

# **Organising Works: Objectives, Evolution, Outcomes**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper gives an overview of the history and development of Organising Works in Australia and the international context out of which it has grown. It defines organising model and contrasts this to the servicing model used previously. It then goes on to outline the three-phased development of Organising works and looks at the challenges of implementing organising principles in practice, looking at the critical juncture that organising has now reached in Australia.

## **ORGANISING WORKS: OBJECTIVES, EVOLUTION, OUTCOMES INTRODUCTION**

### **INTRODUCTION**

In 1994 the Australian union movement, under the aegis of the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU), established Organising Works (OW). The role of OW was to act as the vanguard for an organising-based philosophy aimed at stemming the decline of union membership. This paper assesses the objectives, evolution and outcomes of this major strategic initiative. Some brief background and context to this initiative is first provided; the paper then examines the origins of OW, discusses the concept of the organising model, outlines the phased development and attempted implementation of this model and assesses the impact of OW on the Australian union movement.

### **Context**

Throughout much of the 20th century trade unions played a key, central role in the Australian industrial relations system. This role was inextricably linked to the dominant mechanism of determining the employment relationship, the centralised Conciliation and Arbitration system introduced into the new Commonwealth of Australia in 1904. This system, with its central tenet of representatives of capital and labour appearing before the members of the Australian Industrial Relations Commission (AIRC) to resolve disputes, necessitated the existence of trade unions. To achieve this goal, the new national legislation granted the union movement some very significant concessions. Among the foundation stones of the arbitral model were:

- formal registration of organisations, including trade unions,
- the granting of exclusive jurisdiction over specified segments of the workforce to registered organisations,
- the ability to have claims for improved wages and working conditions arbitrated by a third-party external to the employment relationship, and
- the legal enforcement of awards, decisions of the tribunal establishing minimum wages and conditions.

This new arbitral system was a major factor contributing to the re-birth of Australian trade unionism, a movement that had been practically destroyed during the major strikes of the 1890s. Union density - the proportion of the workforce who are members of a trade union - had dropped to around 6 per cent by 1901. Some ten years later this figure had increased to 28 per cent and had reached over 50 per cent by 1921. Assisting this growth was the expansion of unionism into the white-collar private sector workforce when employees in industries such as banking and insurance established unions in the immediate post-First World War era. This development was paralleled in the post-Second World War era with the establishment of unions for white-collar professional workers such as engineers and architects. Overall, between 1920 and 1980, (with the exception of the depression years of the 1930s) buttressed by the arbitral model, union density remained above 50 per cent. Not surprisingly, then, much trade union strategy in Australia has centred round the arbitration system (for a recent discussion on union strategy, see

Bramble 2001). And with good reason: not only has this system guaranteed the existence of the union movement and delivered it significant membership, it also provided both minimum wage rates and a widespread safety net of working conditions. Traditionally, this dominant arbitral strategy has usually been complemented by a political strategy of affiliation to the Australian Labor Party (ALP). An industrial focus, a focus that, among other things, would necessitate shop floor organising and structure, has, for most unions, clearly been a subordinate strategy. Overall, a culture of arbitration dominated most unions' strategy.

