

Australian report highlights collapse of union membership

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Figures released last week by research agency Roy Morgan, revealing record low membership rates, have highlighted the gulf that exists between the trade unions and the working class.

Having worked hand in glove with big business and governments to enforce the destruction of jobs, wages and working conditions over the past three decades, the unions have become bureaucratic shells viewed with hostility and suspicion by millions of workers.

Based on a survey of 50,000 workers across occupational, age and wealth brackets, conducted in September 2016, the report estimates that national union membership stands at around 17.4 percent. This is the lowest result since the research firm began collecting union membership data in 1998.

The figure is higher than the 15 percent recorded by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) last year, a fact that some analysts have attributed to the smaller sample size of the Morgan survey.

The results provide a glimpse of the class character of the unions. While they are fraudulently touted as “workers’ organisations” by various pseudo-left groups, the unions have virtually no membership base among the most impoverished sections of the working class and young workers.

The highest density of union membership, at 25.8 percent, is the second wealthiest fifth (quintile) of the working population, with an annual income of between \$80,000 and \$99,000. Individuals in public administration and defence are 65 percent more likely to be union members than the average working population.

The finding tallied with ABS data from last year, which found that just 11 percent of workers employed in the private sector are in a union. Among construction workers, Roy Morgan reported that the unionisation

rate is only 11.5 percent. The figure is 9.7 percent for farm, forestry and gardening workers.

Membership was lowest among the poorest workers, with just 12.9 percent in the lowest quintile surveyed—those with an income between \$20,000 and \$39,000—and 14.2 percent in the quintile with the second lowest income. This indicates that the unions view with disinterest the plight of the most exploited sections of the working class.

Among most young people, union membership is a thing of the past. Just 6.9 percent of workers under the age of 25 belonged to a union, while the ratio was 12.3 percent among those aged 25–34.

Young people have borne the brunt of the destruction of full-time work by the employers. Hundreds of thousands of youth have been consigned to low-paid, insecure work with poverty-level wages, no entitlements and the constant threat of unemployment. These conditions are spreading throughout the entire workforce, with rates of part-time, casual and contract work soaring to more than 40 percent.

The unions have directly enforced the destruction of the pay and conditions of young workers. Last year, for instance, it was revealed that the Shop Distributive and Allied Employees Association had signed secret deals with major fast food corporations, clearing the way for the underpayment of up to 250,000 workers—as much as \$300 million a year collectively—compared to the mandated award rate.

The state with the lowest proportion of union membership was South Australia, with just 14.9 percent of the working population belonging to a union. The figure was substantially down on the 24.6 percent recorded in 2012.

South Australia’s Public Sector Association general secretary Nev Kitchin summed up the union

bureaucracy's contempt for the working class. Responding to the data, he declared: "We've been really good at building up the best working conditions anywhere in the world, so you now have a generation of people who are apathetic and don't recognise the hard work that went on to gain them."

In reality, South Australia has one of the highest unemployment rates in the country. The unions have collaborated with the major employers in the destruction of large swathes of industry and manufacturing, leaving working-class areas with joblessness of a depression-era magnitude. Officially, the state's unemployment rate stands at 6.5 percent. But in Elizabeth, in northern Adelaide, where General Motors is shutting its assembly plant this year, joblessness is already at a staggering 33 percent.

The decline in membership rates is one expression of the complete corporatisation of the unions, which function as an industrial police force. They represent a wealthy, upper middle-class officialdom whose interests are diametrically opposed to those of the workers they falsely claim to represent.

The unions derive the bulk of their income, not from membership dues, but various parasitic financial arrangements, including control of massive superannuation funds. The royal commission into union corruption in 2015 documented numerous cases of the unions funnelling workers' compensation monies into financial investment vehicles, establishing bogus union-controlled charities and health and safety companies which solicit donations from big business, and striking countless backroom deals with employers.

Many of those counted as union members may have little choice. In a number of cases detailed by the royal commission, companies paid the union membership dues of their employees. Some workers were not even aware they were members of the union, but were subjected to union-company deals to slash wages and conditions below award rates. The unions, including the Australian Workers Union, formerly headed by Labor Party leader Bill Shorten, also use their fictitious membership numbers to boost their factional weight in the Labor Party.

The decline in union membership is an historic shift, bound up with their transformation into direct agencies of the corporate and financial elite, amid the unprecedented integration of global production. Unions

once sought limited concessions for their members, within the framework of wage exploitation, under conditions of a nationally-protected economy. During the 1950s, around 60 percent of workers were union members.

The sharp decline in membership began during the 1980s, as the unions signed a series of Accords with the Hawke and Keating Labor governments to drive down wages and conditions, and eliminate thousands of jobs, in response to globalisation and the demands of business that Australia be "internationally competitive."

Summarising the decline in union membership in an entire generation of workers, an ABS report in 2008 noted: "In 1986, almost half (48 percent) of those employees born in the 1950s, and then aged 25–34 years, were union members. Ten years later the unionisation rate of this cohort, then aged 35–44 years, had fallen to 36 percent, and a further decade later it was 28 percent (26 percent in 2007)."

Now, amid a deep-going crisis of Australian and world capitalism, the unions are enforcing the demands of the corporate elite backed by governments for unprecedented cuts to real wages, the destruction of what remains of hard-earned conditions and the axing of hundreds of thousands of jobs.

Only through the establishment of new organisations of struggle, including rank-and-file committees completely independent of the unions, and a new political perspective based on the struggle for a workers' government and socialist policies can workers unify and fight back against this company-union offensive.



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