews with workers in these occupations reveal jobs that are increasingly unbounded in time or space, with long or “unsocial” hours of work performed utilizing new technologies in various locations (at work, at home, in public spaces or while commuting between them). This “unbounding” of the time and place of work for some, is a significant challenge to regulation of the work-effort bargain, especially given evidence of powerful cultures valorizing long hours in many professional and managerial jobs (Campbell, 2002).

Since the mid-1970s women’s share of paid employment has risen steadily in Australia while men’s has declined so that almost one half of all Australian workers in 2011 are female. This shift has been accompanied by significant changes in the form of employment with growing employment insecurity and a rise in the proportion of paid workers who are simultaneously carers. There has been strong growth in part-time work: thirty percent of all employed Australians were part-time in 2011 (ABS, 2011a), giving it one of the highest shares of part-time work in the OECD (OECD, 2010).

Almost a quarter of all employees (23 percent) were casual in 2010 (defined by the Australian Bureau of Statistics as lacking paid vacation and sick leave), making the shift to more precarious employment one of the major structural changes in the labour market over recent decades (ABS, 2010b). While part-time hours are often preferred by women and almost one in two Australian women now works part-time, the quality of their jobs is very variable: for example 55 percent of part-time jobs in Australia are casual and many lack access to training and career opportunities (Campbell, 2004). While Australian women – like women in many industrialized countries – have moved into paid work in large numbers, the structure of their working lives is very different from that of the male breadwinner archetype of the post-war years. Our studies of the perspectives of Australian citizens in diverse communities confirm women’s strong orientation to household and community life, alongside their attachment to work. However, many women are very busy putting these spheres together: working mothers are particularly stretched for time and frequently fatigued (Skinner, Parvazian and Dorrian, 2010). Part-time working hours offer little relief for these time pressures (Pocock, Skinner and Pisaniello, 2010).

At the other end of the hours spectrum, full-time hours in Australia are increasing. While Australian stonemasons led the world on shorter hours in the mid-1800s (Turner, 1987), and the country has a reputation for long holidays and a laid back working culture, this reputation is no longer deserved, with the lengthening of hours placing us 6<sup>th</sup> out of 28 OECD countries in terms of the average hours of full-time workers (OECD, 2011). According to recent surveys, 40 per cent of men (and 15 per cent of women) now work 45 hours a week or more: far from the “laid back” nation of our mythology (Pocock, Skinner and Pisaniello, 2010). Working life is also a place of change over the life cycle: just under a quarter of Australian employees change their employer each year (ABS, 2010b), making the notion of settled workplace – or union – relationships and identities, beyond the experience of many. The above work-related factors illustrate the nature of change in the work “microsystem”, which sits alongside and intersects with changes in the social domains of family and community.

Turning to the domains of family and community life, we can see how changes in these spheres also affect the nature of employee interest formation and representation. Australian households are increasingly populated by workers who make many transitions around work, care and home location over their lives, and who are time poor (Pocock, Skinner and Williams, 2012). This affects the nature of the community and extended family within which working households live. It also means that time for non-essential activities like union activism, political or religious activity or volunteering is squeezed.

Most important is the changing shape of the household. In Australia the traditional breadwinner household model, with a male earner complemented by a partner working unpaid at home – dominant in the 1950s – is now outnumbered by dual earner households (Hayes *et al.*, 2011). Most households where children are present have two earners, and their average commuting time is increasing, with two householders spending many hours each week on average in work-related commuting (Flood and Barbato, 2005). At the same time the proportion of sole-parent households has increased in Australia, most of them led by mothers, many of whom have jobs. These are amongst the busiest households of all, and their growth in number reflects higher rates of divorce since the 1960s. The rate of divorce in Australia spiked significantly in 1976 with new divorce laws, and has remained higher than in the preceding decades ever since. The most recent estimates suggest that around one-third of all marriages in Australia will end in divorce (ABS, 2010c): this has significant implications for participation in paid work, the structure of households and the nature of community life.

