

A new species of shark: towards direct unionism

Godfrey Moase

"What can we do today so that tomorrow we can do what we are unable to do today?" Paulo Freire

Introduction

We have reached a moment in the technological development of human society where we are limited not by our resources but by our imaginations. We will be judged as a generation, as a civilisation, on whether we have the collective capacity to think our way through the iron cage in which we have encased ourselves. If we don't, no other generation for thousands of years will have the same opportunity.

Those who are lucky enough to inhabit the top of the iron cage imagine it's not in their interest to escape it. For this reason we cannot expect that some civic-minded oligarch will absolve us of the responsibility to act. The question I'm posing is therefore directed towards the rest of us prisoners. What can we do to escape, and to build a society founded upon equality, solidarity, sustainability and true freedom? I want to sketch out the structure of an organisation that can achieve this – a union for the 21st century.

The rest of this article may read like an autopsy of a dead body. In a way it is. Unions are like sharks; when they stop moving they die. The union equivalent of a shark's perpetual motion is members acting together around issues. The rules that control and limit unions prevent union power critically interfering with the employer community's desire to structure the workplace in such a manner that it produces as much profit as possible. It is time for the union movement to devise a new organisational structure which can challenge the status quo and effect real change.

The crisis of representative unionism

Before I go into the details of the new structure some context is necessary. We can divide each and every union in the 20th century into one of two structures: representative and insurrectional. A representative union (RU) is one where the officials of that union act as the advisers and representatives of the rank-and-file membership, through contract negotiations and other legal proceedings. This model has brought real benefits to generations of working people (such as the weekend or the minimum wage) but it's fundamentally limited in what it can achieve. Although we shouldn't knock higher wages, a greater say in the workplace and progressive social policy, this model of union is forever vulnerable and any gains it achieves are conditional and reversible. An insurrectional union (IU) is one that seeks to use the economic and physical power of the working class to transform the dominant mode of production. Its

horizons may be vast, but given the existential threat it poses to the dominant order it is subject to direct and violent repression. The Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) and Poland's Solidarity (pre-1981) are probably the most notable examples of IUs.

The history of the union movement's interaction with the state can be summed up as a carrot and stick two-step in response to growing workers' power. Insurrectional unions have been repressed, their leaders killed or jailed. Representative unions have been given conditional legal recognition that (at least partially) legitimises their role within the wider economy. This conditional recognition has allowed RUs to build up a significant pool of resources: financial resources, offices and staff (although this is still very little when compared to corporations). Representative unions require these resources in order to go about their daily functions. But these resources are also the RU's Achilles' Heel: take it away and they cease to function. It's not really the laws that regulate industrial action that are used to tame representative unions – it's the threat of having those resources taken away as a result of transgressing the state-sanctioned limits of industrial action.

The union is the membership, and the membership is the union. We cannot begin to organisationally make sense of a fighting union without starting from this point. At the apex of representative unionism membership differed both quantitatively and qualitatively. Membership was widespread and contributions were relatively low when compared with today's rates. However, under this model the amount of time and effort put in to make an objective difference in the lives of each worker was a lot lower. Australian unions could prosper with a strong network of workplace delegates and a few officials who would make the necessary adjustments to the centralised wage and condition structures to bring in new members and enterprises.

Overall union membership declined at its fastest rates not in the Australian Accords of the 1980s,¹ but with the shift to decentralised bargaining in the 1990s. Why? Because this necessitated a qualitative shift in the way unions had to operate in order to successfully "deliver" for members. It was no longer a matter of changing a few documents here and there centrally, with unofficial industrial action delivering extra gains for a few hot shops. The game had changed. Under an enterprise-based bargaining system instead of a single document governing an entire industry, we now had a system where some large operators in a single industry had 10 to 20 different enterprise agreements for the same or similar functions spread across different worksites. A greater and greater amount of time, effort and resources had to go into delivering gains for fewer workers. This is why "labour market deregulation" has coincided with an expansion in the length of the various industrial relations acts and accompanying regulations. This bipartisan policy shift greatly increased the operating costs for unions. It makes no fundamental long-term sense for the

¹ Although there is a strong argument to make that this may have contributed to overall rank and file disillusionment and disempowerment.

Australian Labor Party as a reduction in union numbers (and subsequently union power) erodes its financial support base. Nevertheless, this is the situation in which we find ourselves in Australia, and it leaves party activists with two options: (1) finalise the corporatisation of the party by turning it into an out-post of the US Democrats (i.e. wholly dependent on corporate funding but with a system of "open primaries" to substitute for an effective industrial and political membership base); or (2) admit error and take on the structural issues again.