The 1980s was a decade of change for the union movement. Factors such as a deteriorating economy, the floating of the Australian dollar, deregulation of the financial markets, growing employer and conservative political parties' opposition to the centralised arbitral model and the increasing acceptance, even within the ALP, of the deregulatory labour market tenets of the 'new right' economic philosophy all combined to provide a very negative environment for trade unionism. Commencing early in this decade, union density entered a steep decline. In 1982, union density was 49 per cent. By 1988, this figure had decreased to 42 per cent. These declining density figures created enormous discussion, debate and indeed alarm within the union movement. Unusually, this debate spilled over into the print media as solutions were sought. A cogently argued booklet from the Building Workers Industrial Union was titled *Can Unions Survive?* Its conclusion was that the "Australian model of trade unionism is dying. Our Anglo-Saxon, craft-based unionism has outlived its usefulness" (Berry and Kitchener 1989). A book edited by senior officials of the New South Wales Trades and Labor Council asked *What Should Unions Do?* (Crosby and Easson 1992). The answer offered by the ACTU, its leadership and some senior leaders of key unions was simple: union mergers. At that stage, the obvious alternate answer of launching an organising drive, utilising a combination of experienced organisers and workplace-based officials was not seriously contemplated for the very good reason that, for many, if not most, unions these combinations simply did not exist. For decades, membership had been delivered and guaranteed through the arbitral model. Technically, compulsory unionism *per se* was and is illegal. However, a number of substitute devices - for example, a preference clause in an award that legally guarantees preference on a whole range of issues to union members over non-members - produced *de facto* closed shops. Not surprising then, during the late 1980s, the first significant union responses to declining membership and power, a restructuring of the union movement through mergers, did not necessitate a significant move away from the traditional, arbitral focused strategic hierarchy. This strategy failed to halt the decline in union density. Despite a massive wave of mergers that saw the number of unions reduced from 295 in 1990 to 157 in 1994, density declined from 42 per cent in 1988 to 35 per cent in 1994. Even more worrying was the fact that, over this six-year period and for the first time in decades, absolute membership, as well as density, declined.

The recognition that amalgamations were not, of themselves, the answer to declining union membership led to some re-thinking within the ACTU and a number of key unions. Changes in the external environment, particularly the introduction of a new system of enterprise bargaining from 1991 onwards, allied with the recognition among major leaders that workplace union structures were a key factor influencing trends in membership levels, dominated this analysis. Seeking to draw on international experience, in July 1993 the ACTU led a delegation of union officials to the USA in search of ideas for building membership levels, with a specific brief to

examine recruiting methods and techniques. The report of the delegation provided the basis for the second major strategic response to declining membership: organising. The establishment of Organising Works and the introduction of the organising philosophy generally, elevated the industrial strategy in the hierarchy. In 1999, building on the OW approach, the ACTU document [Unions@work](#) has clearly reversed the traditional hierarchy and asserted the dominance of an industrial focus, and particularly the centrality of an organising approach for Australian unionism.

## The Origins

The first formal recognition of the need for what has become known as the organising model occurred at the 1991 ACTU Congress. In a policy document titled *Organisation, Resources and Services of the Trade Union Movement*, there was recognition of the “continuing need for the trade union movement to develop and implement imaginative and professional recruitment and retention programs”. At that stage, the emphasis was primarily on recruitment, that is, simply signing up more union members. However, it was from this initial mindset of recruitment that the ACTU began to explore more extensive strategies to address declining union numbers. To assist with this process, and in preparation for its 1993 Congress, the ACTU, in July 1993, sponsored an international tour of a delegation of union officials. The idea was simple and straightforward: visit a number of countries and union movements, and examine how these movements are dealing with and responding to membership issues. The delegation comprised of a senior industrial officer of the ACTU, senior officials from a number of unions and representatives from the NSW Trades and Labor Council and the Trade Union Training Authority.

Arguably, the United States was the key country visited by the delegation. As the report of the delegation noted, US unions appeared to face similar problems to Australia in terms of “an increasingly inferior contracts and anti-labour environment” (ACTU 1993, 1). In 1985 the American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO), the ACTU equivalent in the US, had published a report titled *The Changing Situation of Workers and their Unions*. This was a pivotal report. It argued that the major challenge for US unions was to design strategies to increase worker participation in the union. The report highlighted a number of problems confronting US unions, all similar to those faced by Australian unions. These problems included lack of membership involvement and support, lack of funding due to dwindling membership and lack of experienced organisers/recruiters who could deal with the prevailing hostile attitude of employers towards union representation and collective bargaining. To address this issue, the AFL-CIO had established the Organizing Institute in 1989. This was a specialised unit set up to recruit and train a “new breed of union organiser” (ACTU 1993, 6). The AFL-CIO adopted the organising model in the USA because they had been experiencing a steep decline in membership rates from 35 per cent of the workforce in 1953 to only 16 – 17 per cent by 1993 (ACTU 1993, 4). US unions regarded organising as a major potential solution to their problems because, relying on traditional servicing models, the union base had been severely eroded by ‘union busting’ activities carried out by hostile employers during the 1970s and 1980s. The Organizing Institute was created in 1989 to gather committed members to the organisation that would be more likely to stay loyal in the face of employer tactics than members who were simply ‘recruited’. Their objective was to “build a community of workers connected to the union leaders and to one another” (ACTU 1993, p 17).