Australian households also experience many geographic transitions: between the 2001 and 2006 Census, more than a third of Australians changed their address. Many did so locally, within their city or region. However, almost two

million moved to a new city or region, and many changed their communities (and jobs) when they changed address. This mobility can be associated with better opportunities, but it also often means the need to establish new communities and the loss of extended family support, as our study of ten Australian suburbs revealed (Williams, Pocock and Bridge, 2009).

A time squeeze is also evident in this study. This squeeze is driven by the combined effects of women's increasing participation in paid work, the growth in dual earner and sole-parent (mother) households, increased household time given to commuting, and the expansive nature of greedy professional and managerial work. While many Australian women work less than full-time hours, they are often rushed and pressed for time: sixty percent of all working women and almost half of men (47.2 per cent) said they are often, or almost always, rushed and pressed for time in our 2010 survey and 70 percent of working mothers felt this way (Pocock, Skinner and Pisaniello, 2010: 20). This reflects in part the unchanging distribution of unpaid domestic work in households which remains disproportionately done by women (at twice the level of men) and shows only small changes since 1992 (ABS, 2006).

These changes explain a stronger employee interest in working time as a site of industrial bargaining. For example, recent surveys of workers' preferences between getting more money (say a 4 per cent pay increase) or more time (an equivalent two week increase in paid leave), suggest that the majority of workers (57 percent) would prefer more time over more money, and the size of this majority increased between 2002 and 2010. Beyond more leave, many workers are also interested in more say over the quantum, intensity and configuration of working time over the day, week, year and life-cycle (Pocock, Skinner and Pisaniello, 2010).

Further, in the Australian case, greater diversity in working time preferences and arrangements makes the formation of shared interests very challenging. Applying standard forms of employee voice to an increasingly non-standard workplace and workforce is difficult, especially in a political and legislative environment which is increasingly hostile to unionism and to advancing substantive or procedural workplace rights (Peetz, 2006).

The removal of a full-time home-maker and carer from so many households changes the time economy of the family and community in profound ways – both in the home and in broader society – affecting the possibilities of employee representation along with many other aspects of work engagement. Living in a dual earner or sole-parent household changes the needs and preoccupations of workers in their workplaces (Pocock, 2003; Williams, Skinner and Pocock, 2008). It also means that the archetypical union representative of the mid-1970s, with time to attend meetings and devote himself to union activities, is in short

supply. Time-poor householders who need flexible working conditions and new working time and work location arrangements, including the chance to work “non-standard” hours and/or sometimes work from home, require new forms of employee representation and they seek employment and social conditions that are different from those sought in a male-breadwinning community. Above all, these new forms of representation need to minimize the time demands associated with representation as workers, and they need to address the changing priorities and identities of such workers.

The greater work-, house- and relationship-mobility of workers, whether to a new job, a new family or a new city, means that systems of employee representation cannot rely on long job, workplace or community tenure. Further, working some distance from home as many Australian workers do, makes it more difficult to establish bonds of affiliation that reach across both work and home. As Hyman (2001: 34) observes, the notion of a working class suburb where stable relationships link individuals both in their workplaces and streets, is increasingly contradicted in Australia by shorter job, home and community tenure. In this more spatially disparate life of multiple work, home and community transitions, interest formation and collective power is less easily aggregated. The potential for these is based in a much wider range of activities – in family and community life, virtual connection, and social activities that are not consistently aligned with class, place or employment status and circumstances.

### Implications for Unions

In 500BC Sun Tzu famously said that “Strategy without tactics is the slowest route to victory. Tactics without strategy is the noise before defeat.” If unions today – in the face of enormous challenges – are to apply effective strategies, rather than hum with mere tactics applied with increasing panic, then they need a strong analytical diagnosis of their circumstances to inform strategy. This includes a better understanding not only of the changing circumstances of work, but also of workers’ lives beyond work where so much of their time and activities are based. For unions today, analysis of the changing nature of work, home and community and the nature of their interactions is vital to inform that strategy, as well as the application of an appropriate repertoire of tactics and tools. The pull of past paths and the familiarity of the historic repertoire of union activities, make this a challenge in many unions, especially given the “institutional stickiness” (Crouch and Farrell, 2004: 5) that characterizes democratically structured organizations where changing direction is not a matter of CEO decree.