The main method the Australian union movement has used to overcome this decline in funding over the last generation has been to increase membership contributions to between 1% – 1.5% of their members' average incomes. Overall, this increase in membership contributions has been justified and largely tolerated by the remaining core of the union movement on two grounds. Firstly, because as the wage system has decentralised, the gap in wages and conditions between organised and non-organised worksites has risen to around a 20% differential. Secondly the very same shift has seen more resources required to achieve this gain. From experience, I can tell you that negotiating an agreement for five people can be nearly as challenging as negotiating an agreement for 5,000 people. This has led us to a union movement workplace structure today, though, where there is a clear binary between union and non-union, membership and non-membership. Membership becomes a significant financial commitment for a worker, but this commitment makes a huge difference to their lives in the right circumstances. This binary, I will argue, will need to be shifted to a membership continuum.

Moreover, there has been a qualitative shift in the employment relationship over the last 30 years. The disappearance of the "job for life" has placed severe pressure on the RU structure. This notion of the "job for life" is based on a combination of mythologising the past and the real life collective experience of the Australian working class. Nevertheless the power and history of this idea is quite real and important when considering the future of the union movement.

In reality of course, there was never such a thing as the job for life. Exploitation and labour market turnover (both voluntary and forced) was a part of life in the Post-War Golden Age. Overall statistics for both the Australian and British labour markets suggest that there has only been a slight decrease in average lengths of tenure since the 1980s (Baldwin et al. 2009). However, like most global statistics, this slight decrease tends to hide rather than reveal what is actually going on. It does not take into account, for example, that there has been a marked increase in job tenure for women over this period as more women have entered the workforce and some have obtained privileged professional or managerial positions within the labour market. Furthermore, there has been a divergence in the labour market between those already occupying permanent positions of privilege and those just starting out (or restarting) who are going through a series of temporary/casual positions (Gregg and Wadsworth 1995).

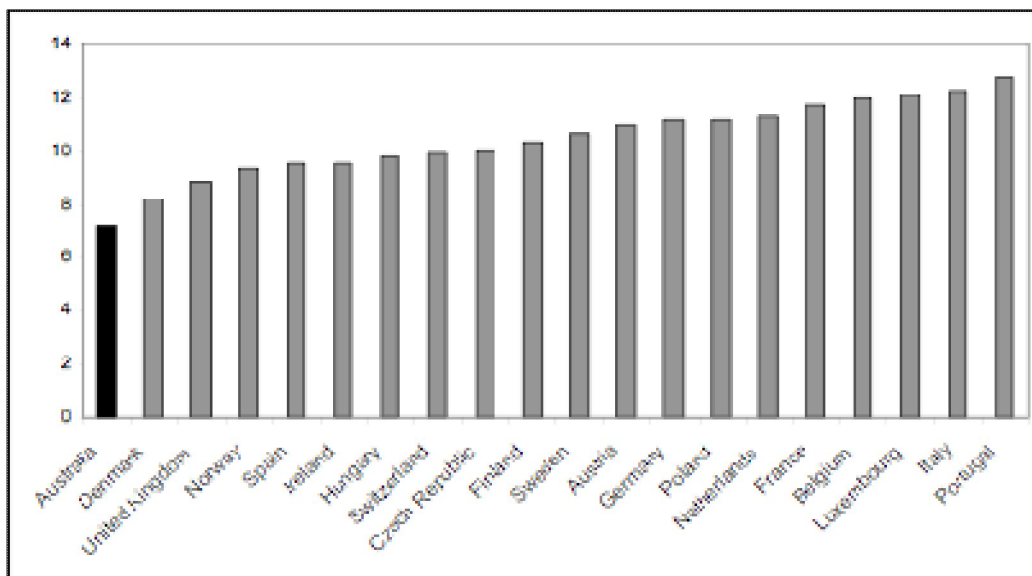
Some academics, such as Guy Standing, have argued that this divergence is so great that it is forming a new class in the making, the precariat (2011). While I

agree with Standing in his identification of the overall phenomenon in terms of labour market insecurity and its political impact, I'm far more sceptical about labelling the precariat a separate class. It ignores Marx's analysis, in *Capital Volume I* (1867), of capital's tendency to create a reserve army of labour that could be brought in and out at a moment's notice to not only fulfill seasonal and/or contractual obligations but discipline the existing workforce and lower the overall price of labour.