The delegation saw parallels between the US and Australian experience; it was impressed with the organising philosophy and the Organizing Institute, and its report strongly recommended that Australian unions adopt a similar approach. The September 1993 ACTU Congress accepted this report and decided to develop and refine its 1991 recruitment strategy. Congress agreed, "the key to the future survival and growth of the trade union movement is the implementation of successful organising strategies" (ACTU 1993, 2.1). The resolution adopted went on to stress that "unions must recognise organising as the number one priority and promote the development of a recruitment culture at all levels of the union – federal, state and workplace. Organising activities must be integrated into all of the activities of a union"(2.4). It also noted "it must be recognised that organising and recruiting take specialist skills and training in order to be effective" (2.5). Arguably, Congress delegates supported the philosophy and the underlying intent of the resolution; however, because the organising concept was so new to Australian union practice, it was only very loosely defined and still generally equated with recruiting.

Based on this Congress resolution, Organising Works (OW) was established in 1994. Initially, despite comparisons with the AFL-CIO Organizing Institute, OW was a small training centre established within the ACTU. Its initial purpose was twofold. Firstly, it was to "recruit, train and support new union recruiter/organisers, who would each be attached to a participating union" (Svensen *et al.* 2002, 9). Again, this language shows the initial focus of the OW program on recruitment, and a certain naivety about the practice of organising. The second goal of OW was "to develop an organising culture" (Svensen *et al.* 2002, 2) within the Australian union movement, a much more difficult goal and time consuming to define and implement. Inevitably, in its first few years of operation, OW would have to focus on this first objective before it could make any progress on the second. Carter and Cooper outline this progression: "Organising Works was conceived as a means to aid unions committed to organising, firstly by building the organising skills and the capacities of the union movement, and secondly by spreading the 'message' of the organising model." (Carter & Cooper, 2001 23) Thus the first two years of OW were dedicated to building a base of organisers and fostering an understanding of what organising is in the union movement. What was perhaps not clear at that stage, either to the ACTU, the union branches, or to OW officials, was that, to achieve the second goal, OW would gradually need to take on more and more responsibility for leading change in organisational culture within the union branches themselves. There is a plethora of definitions for organisational culture, "like a Rorschach, culture means different things to different people". (O'Reilly 1996, 159) However, it is broadly agreed that organisational culture is essentially a shared set of beliefs and values, which create a sense of identity for those in the organisation, and defines their modes and methods of operation and interaction (Brown 1995, Kotter 1992, O'Reilly 1996, Rousseau 1990). Sinclair also widens this definition to include belief systems of the organisation's participants: "a working understanding of organizational culture is that it consists of what people believe about how things work in their organizations and the behavioural and physical outcomes of those beliefs" (Sinclair 1993, 64). Regardless of definition, changing an organisations culture is a major task, a task that, arguably, neither OW nor the union movement was ready for, or committed to in 1994.