Many of the above work, family and community changes, illustrated in the Australian context, create new priorities for workers in their bargaining and industrial conditions. They also have implications for which tools – collective bargaining,

substantive and procedural statutory rights or social security – will most effectively improve workers' circumstances. Finally they make some of the traditional vehicles of union power outmoded – like collectivizing through a longstanding job or craft affiliation. I now turn to the implications of the above findings for each of these issues: firstly for industrial goals, secondly for the tools that unions use to improve workers' lives, and thirdly for the sources of union power.

### **Implications for Industrial Goals**

Changing occupational profiles, gender, time pressures and work/care burdens make issues around the configuration, control and length of working time of growing concern in countries like Australia. A changing industrial agenda is also implied by a changing family/community context. Building union voice around urban planning, transport and the creation of more livable communities is of increasing interest to workers who spend longer periods of time commuting between their home, job and essential services like shops and childcare. There is also increased reliance on state services like childcare to supplement provision by private householders who are rushed and pressed for time.

While bargaining over time is by no means new to the union agenda and wages continue to matter a great deal, being able to put together the times of work, family life and social life more broadly is becoming more critical as they overlap and conflict. Preferred weekly and daily hours change for workers over the life-course, and a standard working week will not satisfy many. Setting and enforcing new diverse "standards" is critical here, so that non-standard hours do not mean inferior conditions. Beyond the quantum of hours, many workers now seek day-to-day and week-to-week flexibility so that they can attend to unpredictable non-work demands. They need reasonable workloads to enable practical access to such conditions.

Given the close relationship that has evolved between non-standard hours and insecure or poorer quality work – affecting up to a quarter of all Australian workers for example – job security and the quality of part-time work represents an important industrial goal.

Long hours of work cast a long, negative shadow in the reconfigured work, home and community settings. Australian women, for example, describe how men's long hours turn them into sole-parents (Pocock, 2003); their partners' over-attachment to long hours marginalizes their own work attachment, and with it their life-time earnings. In this light, long hours are a poor fit with more demanding and complex work, home and community contexts. Preventing long hours thus presents an increasingly important – and elusive – union goal.

Given the weaker spatial and temporal boundaries around the growing proportions of managerial and professional jobs, improving the time-limits around

such work, managing their technologies, and enabling safe and well-regulated and remunerated work from home are also likely to be industrial issues of increasing significance.

Finally, questions of leave assume greater importance in the changing lives of workers. Many forms of paid leave enable the reconciliation of the demands of the three spheres of work, home and community: paid parental leave, education leave, leave for volunteering activities, paid holidays and the opportunity to care for oneself or sick or disabled family or community members are all important. Improvements in paid leave provision are highly valued by busy working carers in particular.

### **Implications for the Right Tools to Improve Workers' Circumstances**

Particular tools of employee protection are more helpful than others in this changing work, home and community context. The traditional tools of collectivization and union activism at the workplace are harder to mobilize amidst a population that increasingly moves between jobs, and in and out of work around care, education, relationship and housing circumstances, and for whom the bonds of work-based affiliation are disrupted by short or insecure job tenure, or are simply overwhelmed by other affiliations and demands – like family needs, community obligations, long commutes or the need to organize one's own social reproduction. Long-term job tenure gives rise to a power resource that is undermined by busy work, home and community intersections, and worker mobility. As Beatrice and Sidney Webb recognized a long time ago, weaker workers are often best protected by statutory standards which, while hard to achieve, satisfy "more perfectly the Trade Union aspirations of permanence and universality than any other method" (1897: 255). In a world where workers make more transitions, have less job-based stability and shoulder more caring responsibilities, collective organizations and bargaining are harder to achieve. In this context, substantive statutory rights are of great significance: for example, a relatively high minimum wage, effective controls on working time, access to statutory paid holidays and parental leave, protection from exploitative contracts, and rights to education and training. Having a strong (and enforced) set of workplace minima is vitally important in a world where workers are busy, move more and have strong competing priorities that claim their energy and attention, and where union density is low. They have particular salience where collective bargaining and workplace organization is weak.