This labour market divergence, however, is particularly marked in Australia. Overall, 40% of the Australian workforce are in temporary or insecure work arrangements from labour hire, fixed-term contracts, through to direct casual employment (ACTU 2012). This constitutes one of the highest rates of temporary work in the OECD, period.

Unsurprisingly, as this graph from the most recent *Australia at Work* (2009: 28) report demonstrates, Australia has a significantly lower length of job tenure than EU countries:

Figure 3.1 Average job tenure: Australia compared to EU countries, 2007, years



Population: All employed persons

The financial incentive for employers to get rid of the so called job for life is greatest in those sorts of roles that are both physical and deskilled; sectors such as manufacturing and general warehousing. It allows employers to greatly increase the rate of exploitation on the job to maximize their profits, and then easily toss the broken workers back onto society to bear most of those other inconvenient costs. It all leads to the attitude expressed by one worker and participant in the *Australia at Work* (2009: 27) study:

...Like you don't have a job for life. Or a right to a job for life, y'know, if they feel that you're not needed...Oh I think that's the way of the modern world. Got to accept it and move on (Male, 54 years).

If you want to get a really damning assessment of how Australia has changed for working people, get a group of 40 blue-collar workers who have all started work at different times in the last 40 years and ask them three things. How were they employed in their first post-school job? How are they engaged today? How has their work changed since they started? I've tried it, and would call the exercise "why Marx is right".

This qualitative change in the labour market over the last 30 years has been particularly devastating for the representative union. Being part of a RU is predominantly about getting together with the people you work with and having a union act for you in contract negotiations with your employer. This results in a two-fold difficulty for RUs. Increased labour turnover discourages workers from standing together at their existing place of work, as the reward for doing so is decreased ("I might be leaving soon anyway if I can get something better"), and the barriers to successfully standing together are raised ("A lot of my workmates might not care because they're looking for something else" / "I'm a casual the boss might just tell the labour hire company to stop giving me shifts"). Moreover, it weakens the membership base of many unions, as the structure of this type of unionism is tied to the employer - when a worker leaves one, they simultaneously leave the other. This makes it much more difficult for representative unions to recruit and retain members. Thus, members of a representative union tend to be those occupying the more privileged positions within already unionised industries (e.g. the skilled tradespeople in a factory, the forklift drivers in a warehouse or the nurses in a hospital). Union members on average have job tenures of 10 years as opposed to five years for non-members (Buchanan 2007: 86).

Labour market mobility is now the main reason an Australian worker will leave their union, whether this manifests as a change of employer or work location (Australia at Work 2011). As such membership in a RU structure faces a dual challenge from the increased resources required to represent workers at a particular workplace, and greater labour market turnover.²

Representative unions, nonetheless, still proved to be so successful that the price of labour itself caused a systemic economic crisis in the 1970s and 1980s.

² Some on the Left today may subscribe to the view that the relatively weak state of the union movement today is due to continued and conscious conspiracy by a parasitic class of collaborationist union officials. Maybe this was true once, but I'm afraid the contemporary truth is far more banal. The Australian union movement today is largely populated by organisers and officials with good values who have no great love for either the Labor Party or the employers they deal with, but are largely too overworked by the bargaining and recruitment treadmills in the RU structure to have that much energy left to strategically change approach. It's a case of good people in the wrong structure.

It was then that the structural vulnerabilities and inherent limitations of RUs were exploited to full effect in order to restore profitability under the guise of neo-liberal economic policy. It has had a devastating impact on representative unions in the developed world. This has in turn been overplayed into a crisis of unionism in general.

The idea of workers standing together is an idea. You cannot kill it. It doesn't bleed. Besides, growing union power across the globe stands in the face of the fiction that unions are being eroded.

The rise of an idea: direct unionism

The cleansing fire of extreme neo-liberal policy nonetheless is giving rise to a synthesis of the two competing models of unionism. I know this because the first tentative steps are starting to happen around this global movement. For want of a better term I'd call it *direct unionism*. It combines the transformative vision of an insurrectional union with the everyday foundations of a representative union. But unlike either it cannot be disciplined through the threat of its resources being appropriated or its leaders being killed and jailed. It can only be shut down through turning off the very flows which sustain capitalism itself – the flows of information and capital.