When assessing the role of Organising Works, an important contextual point is that while OW was the key initiative to come out of the 1993 visit to the US and the major strategic thrust of the ACTU in stemming membership decline, it was always

acknowledged that OW was not the only solution to the problem of membership decline. On its own, it was not expected to solve all of the union's problems. Walton commented in an initial 1995 assessment of the program "Organising Works has always recognised that the program in itself is not enough to address membership decline. Unions need to develop a recruitment and organising culture and support that with adequate resources and focus" (ACTU 1995, 7). Recall, for example, that the major union merger wave was still underway when OW was established. Union non-industrial services were also expanded during this time, with the introduction of schemes such as discount air flights, telephone accounts, and purchasing services. Also an initiative called the 'Worklink' phone centre was developed in the early 1990s. This enabled workers to make faster contact with their representative union official. The Worklink program was continued in 1995 when the ACTU devoted part of a \$10 million budget designed to support recruitment projects, to marketing and funding Worklink. This was a program designed to support or service members rather than organise them. The fact that the ACTU funded both these programs simultaneously shows that they did not see organising as 'the only' solution. Rather, there was also a perceived need for some servicing activities to continue although, in some respects, the contradictory nature of these programs could have been due to the fact that, at this stage, the ACTU did not appreciate the full ramifications of the organising model, possibly viewing it more as a recruitment program.

### **The Servicing versus the Organising Model**

Prior to outlining and analysing the development of OW some brief discussion on what has become known as the organising model is necessary.

Historically, Australian unions have related to their members through a servicing mode of operation, providing a range of 'services' to members, in return for a fee or levy. One of the principle services the union provided was negotiation and settlement of disputes through the Australian Industrial Relations Commission (AIRC). Industrial campaigns were drawn up and conducted by the union industrial officer. The industrial officer would hear member's claims, work out a strategy, and either negotiate a collective resolution with the employer or utilise the services of the AIRC. Bill Mansfield, an ACTU Assistant Secretary, summarised this system:

For much of this century unions had the luxury of not having to critically re-assess either their strategies or their performance in servicing the needs of their members. The characteristics of Australian employer/employee relations for decades have been an adversarial industrial relations culture; management attitudes which regarded labour relations as either of marginal importance or as an issue to be left to the IR specialists; an industry based Award system which could be somewhat inflexible in catering for the needs of individual enterprises; and wage bargaining which was largely undertaken in industry level negotiations or through the Industrial Relations Commission arbitration process for national wage and industry level adjustments (Mansfield 1996, 1.3)

This prevailing culture meant that, in most workplaces, union members played a fairly passive role in the union movement. They paid their membership dues and were expected to then hand over their industrial issues to the union official, who represented their interests collectively to management or the AIRC. Chris Walton, one of two Joint Directors of the Organising Centre, the 2001 successor to OW,

likens this to "a transactional model of unionism that, in return for fees, members expect a service - like paying premiums to an insurance company. This leads to a vicious cycle where the union members expect the union to do the work and then they blame the union if they don't get what they expected, even if it was the employer who became hostile"(Walton 1999). The other Joint Director, Michael Crosby, described the servicing model as one where "the industrial officer would do the deal at the Commission and then go back and sell it to the delegates. The union official was the knight in shining armour." (Crosby 2001)

In contrast, the organising model encourages a more participatory style of official-member interaction. It necessitates the members being active in their own workplace around union issues, for example, meeting with each other, discussing issues and developing action plans. The model requires that a delegate structure be set up within the workplace, and that that structure represent the members and their interests to management. The members do not just hand over problems to a union official, but must themselves take responsibility for issues in their workplace and for deciding on appropriate action. In short, this model demands more from a member, in terms of time, effort and input. However, when done properly, it is ultimately more rewarding for all concerned, as the union members are able to generate their own issues and work towards solving them together. One senior union official described the organising model in the following way:

The organiser plays an educative and supportive role. Organising means the establishment of a well-structured delegate - organiser relationship. This means that the site deals with many of its own problems in its own right. It means having a quality delegate on site who deals with a lot of the issues that come along and the organiser supports that person when they really need support, but they are not there all the time just when any little thing goes wrong. Therefore organisers can cover many more sites and many more members because the delegates are able to deal with more issues. (Daley 1999)

In simple terms the OW approach "was trying to put back into the union forms of activity that were discarded by hiring professionals to do things for members, instead of having members do things for themselves." (O'Sullivan 1999). The organising model still has a significant element of recruitment in it; however, it goes beyond just 'signing up' members: "Organising doesn't mean that you put on organisers to go out and recruit members. It means that organisers go out and organise other people to recruit members. Such organisation is not permanent, but it is semi-permanent because it will reproduce itself if it is good - the delegates, the committee, whatever is created will carry on when the organiser leaves and create and maintain a culture of unionisation" (O'Sullivan 1999). In practice, the organising approach attempts to empower and entrust the members, making them the focus of their union.