Similarly, effective procedural rights that give employees flexibility around working time (for example, a meaningful right to request and receive flexible working conditions), and to contest unfair treatment, harassment or discrimination, are important in this changing work, family and community environment.



Finally, social security arrangements and public services are also vital in a world of frequent worker transitions and complex work, family and community life. The opportunity to step back from paid work and rely on social security or employer or state-funded paid leave to care for family or to participate in education or community life, are essential in the context of current work, family and community arrangements, as is access to quality, accessible and affordable childcare, health and education services. While unemployed benefits or income when recovering from a workplace injury has long been a priority of the union movement, other forms of income support for workers who are sole-parents or carers are of increasing importance in a labour market of change and mobility, where workers are very likely to be simultaneously employees, carers and active family and community citizens – or moving between these – for much of their working lives.

A rebalancing of the traditional repertoire of union tools is suggested by the above analysis, with less weight on the instruments of workplace collective bargaining and more upon those that can ensure substantive or procedural rights or social security, independent of workplace-based power resources.

### **Implications for Building Union Power**

Improved statutory and procedural rights and a strong social security system will not be easily won. Advances on control of working time, for example, have always been opposed by employers in every country. Thus, there is no cause for easy optimism that the above industrial priorities or application of a reweighted range of union tools can be easily accomplished, especially in times of recession. Their achievement depends, as ever, on the mobilization of workers' power and the balance of economic and social forces.

The vehicles for this mobilization, however, need to be remade in the context of a changing regime of social reproduction at home and in community life. Decent work standards have always been vigorously contested amidst the changing balance of class forces. On the workers' side, this contest has always been led by unions that now represent and collect resources from a declining proportion of workers. New kinds of union leadership, practices and institutions are essential, speaking to new communities of interest and reflecting workers' circumstances and preoccupations both at work and beyond. Whether enough unions can rise above their historical sediment, customs and affinities and adopt new forms of employee representation while articulating new industrial priorities that takes up the issues of time, home and community more centrally, remains to be seen.

This mobilization must leverage off the changing gender and occupational balance of the workforce and the positive potential arising from workers' embeddedness in a larger community of interests. Women's positive affinity to unions in many countries creates positive opportunities, but only where unions

speak to the work, care and larger life concerns of women and can adapt ways of working to women's time poverty and work-life pressure (Cobble, 1993; Pocock, 1997; Bronfenbrenner, 2005). Challenges also arise in relation to managerial and professional workers and their work and non-work circumstances. The traditional worker-boss dyad – where the worker and boss are assumed in opposition – may not have the same discursive hold amongst those who see themselves as professionals or who work in close association with supervisors and managers, identifying – at least in part – with their mission. For example, women who share the same time-poverty or maternal pressures as their supervisors may find more commonality here, than difference arising from their worker/boss relationship.

As many unions now recognize, building a sense of collectivism amongst a workforce whose composition is changing relies on new mechanisms of solidarity-making that link to practices and rights around, for example, autonomy, control, education, ethical practice and concern for quality of service or client outcomes. Strategies which link collectivization to opportunity for skill acquisition, professional development, career identities – which some nursing, teaching and engineering unions aim to achieve – are examples of adaption to this new context. This sense of affiliation may need to be beyond the workplace and current job, to a larger occupation or service. Further, it is likely to be fruitful to build workers' power more through discursive means and campaigning around principles of fair treatment and justice both at work and beyond, than through withdrawal of labour and more traditional union tools. This orientation benefits from coalition with non-union membership-based organizations, as well as the traditional structures of unions (Tattersall, 2010).

An example is provided by the 2007 Australian "Your rights at work" campaign, which framed a national community-based campaign to protect labour standards around rights for all – not just union members – and especially to protect the disadvantaged and historical social norms. This approach enlarged the activist base and built worker power (Muir, 2008). This orientation to justice beyond the "job", to justice and fair treatment in the larger labour market and society increased Australian workers' voice and power in the context of the changing world of work in which unions now exist.

