

How unions manipulate us

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UNION membership in Australia might halve overnight if all state governments outlawed payroll deduction of union fees and the federal government outlawed the forcible unionisation of small business by big business.

Unions have always foreseen that such laws might pass. For decades the ACTU has been trying to insure against widespread membership losses by training union officials by the “organising model”, a technique learned from US unionists.

With various degrees of success, Australian unions have been making the transition from the “servicing model” to the organising model.

Unions believe that only those who make this transition will survive D-day, the day government and corporate support evaporates.

The servicing model is where members of unions see themselves as clients who receive services from the union. The problem with the servicing model is that when members are dissatisfied with services they leave the union. This is unsatisfactory for the union hierarchy.

The organising model is where every member is turned from a client into an activist. Members are persuaded they actually are “the union”.

That way, when the union fails them, they have only failed themselves. Hence, resigning union membership doesn’t rectify the failure. The failure is rectified by becoming a better activist and recruiting workmates to participate in the activism and join the union. This is satisfactory for the union hierarchy.

The organising model unionises unionised workplaces via an “organising campaign”.

Drawing from my own training experience and written material from a New York construction union, here is “organising campaign” theory:

There are four basic stages of a campaign.

The first stage is target selection and planning. Businesses are “primary targets” and are discussed: who is growing, who supplies existing union sites, who is bidding for government or business contracts, who has a social connection to a union leader.

Once a target is selected an “organising plan” is drawn up. The plan must include both “bottom-up pressure” and “top-down pressure” to be used against the employer.

Bottom-up pressure is when workers participate in and grow the campaign.

Top-down pressure is when people in high places who have the “ability to alter the behaviour” of the employer apply force. For example, a state government may make it clear a good relationship with unions is needed to get a grant or work contract.

The second stage is to “engage contact”. Any existing members are recruited into the campaign.

If there are no members, a way into the workplace via social means is found. Social media can be used to initiate contact or the workplace is watched to see where people go at lunchtime or after work.

A union official befriends workers on Facebook or bumps into them at a pub or coffee shop with the intent of striking up an acquaintance and securing a social meeting, to be held outside the workplace.

The goal of the first meeting is to identify any discontent with work and harvest information about the workplace so it can be “mapped”.

Chit-chat leads to talk about the workplace, how it runs, what the people are like and who the influencers are. Questioning leads to one crucial point: is there anything at all, no matter how small, the person doesn’t like about their work?

This topic is explored gently; how does it make them feel and may other workers feel the same way? If so, would they be agreeable to invite someone else from work to the next social meeting, just to talk?

The next meeting sees the process repeated. More and more meetings occur, always outside the workplace.

The group grows over many months. The emotion attached to individual

grievances about work is used as fire-starter material.

Eventually a collective fire of discontent rages against the boss: energy is harnessed, fear is abandoned and bold action is agreed on. When the emotional heat reaches its peak the third stage is achieved.

Bottom-up and top-down tactics are “deployed simultaneously”.

The union official enters the workplace, informs the employer that unionisation has occurred and tables a list of demands. At the same time, key people in high places inform the employer of their expectation to keep the union happy.

The final stage is reached when the union achieves “surrender by the employer that is being pressured”.

In my opinion, the evangelical organising technique is manipulative and verges on stalking.

Many union people feel the same way. Nevertheless, the leadership has determined the troops learn organising just in case the legislative change they fear ever occurs.

After all, without the support of governments or corporations, unions would barely survive.