The first step in moving towards an organising culture is implementing internal organising practices in a union branch. The branch needs to make a commitment to organising and free up the organiser's time to pursue these tasks, without expecting him/her to also take on servicing issues as they arise. The union official then focuses on organising members in existing union sites; getting them to choose their own representatives/delegates from among their colleagues, and have them discuss, track and represent their own issues to their management. Internal organising is seen as operating in workplaces where there is already a union presence. It is

encouraging the existing members to become more active in union issues, and involves training selected delegates to deal with some issues themselves. The 1999 unions@work report defined internal organising as "involving workplaces with an existing union presence. Members, activists and delegates are educated and encouraged to become more involved in union affairs. Delegates are taught to resolve member grievances, negotiate collective agreements, and recruit members with the aim of strengthening workplace organisation." (unions@work, 3). With external organising the union official devotes his/her time and energy on converting non-unionised work places into union centres, by setting up small groups within this workplace who will 'spread the word' of unionism and recruit members. External organising is starting recruitment and organising campaigns in a non-union worksite. This is explained in the unions@work report as "involving targeted recruitment campaigns in non-union workplaces - organising and recruiting in new areas."

## **ORGANISING WORKS AT WORK**

Over time, OW has changed significantly and evolved in a number of ways. Some of these changes were generated through internal debate; others were forced by outside developments. Arguably, and to date, three different phases of operation can be discerned. The first phase covered the initial two/three-year, 1994-6, during which OW had to establish itself and gain some credibility within the broad union movement. The second phase lasted for around three years, commencing with the election of a conservative federal government. The third, and current phase was initiated in 1999 following the unions@work publication. This section traces this evolution of OW, commencing with its initial establishment and providing some data on OW graduates.

### **Initial Set-up**

Organising Works was established as a stand-alone unit run by the ACTU in 1994. Initial funding of \$1 million was provided by the ACTU; half of this seed funding was invested in financing the first training course, so that trainees could be accepted and paid. The participating unions were then expected to refund the ACTU outlay when they took on an organising graduate. The training arm of Organising Works was funded under the federal government's training scheme. In practice, union branches contributed the full cost of the trainee's wage minus government funding received for the program; in 1994, on average this came to approximately \$14,000 per trainee. The rest of the ACTU funding was put towards fixed costs, such as venue hire and staff wages to run the program. In late 1995 the ACTU created a recruitment fund of \$10 million to finance Organising Works on an continuing basis as well as other recruitment initiatives outlined earlier. This funding was evidence that OW had completed a trial period and that the ACTU was now ready to make a financial commitment and sponsor the program on an ongoing basis.

Due to these initial financial constraints, and with only a small training team, the program was confined to Melbourne and Sydney for its first two years of operation. The OW management team would select potential trainees through conducting group interviews. These trainees were then put on a one-week residential course. Subsequently, representatives of different unions interviewed trainees and then selected those they wished to hire. For the following nine months the trainees were placed in the sponsoring union where they worked for four days a week, and would then spend the fifth day attending OW training courses. The participating union paid

a fee that contributed towards the cost of training the participant. The rest of the trainees wage was subsidised by the ACTU. The unions who took on trainees had to nominate a mentor for each trainee. This mentor was to guide, supervise and assess their progress in the practical application of organising. The importance of having a mentor who is both experienced in organising and available for close supervisory contact with the trainee is stressed by Widenor (2001, 10); however, this type of union official was often difficult to find in practice, especially in the early days of OW.