Union practices need to deal with the time poverty and family/community complexity that many workers now live amidst. Time pressures and the need for flexibility are not new to workers, but they are much more widely felt with growth in dual earner and sole parent families. Most workers now cannot rely on someone else to run their households and reproduce their children, extended families or communities while they "do" unionism. Indeed many must now attend to their own social production – their own food, clothing, housing and health – not just that of their significant others.

The fact that a declining proportion of workers are members of trade unions also raises issues about the appropriateness of the basic vehicle of employee voice: union membership in the workplace. With four in five workers in a country like Australia no longer included in this form of representation, and no prospect of a significant rise in this ratio, it is important to grow worker voice in the workplace – as many countries have done – through, for example, occupational health and safety, education and training and bargaining structures that give non-union members a voice. Movements that aspire to speak for all working people cannot afford to “other” many of the most vulnerable workers: the young, women, immigrant and some of the lowest paid. This set of preoccupations lends itself to coalitions and community-based approaches that bring together the interests of citizens as workers, householders and community members on issues like transport, care, housing, and quality of service provision, as well as the quality of jobs. Scope for forms of worker organization that move away from (or complement) individual union membership (and payment of union dues), to forms of collectivization around a broader set of work and social rights, protections and norms might be considered – rights that link to the changing circumstances of citizens over the life-cycle, whether workers, mothers, carers or students, for example. Whatever the vehicle for moving forward, some radical thinking about institutional options is called for by the current crisis of union membership in the industrialized world.

There is also a role for research in considering these possibilities, investigating new forms of worker-citizen representation and their critical enablers in the changing context of work, family and community circumstances. Giving central consideration to both the balance of class forces in the labour market and the nature of the larger social context is important to this inquiry.

## Notes

- 1 There are of course many forms of precarious employment. While part-time workers are not always precarious, in many countries their terms of employment are inferior to full-time workers and part-time work is more precarious than full-time work. See Vosko *et al.*, 2009 for a discussion of this relationship.

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## SUMMARY

### Rethinking Unionism in a Changing World of Work, Family and Community Life

This article considers the state of unionism today and argues that in strategizing for more workers' power and effective worker representation, unions have – unsurprisingly – focussed upon the primary domain that workers occupy: the labour market and workplaces, applying a particular repertoire of tools. While social conditions beyond the terrain of work have always mattered and sometimes been recognized by activists and theorists, these are often under-attended in analysis and strategy. The article argues that the relevant social context includes the three "microsystems" of work, household and community life, their intersecting "mesosystems" and the larger "macrosystem" of labour law, social norms and gender cultures within which they are located. Together these construct a system which affects the ways in which unions can build power, the tools available to them, and the industrial issues that matter to workers.

Significant changes in the three interacting domains of work, household and community life since the mid-1970s in many industrialized countries have changed the system within which workers' create collective power. This is illustrated by evidence drawn from the Australian experience, and the changing forms and occupational structure of employment, and the changing shape of households and communities within which Australian workers live. Workers' increasing mobility and work, family and community transitions make some of the traditional vehicles of union power outmoded – like collectivizing through a longstanding job or craft affiliation. Such changes call for new forms of collectivization and create new priorities for workers in their bargaining and industrial conditions. They also have implications for the tools – collective bargaining, substantive and procedural statutory rights or social security – that will most effectively improve workers' circumstances.

KEYWORDS: unions, work, households, community, women, Australia

## RÉSUMÉ

### Repenser le syndicalisme dans un monde où la vie de travail, la vie de famille et la vie communautaire changent

Cet article considère l'état du syndicalisme aujourd'hui et avance que dans la mise en œuvre d'une stratégie pour un rapport de force favorable aux travailleurs et pour une représentation efficace de ces derniers, les syndicats se sont focalisés – sans surprise – sur les espaces de base occupés par les travailleurs : le marché du travail et les lieux de travail, mettant en œuvre un répertoire particulier d'outils. Tandis que les conditions sociales, au-delà du milieu de travail à proprement parler, ont toujours compté et ont parfois été reconnus par les militants et les théoriciens, ces espaces sont souvent restés sous-évalués dans l'analyse et les approches stratégiques. L'article met en avant le fait qu'un contexte social approprié inclut les trois « microsystèmes » du travail, de la vie familiale et communautaire, leurs « mésosystèmes » à l'intersection, et le « macrosystème » plus large composé par la législation du travail, les normes sociales et les cultures de genres dans lesquelles ils sont situés. Ensemble, ceux-ci construisent un système qui affecte les manières dont les syndicats peuvent développer le rapport de force des travailleurs, les outils disponibles, et les questions qui concernent les travailleurs.