At the heart of the direct union – and in fact at the core of any union – is the conversation. In the same manner that the exchange of commodities is the foundation for a market economy, the conversation with and between workers is the foundation for any union. However, the grounding conversation in a representative union, whether it be between workers, union delegates or officials, is simply this: "What can the union do for us, and how can it do it better?" While many representative unions have initiated great campaigns, or participated in large-scale struggles for new rights, the crux of the matter is that RUs – having been given legal recognition – become (semi)privileged actors in the economic system that can deliver some limited outcomes for their members. This engenders an attitude amongst workers that the union is an outside body that delivers for them, which is an excellent recipe for passivity amongst members. Furthermore, the repetition of this conversation over time prepared the groundwork for the neo-liberal counter-reformation. With unions being framed as an outside body (and often acting like one), the general crisis of the rising cost of labour could be repackaged as *the other* (unions) threatening the prosperity of society in general. Therefore, if this outside body was disciplined, weakened and "brought into line" then everyone (including the workers who were being represented by these unions) would be better off. It worked electorally for a time. Even industrially, smart management in highly-organised sectors could set about a 5-10 year plan of de-unionisation by going direct to their workforce, buying-off or otherwise sidelining local workplace representatives and offering better wage outcomes. With the organisation of their workforce smashed, over time they could bring down the wages and conditions to a more affordable level once again. The sad story of the de-

unionisation of the Pilbara region, in the north west of Australia in the 1990s, bears out this strategy.

The IU, on the other hand, has a very different sort of foundational conversation. The conversations between workers, shop-floor leaders, and organisers take the form of "we are union, and what are we going to do about it together?" There are a number of different names/frameworks for what are essentially the same action conversation whether it be Saul Alinsky's "Anger, Hope, Action" framework or the old anarchist catch-cry, "Agitate! Educate! Organise!" (and that's just for starters). The first phase of the conversation is to agitate/anger the worker about a particular issue they are experiencing. The second phase then moves to educating the workers about the power they can exercise collectively (whether it be in their specific workplace, their company, industry or class) – the idea being that the workers now have a realistic hope that they can actually win on their issue – enough of a hope to care again. The conversation then moves to the action/organise phase, with the aim that the worker will come away from the conversation committed to carrying out some sort of action. Historically this has ranged from simply joining a union, to asking a couple of workmates to come to a meeting, through to participating in a strike. The whole aim of the conversation though is to get working people actively grabbing hold of their own destiny and struggle.

Interestingly, since the neo-liberal counter-reformation, the action conversation is gradually gaining ground in larger-scale representative unions. The fire of the neo-liberal industrial relations strategy is forging a new model of unionism, and the incorporeal part of the union structure – the conversation – is the first part of the representative structure to change. It should come as no surprise then that the first systemic use of action conversations within a representative union structure came at the "ground zero" of neo-liberalism, 1980s California. The 1980s Justice for Janitors campaign in Los Angeles was all about getting workers active because the traditional representative mechanisms had so broken down for cleaners/janitors that the only rational option, over and above a dystopia of forever-falling wages and living standards, was action across an entire industry against those who really exercised power and shifted risk down to workers.

The action conversation, in the contemporary period in Australia, first started to filter through in the early 1990s as the crisis in representative unionism started to be felt institutionally with drops in membership numbers translating into a real operating and budgetary crisis for unions. It was here when the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) radically shifted its training priorities. The first Organising Works class started in 1994. New organisers would be trained in the action conversation and other key elements of organising. Obviously the training up of a professional class of organisers will only ever have limited value as a measure on its own to build up worker power. One could even retort that it hasn't made much of a difference over the last 18 years. I would argue, though, that it's probably only over the next 4-5 years that we will objectively see what sorts of ramifications this will have for the movement in Australia. Given the

relatively small change of personnel and low-levels of turnover it's only been recently that those who directly participated in this revised training curriculum, or were open to influence themselves, have begun to obtain leadership positions within the movement.

The action conversation has probably reached ideological supremacy within the Australian union movement, although its hegemony is by no means uncontested. And there is a real self-interest for unions as organisations as to why this has happened; when neo-liberalism cuts away at the foundation of representative functions it's the strongest alternative the movement can turn to. Where we are today though, is by and large, representative unions having more action conversations. The key will be turning to how these conversations can take place within a direct union.

