

Three strategies unions are considering for their survival

Written by The Conversation



Modern working conditions are forcing unions to alter the way they are structured. Search Results Australian Nursing & Midwifery Federation

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Author provided

When more than 1,000 unionists gather in Sydney at a conference organised by the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU), they will be trying to work out a way forward for a movement that's in danger of losing its relevance.

The meeting was initiated by the previous ACTU Secretary, Dave Oliver, in response to 2015 union membership figures that showed participation at an historic low. Membership has [fallen further](#) since then.

For union leaders, doing their job with dedication and passion isn't enough. Economic shifts have hit industries with high numbers of union members. Overwhelmingly, [new jobs are either not](#) in unionised industries or not in permanent employment – or not in either – and unions aren't adapting fast enough to this new reality.

The proposals on where to go from here mostly fall within three strands of unionism: community, professional identity and digital. These strands are not mutually exclusive. As Richard Wagstaff, head of New Zealand Council of Trade Unions, put it to a meeting of ACTU taskforces last July, "We need to move from a contest of ideas to a reservoir of ideas".

Teaming up with other community groups

[Community unionism](#) is the strategy commonly associated with the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) in the United States. The SEIU pursues change outside the workplace, in coalition with other like-minded community groups.

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It has been spectacularly successful in the Fight for Fifteen campaign for a US\$15 minimum wage, which to date [has won US\\$62 billion in wage increases](#) .

The downside is that these political campaigns do not translate into membership growth, at least not in numbers that offset the money invested. Without modification, this is not a long-term growth strategy.

Aligning with a particular profession

[Professional identity unionism](#) is where the union works very closely to maintain its relevance for that occupation. It advocates for its profession, not just in industrial tribunals, but in industry forums as well. It often directly provides training on the skills required for that job.

This strategy is working a treat for the Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation. It is on a growth trajectory and now the [country's largest union](#) .

However in a world where most people will have multiple careers, professional identity is not as strong as it used to be.

Most Australian unions find this strategy a challenge because they're industrial unions not craft unions - their members have a variety of occupations so it's difficult for the union to clearly brand itself as the voice of this or that worker.

Finding members online

In digital unionism, unions reach and recruit members online. This sidesteps the difficulties of obtaining workplace access from hostile employers.

However converting online sympathisers into paying members has proven more difficult than it sounds. This is one reason America's United Food and Commercial Workers [abandoned](#) its highly visible Our Walmart campaign, that was lobbying the supermarket giant via online channels to change its practises.

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If Australia's existing unions don't perfect digital unionism first, others will take it into their own hands to advocate. One Uber driver told me in an interview that she was able to stare down the company purely on the strength of her influence on social media. She declared:

I'm just going to have to wait here until you let me know when it [overdue payments] come in. Otherwise you're going to have 150 drivers in here before four o'clock.

Digital tactics like this feature strongly in the current wave of labour activism. This will develop with or without the involvement of incumbent unions. A few developments give us a clue as to how this will look.

For example the Independent Drivers Guild, sponsored by the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers, successfully negotiated with Uber to [create a process](#) to appeal driver deactivation in late 2016. The guild had been treated with suspicion and [derided as a quasi-union](#). It came as a surprise that it could achieve this win.

Other unions in the UK have created subdivisions to focus on new economy workers and each combines elements of community, professional identity and digital unionism. They are partnerships between unions and other groups, focusing on a narrowly defined group of workers rather than being a catch-all, and are digitally savvy.

For example, the Independent Workers of Great Britain [created a branch](#) in 2016 to represent London's previously self-organised Deliveroo riders. Community, a UK Union, followed suit this month by establishing a subdivision called [IndyCube Community](#) for self-employed, mobile workers.

We'll have to wait for the outcome of this latest ACTU conference, as to whether the different strands are pursued dogmatically or integrated into union strategies.

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