Les changements cruciaux qui s'opèrent depuis le milieu des années 70 dans les trois domaines interagissant que sont la vie de travail, familiale et communautaire, de beaucoup de pays industrialisés ont changé le système duquel les travailleurs tirent leur force collective. Ceci est illustré par l'expérience australienne. La preuve est faite par les formes changeantes d'emploi, la transformation de la structure professionnelle de l'emploi, et les changements opérés au sein des ménages et des communautés dans lesquels les travailleurs australiens vivent. La mobilité croissante des travailleurs et les transitions professionnelles, familiales et communautaires rendent les véhicules traditionnels du rapport syndical dépassés – comme le modèle collectif basé sur l'occupation d'un emploi permanent ou sur l'affiliation professionnelle. De tels changements réclament de nouvelles formes de collectivisation des droits et créent de nouvelles priorités pour les travailleurs dans leurs négociations et leurs conditions de travail. Ils ont également des implications sur les outils – la négociation collective, les droits ou la sécurité sociale – qui amélioreront le plus efficacement la condition des travailleurs.

MOTS-CLÉS : syndicats, travail, ménages, communauté, femmes, Australie

## RESUMEN

### Repensar el sindicalismo en medio de los cambios que acontecen en mundo del trabajo y de vida familiar y comunitaria

En este artículo considera el estado actual del sindicalismo y argumenta que con el desarrollo de estrategias para reforzar el poder de los trabajadores y la representación efectiva de los trabajadores, los sindicatos – como era de esperarse – se han centrado en el campo principal que ocupan los trabajadores: el mercado de trabajo y los lugares de trabajo, la aplicación de un repertorio particular de instrumentos. A pesar que las condiciones sociales siempre han sido importantes más allá del terreno de trabajo y que a veces han sido reconocidas por los activistas y los teóricos, estas son a menudo menos consideradas en el análisis y la estrategia. El artículo sostiene que el contexto social de referencia incluye los tres “microsistemas” de vida laboral, familiar y comunitaria, sus “meso-sistemas” de intersección y el más amplio “macro-sistema” de la legislación laboral, normas sociales y las culturas de género dentro del cual se encuentran. En conjunto, estos constituyen un sistema que afecta las formas en que los sindicatos pueden construir el poder, los instrumentos disponibles para ello y los problemas laborales que preocupan a los trabajadores.

Los cambios significativos en los tres ámbitos de la interacción de la vida laboral, familiar y comunitaria que acontecen desde mediados de 1970 en muchos países industrializados, han cambiado el sistema dentro del cual se crea el poder colectivo de los trabajadores. Esto se ilustra con las pruebas derivadas de la experiencia australiana, y las formas cambiantes y la estructura ocupacional del empleo, y la forma cambiante de los hogares y comunidades en las que viven los trabajadores australianos. La creciente movilidad de los trabajadores y las transiciones de trabajo, de familia y de comunidad hacen que algunos de los vehículos tradicionales de poder sindical aparezcan obsoletos como por ejemplo la colectivización mediante un trabajo de larga data o la afiliación por oficios. Estos cambios requieren nuevas formas de la colectivización y la creación de nuevas prioridades para los trabajadores en su negociación y condiciones laborales. Ellos también tienen implicaciones para los instrumentos – la negociación colectiva, los derechos legales de fondo y de procedimiento o la seguridad social – que mejoraran con mayor eficacia, la situación de los trabajadores.

PALABRAS CLAVES: sindicatos, trabajo, familias, comunidad, mujeres, Australia