The membership is the union, and the union is the membership. This is why membership is usually one of the goals of initial conversations between workers, delegates and organisers looking to create a new union in a workplace or industry. Membership is the existential question that sets up the realistic structures necessary to fight for a group of workers' key issues. It is the vehicle which creates the power necessary to win the change they want to see. The union is simply the collective noun for a group of workers united in their economic, political, social and environmental interests.

Union membership is the first sign that a group of workers are united in common cause to defend their interests against the insatiable corporate drive to take more and more profit. It also provides the structural drive for effective unions to fight for equality (at least amongst their membership), as each and every member is of equal value in terms of the contribution they make towards the effective whole of the union. Hence the old adage, "without you there is no union".

While there are other factors at play in measuring worker power, there is a strong enough correlation between overall union membership numbers and density within the Australian economy and the strength of labour in the economy for it to be a topic of statistical interest to both the Australian state and the mainstream media. This is also the source of the paradoxical criticism of union power amongst paid advocates for capital. Over a generation of union decline, these advocates have generally used two lines of criticism. The first being that the union movement is more and more out of touch with mainstream working Australia because there are less and less members. The second line is that unions overall exercise too much power within the Australian economy. The logical gap between the two lines only makes sense from one perspective - the logic of continual profit accumulation. The first line is really a celebration of successful efforts to decrease worker power and the second is the expression of capital's insatiable hunger for more and more. The vampire can celebrate his kills but still lust for more.

The direct union is about the membership as a collective having direct control over their own union. A union is about workers coming together to exercise direct power in their workplace, industries and communities. It should be readily apparent that this is in no way possible without workers also being able to have direct control over the vehicle which is supposed to win them these victories. This statement is a piece of glib obviousness compared with the hard work implementing it in reality – and it cannot be founded on a romanticised or idealised view of workers as the ideal *other* which will come to the rescue of a flawed society. It must be based on a recognition that there is no such thing as an inherent human nature – and that the actions and attitudes we see of people is at least partly a product of the structures we put in place.

Generally in Australia today unions have a representative structure. The membership is represented by a layer of elected officials (a mixture of full-time officials and those who remain on the job). It is these officials who are by and large left to determine and implement the administrative, industrial and political strategies of the union. If either the members are deeply unsatisfied with the results of these elected representatives, or the representatives themselves become divided, or they anger well-resourced outsiders (or usually a combination of all three factors), then there might be a challenge.

A direct union would probably still require a layer of dedicated officials to assist in both researching, proposing and implementing the administrative, industrial and political strategies of the union. However, it would be the membership that would also have the power to propose and determine these strategies and policies. This would have to come through a mixture of face-to-face meetings/general assemblies, online participation and (sometimes) votes of the entire membership. Probably the most important piece of infrastructure for the direct union is a full-on Web 3.0 site, a space that would allow geographically-disparate but industrially connected members to deliberate together. On such a website though, in a members' only section of course, all of the union's administrative policies (including salary levels, membership contributions and credit card policies among other important topics) would be posted for free comment and suggested editing.

This could be supplemented by an annual general assembly for the union that is open to every single financial member – a hybrid physical and online meeting – occurring with booked meeting/conference facilities in each major metropolitan region as well as allowing members who may be unable to attend a chance to voice their opinions online. These meetings would vote on the union's budget for the coming year, decide the union's political strategy for that given year, and endorse/review the progress of significant campaigns. Such a general assembly, to be a meaningful event though, would have to be a culmination of a series of informal meetings and/or committees and online forums open to all members to put in the significant amount of work for members to then make an informed decision. Think of it as a synthesis of structure and the democratic energy of the Occupy Movement.

There would still be leaders in such a structure but the basis for their power would be different. I would come less from "having the numbers" and therefore controlling key office, than being allied with and harnessing creative thinkers to drive progressive change, being persuasive enough to shift people, and doing the hard work of organising members. Having a structure to reward these character traits would not only be good for the movement but good for humanity.

This of course, all sets up an interesting paradox. What if the membership collectively and directly decides against any of the other structural changes I would propose as part of building a powerful direct union? Well, shit happens.

Membership in a representative union structure is really a dichotomy. Either you are a union member or you are not a union member. If it's a recognised union site then chances are you are probably a member, and if it's not a recognised union site then you are probably not a member. To be a member you must be paying your union contributions. In contrast, direct unionism abolishes the member/non-member dichotomy and replaces it with a continuum, and it does this by breaking the nexus between membership and paying contributions.

