Australian unions contract out recruitment of members

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In a remarkable demonstration of contempt for their own members, a number of trade unions in Australia are outsourcing recruitment to a commercial agency, Work Partners, in an effort to bolster their declining membership base.

In the past, workers not only joined and built unions but they actively defended them against the attacks of employers and the state. The turn by unions to private recruitment agencies reflects the irreversible degeneration of these organisations and their remoteness from the concerns of ordinary working people.

In recent decades, union membership in Australia has plummeted as workers, disenchanted by repeated betrayals, left in droves. Younger workers rightly viewed the unions as alien to their aspirations and shunned them.

As a result, total union membership has more than halved from 40.5 percent in 1990 to just 18.9 percent in 2008. In the public sector, membership fell over the same period from 66.8 percent to 41.9 percent. In the private sector, it plunged from 30.8 percent to just 13.6 percent.

On its website, Work Partners offers "engaging and inspiring face-to-face recruitment" for a range of organisations wanting to increase their base of support. "Trained representatives working in teams will approach your prospects in person, engage them in one-to-one conversations and inspire them to buy, join or donate," it declares.

The business is headed by Stuart McGill, a former Labor Party numbers man and staffer to Labor senator and ex-metal union national secretary Doug Cameron. In 2008, McGill's "recruiting" skills led to allegations of branch stacking—the signing up of members, real or not, for factional purposes—sparking an internal party audit.

Several unions, including the Australian Education Union (AEU), the Community Public Sector Union (CPSU) and the Communications, Electrical and Plumbing Union (CEPU), have embraced the services of McGill and his company.

AEU Victorian branch secretary Brian Henderson acknowledged that his union paid Work Partners $500, the equivalent to around one year's dues, for each new member recruited. He said that Work Partners had brought in 7,000 new members from schools, technical colleges and early childhood centres—earning the company $350,000.

Henderson has publicly promoted McGill by appearing as a key speaker at a meeting last December to discuss "Trials and Tribulations of growing union membership in the 21st Century". Work Partners' website features Henderson's glowing tribute: "I highly recommend Work Partners as a further means of increasing union membership and therefore density."

As far as CPSU Victorian secretary Karen Batt is concerned, her union's use of Work Partners is all a matter of business. It supplemented the union's own efforts, she said, and was a "breath of fresh air". The unions used a range of other professional services including legal and advertising, Batt told the *Australian*, so "what is sacrosanct about recruitment?"

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Other unions have been wary about contracting out recruitment, no doubt concerned about putting their lack of support on public display. Officials told the *Australian* that it was “a bad look”. Australian Workers Union (AWU) national secretary Paul Howes said: “We are not going to use them as we don’t think you can outsource core union work.”

However, if recruiting members is “core work”, the unions have failed spectacularly. In reality, for more than two decades, “core union work” has consisted of collaborating with employers and governments, Labor and Liberal, in slashing longstanding working conditions, suppressing wages, demolishing workers’ rights and axing jobs.

In the 1980s, the unions responded to the globalisation of production by abandoning any effort to obtain limited concessions and seeking instead to make corporate Australia “internationally competitive”. Under their Accords with the Hawke-Keating Labor governments from 1983 to 1996, the unions functioned as industrial policemen to break the resistance of workers to Labor’s pro-market program. The unions have played the same role under the Howard Coalition government that came to power in 1996 and now the Rudd Labor government.

The impact for the working class has been devastating. Large segments of manufacturing industry have been wiped out. Full-time jobs have been increasingly replaced by poorly paid and uncertain part-time, temporary and contract work. Outsourcing and the use of contact labour have become ubiquitous throughout industry and services. The unions have not only presided over, but profitted from these processes. The Australian Manufacturing Union and the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union, for instance, have both operated their own body hire companies.

The extent of these restructuring processes is underlined in Telstra, where the CEPU is now using Work Partners to recruit new members. Over a 10-year period from the late 1990s, the number of jobs in Telstra was slashed from around 90,000 to just 30,000. In comments to the *Australian*, CEPU national president Ed Husic praised the company for its consistent approach, admitting that his own full-time officials had made little headway in recruiting.

The unions’ use of Work Partners is not primarily motivated by the prospect of extra membership dues. As membership has plunged, the unions have established a different financial base—including superannuation funds and investment portfolios—through their relations with government and the corporate elite.

In fact, as the Australian Education Union indicated, it is prepared to forego the equivalent of a year’s dues in order to increase the number of members on its books. The main concern of the unions is to ensure their place in the industrial relations regime—if membership drops, the unions risk being sidelined altogether.

The turn to Work Partners follows years of trying other gimmicks, from slick advertising campaigns to offering various services from banking to lawyers and consumer discounts. None of these efforts has overcome the continued membership decline, which is testimony above all to the deep-seated hostility and indifference among workers towards the unions.

The issue facing workers is the necessity of breaking completely from the straitjacket of the trade unions and forming independent organisations, such as rank-and-file committees, as the basis for defending their rights, conditions and jobs. Such struggles can only go forward to the extent that they are animated by a socialist perspective directed against the real source of the onslaught on working people—the profit system and all of its defenders, including the unions and the Labor Party.

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