The separation of membership and contributions is really the structural means by which capital's two key strategies for reducing worker power (over and above a direct assault on unions) are transformed into trends which build levels of worker organisation. As I've outlined earlier, two developments in the industrial sphere have translated into a general hacking away at the membership of representative unions: First is the decentralisation of bargaining away from an industry level to individual work sites; second is the growing rate of turnover with the rise of insecure work (especially for new entrants to the workforce). This has led to a situation where, by and large (in the private sector), union membership is restricted to islands of key sites within some companies in the economy, and that within these islands membership is further (and sometimes deliberately) restricted to a core of permanent longer-serving workers. The periphery of insecure workers is then largely ignored.

The membership continuum, however, can turn this into a trend that works for building worker power. First a disclaimer: all of these structural changes are dependent on active union campaigns. A shark needs to keep swimming to survive and prosper. Supplementary to these membership changes, then, is an environment where unions are actively campaigning for insecure workers in a way that brings the core workforce together. Unlike Guy Standing, who sees very little prospect for solidarity between secure and insecure workers, I think capital's insatiable desire for more and more profit as quickly as possible will see it forcing more and more workers in the core to the periphery of the workforce. This leaves those remaining in the core working under the ever-present threat of being made redundant or outsourced. This may work for employers in terms of day-to-day control of their workforce, but it's also fertile organising territory. Australian unions have made a respectable start at starting campaigns that create this necessary context (see securejobs.org.au and jobsyoucancounton.com.au). Putting issues of context aside, a membership continuum turns the islands of unionism into pockets of dandelions in a field.

As workers come through these sites and inevitably leave them they can float onto new fields as union members. It achieves this through a number of intersecting means.

Direct union membership is not continuously mediated by an employer through payroll deductions. Instead, when a member joins a direct union they do so directly – membership contributions are paid directly to the union either via electronic fund transfers or credit cards. Whatever the means, any individual's union membership is not dependent on ongoing employer cooperation. If this membership method were applied across the Australian union movement today, it would open up at least the structural possibility that hundreds of thousands of unionists each year could retain their memberships in non-union or anti-union workplaces. A structural possibility is, however, a long way from a structural imperative to retain union membership.

Furthermore, workers leaving a workplace face a very real prospect of unemployment or underemployment, while many insecure workers within the islands of unionised workplaces face the real and ongoing prospect of underemployment. Removing the nexus between membership and contributions allows for the periodic suspension of contributions while retaining one's underlying union membership. For example, it might be the case that a worker will not be getting a shift during the annual office shutdown – once this would have been enough to cancel a union membership.

At this point, you might be thinking that all I've done is to collect a bunch of things that are already happening within many unions and turned them into a recipe for draining the union movement of key financial resources. If this was all there was you'd be right, as I haven't outlined any significant points on the spectrum as yet, but briefly outlined the technical means by which a worker could move through the spectrum and retain membership. And there is a very real tension that needs to be teased out here between underlying union values of equality and democracy combined with increasing involvement on the spectrum leading to more involvement and more rights. On this point, I don't have all the answers - but I know I don't have all the answers.

A table of the direct unionism continuum:

Union involvement	Contribution level	Membership Rights	Potential Services
Not a member	None	None	None
Campaign subscriber	None	Limited use of union website. Subscribed to email list.	Participate in campaign activities. Limited use of union website
Community member (for sympathetic activists, unemployed workers, retired members)	Minimal (50 cents/week etc)	Voting rights on union political/social/economic policies and strategies. More extended use of union website. Access to union training courses.	Access to union's information on employment opportunities in area of coverage. Assistance building resumes.
Minority member (for workers not covered by a union agreement)	Relatively minimal (\$1-3/week)	Full voting rights on elected officials and participation in annual General Assembly. Some use of union website for industrial purposes. Ability to elect workplace delegates.	Access to all non-industrial union services. Access to membership service centre for remote assistance with individual workplace issues (including workers compensation).
Bargaining member (for workers covered by a union agreement or actively working towards one)	Committed (1% to 1.5% of income)	As above, plus full use of union website for industrial purposes.	Allocated organiser(s) to assist with campaigning/building worker power for a better agreement. Full access to assistance with individual workplace issues (up to representation at tribunals).
Member-organiser (for rank and file bargaining members fighting for workers outside their workplace)	As above plus an average of in-kind assistance of one hour off site/week	As above, plus more extensive organising training. Respect as a leader of the working class and the sacrifice that involves.	None.
Union cooperative member (for workers who already owns the means of production)	2% to 2.5% of income	All rights above except that of a member-organiser.	All of the above plus business services to ensure ongoing viability of cooperative. Mediated access to full union subscriber list and network to build market for the enterprise.

If a tree falls in the forest and no one is around to blog about it does it make a sound? A working website is now the most important piece of infrastructure a union has. As I've stated earlier, the heart of the union is the conversations that occur between members – this is what brings workers to stand together. The website has an important role to play in bringing workers together across geographically-disparate areas; members who might otherwise be critically linked by employer, industry or supply-chain connections. There has been some background debate over the last few years whether the rise of the online world and social media has made organising easier or harder. That debate is beside the point. It would be like arguing whether the printing press had damaged the aesthetics of book publishing: the world has moved on and the point now for those of us who are primarily interested in changing it is to adjust to a new reality.

The first step towards being an active unionist on the direct membership continuum is becoming a campaign subscriber (note I'm not arguing that under a fully functioning direct unionism model that workers would necessarily move through the continuum sequentially). The direct union's homepage is the permeable membrane that non-members first pass through on a journey towards eventually taking control of the production process.

The main purposes of the direct union website at the campaign subscriber level are twofold. First, on a global scale it is about data collection. The website as a tool is about building up a database of workers in the union's industries. This puts direct unions on the starting blocks to at least begin the process of organising the working class as an entity. The workers' experience is to sign up for free to gain information that has clear utility for their job. This might mean that information that is currently readily available becomes only accessible after a worker has input their email address and industry of work into an online form. An example of such information might be fact sheets and quick guides to injuries at work, electing safety reps, unfair dismissals/dealing with disciplinary procedures, collective bargaining, or summary guides to wages/conditions in a particular industry (to name but a few key topics). In addition to this, the direct union would have to put out regular e-letters that would include links to articles, images and podcasts. These updates would be tailored to the campaign subscribers' nominated industry. It would be vital that the industry e-letters would have to include campaign news as well. However, this also leads onto the next purpose of the website.

Second, as well as addressing areas of immediate need for workers, the website is about raising consciousness. This is where campaigns come in. Becoming a campaign subscriber is about participating (*read* online at least) in campaigns that result through some sort of collective action in making a difference for a group of workers. The point is to counter the dominant consumerist model by providing concrete (*read* online at least) experiences of strength through worker unity. Such campaign activities (over and above getting an email) might include sending emails, uploading photographs, agreeing to participate in a real-world event or asking friends and family to become campaign subscribers as well.

What a campaign subscriber gets is partial access to an online community of workers – and it's absolutely key that the subscriber is made aware of what further access there is for upping their level of commitment to that community.

A good example of what a direct unionism website initially might look like to a campaign subscriber is Working America (see www.workingamerica.org), and their *I am not your ATM* campaign. Working America is a community affiliate of the AFL-CIO with approximately 3 million members in the US. It provides an interesting model of building up a database of activists who are deeply unhappy with the broken economy of the USA. What it leaves us to grapple with, however, is how to translate this into strong collective action across workplaces, industries and in the streets.

The website functionality will need to further expand for the next level of membership – the community member. Some unions such as Unite the Union in the UK have instituted a community membership along the lines summarised in the earlier table. What this form allows, though, is for employed and unemployed/student members to start the process of connecting and acting together politically within their communities in a way that is neither dependent on nor bounded by mainstream party politics.

Taking the first steps toward direct unionism

Direct unionism rests on one key assumption: a high degree of software development capacity. It would be charitable to say that the labour movement's overall technological capability is sadly lacking. Many union websites are embarrassing. And given the internet is a space where more and more people come together for entertainment, friendship, education and key information this is a major hole in the movement today. This, however, sets up a dilemma for union leaders. There is a choice between developing software internally or contracting out software development to a private firm. Developing software internally is a huge risk – most unions are simply not going to be able to afford the risk of dropping \$100, 000 let alone \$1 million on software that might not even fulfill the union's core needs. Even if the software works it will become outdated pretty quickly. Even the resources of some of the world's largest unions on their own are not going to be able to keep up with the development speeds of large-scale private corporations such as Apple, Google or Microsoft. The most talented individual in the world will not be able to keep up with the more efficient mode of development and production.

The choice to contract out software development to private firms, on the other hand, is no less problematic. First of all, it's no less costly. Anything approximating a 3.0 site with basic functionality will probably set a union back about \$100,000. In addition, the union will have to continue to pay an ongoing rent to the private firm for continued website servicing. Moreover, it comes down to an issue of power. The ongoing technological organising ability of a union is effectively hostage to a private firm. Given the union software market is a fairly small concern, there's probably not going to be a very large number of

players. It would effectively mean that any one nation's union movement is subject to a handful of development firms. This near monopoly situation effectively means that the movement's precious resources go towards a small group of private individuals keen to maximise their profits.

In essence, both choices are inefficient. With the first choice we have a whole bunch of union silos developing different software for the same ends without collaborating, and thereby repeating the same mistakes. With the second choice, there are less silos (theoretically any boutique firm would have a number of union clients) but workers' capital gets diverted to private firms extracting a profit. Faced with two imperfect choices, many unions have made an even worse decision by (largely) doing nothing. With that, direct unionism remains nothing other than the fantastical rantings of a mad man (and not in a 'cool' 1960s advertising kind of way).

There is, however, another way. If you really want to socialise the means of production, you socialise the means of production. And in this instance, it's almost as easily said as done. Because socialist production (and by that I mean actual worker – not state – controlled) is alive and well on the internet. It's free and you're probably already using some sort of open source software without realising it. Open source is about programmers coming together to work on source code that is free and publicly available. This collaboration around projects is a powerful way of creating free software for the end-user. An example is Mozilla Firefox. The global union movement has made some tentative starts down this road. For instance, Cyberunions (www.cyberunions.org) is an interesting project exploring the intersection between new technology and union organising. Union internet pioneer Eric Lee (see www.ericlee.info) has built a union global news service with LabourStart (www.labourstart.org) and an international union social networking site in UnionBook (www.unionbook.org). By and large these efforts have globally linked together key organisers and activists within unions.

What's missing, though, is the next step (as far as I know, and if you know better please tell me). The next step is a group of unions cooperating and collaborating by developing open source campaigning software that is free and ready to use. When this happens change will really start motoring. This would allow unions to build on and improve upon the investments that other unions have made – contributing to a shared commons of software that the wider and global union movement can take advantage of. It will give any union around the world the capacity to start to turn into an indestructible union if it so chooses, and as soon as one union consciously makes this decision others will be forced to follow. I would forecast that this is more likely than not to happen in the near future. Why? Because it requires only one of any numerous state/provincial labour councils, national congresses/councils of unions or global union federations to pilot such a mechanism with any interested group of its affiliates. Only one of these groups needs to decide that this is a realistic way of increasing the technological capacity of its affiliate unions without necessarily spending anymore on software development. Only one of these groups needs to think this

is a realistic way of responding to a crisis of union membership, or a way to wage effective campaigns against ever circling and predatory neo-liberal political forces. The immediate reason for this development process may vary but the underlying necessity remains – it's the most efficient way of building up the most effective campaigning technology.

The old representative species of shark is being hunted to extinction by global capital, but a new species of direct unions can turn the tables. This is the way we make the tools necessary to forge a new world.

* I doubt I've had a single original idea in this essay. This is just the start of the process of knitting together disparate existing threads, a process which I hope involves many people, and will continue at www.tradeunion.wordpress.com.

References

- ACTU Secure Jobs. Better Future: www.securejobs.org.au/get-the-facts (accessed 25.8.2012)
- Australia at Work. 2011. *Trade union membership - Who's leaving? Australia 2008-2010*:
<http://www.australiaatwork.org.au/assets/21.%20Union%20membership,%20who's%20leaving.pdf> (accessed 25.8.2012)
- Baldwin, S., Buchanan, J., van Wanrooy, B., Wilson S. and Wright, S. 2009. *Australia at Work: In a Changing World*. Sydney: Workplace Research Centre at the University of Sydney.
- Buchanan, J., Jakubauskas, M., Oxenbridge, S., van Wanrooy, B. 2007. *Australia at Work: The Benchmark Report*. Sydney: Workplace Research Centre at the University of Sydney.
- Gregg, P. and Wadsworth, J. 1995. "A Short History of Labour Turnover, Job Tenure, and Job Security, 1975-93." *Oxford Review of Economic Policy* 11(1): 73-90.
- Standing, G. 2011. *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*. London: Bloomsbury.

About the author

Godfrey Moase works as a campaign Lead Organiser at the National Union of Workers in Melbourne, Australia. He blogs at www.tradeunion.wordpress.com and can be reached on Twitter @gemoase.