Over time, the profile of a typical OW trainee has gradually changed. In the early years they were young, in their early 20s, usually new university graduates, had little prior involvement with unionism and frequently were bi- or multi-lingual. In later years the trainees were older, more experienced in the union structure, and were often existing union delegates. Table 1 outlines the characteristics of these trainees.

**Table 1: Characteristics of Organising Works Trainees**

Year	Intake No.	% Graduated	Ongoing Union Job	Average Age	% Female	% Second Language	% with a Degree	% Nominated by a union
1994	58	55	54	25	60	29	52	66
1995 (1 <sup>st</sup> Intake)	86	79	Not available	24	61	12	50	43
1995 (2 <sup>nd</sup> intake)	52	42	Not available	26	54	30	43	71
1996	41	36	34	28	49	24	46	66
1997	27	25	23	28	46	23	39	23
1998	23	21	18	28	48	17	35	48
1999	26	24	23	30	46	8	58	50
2000	37	89	90	28	62	11	57	89
2001	41	Not applicable	Not applicable	31	51	5	51	100
TOTAL	324							

### **First Phase: Gaining Credibility, 1994 - 1996**

In the first three years, the program mainly centred on training Organising Works graduates. These graduates then went on to get jobs in individual unions and often took up a position that was usually a mix of organising and servicing roles in a function such as industrial officer. The first intake consisted of 58 students, and they were placed in 20 unions in Melbourne and Sydney. The program expanded rapidly to take a significantly larger group of 86 trainees in March 1995, along with a second intake of 50 in July 1995. At this stage the curriculum was principally theoretical, as

there were few Australian examples of practical organising to draw upon. Weidnor points out "due to the lack of indigenous Australian models for organizing activity, they borrowed heavily from US models" (Widenor 2001,11)

Although the program showed initial signs of success, it quickly became clear that the organising infrastructure was not in place within the unions themselves to support the training and mentoring of over 130 trainees, and that taking on this number early in the program was too ambitious an undertaking to have effective results. In addition, the role of organiser was not clearly understood by many union officials. Most graduates, when placed in a union, reverted by default to a servicing model, as this is how the branch operated. Some union officials have admitted that generally the branches had a limited understanding of organising in these early years. "There was probably a mistaken view that organising would be reserved for the people who did this training and others wouldn't have to do anything; that they would come along and save the world. The challenge was to keep those who have been trained in organising doing organising" (O'Sullivan 1999).

Initially, and understandably, assessment of the OW program was measured by recruitment criteria. An estimated 10,500 new union members were recruited in the first year of operation (ACTU 1994b: 6) and many of these new recruits were in new non-union workplaces. In its first year, "taking a conservative view, based on average union fees of \$200 pa the program has generated approximately \$2 million dollars in income" (ACTU 1994b, 7). The second intake of trainees (the first in 1995) recruited 13,800 new union members. This was also a significant achievement and represented an average of 174 new members per trainee, an income of over \$2.7 million in membership payments. Thus, at first glance, the Organising Works program could have been termed a 'recruiting success' in its first years. It was important for Organising Works to show this initial success as it earned the new organisation much needed credibility to justify its existence. It demonstrated to the union branches that Organising Works could quite quickly generate new members, and at a time when union membership continued to decline. However, there were two key problems with using numbers of members recruited as the measuring stick for the success of the program. Walton outlined these problems: using recruitment data "gave the message that the main purpose of the show was getting numbers; and it also gave the message (to individual unions) that you don't have to do anything else, this show is going to change things around. So we had to change course early." (Walton 2001). It became clear from the feedback of the organisers themselves that there was limited understanding of organising and thus support for the work from the sponsoring branches. The experience within one union, the National Union of Workers (NUW) which hired four graduates from the 1994 intake was not unusual: "They (OW graduates) were primarily engaged with going out to non-union sites and trying to get people to join the union. It was a bit hit and miss, there probably should have been more direction with it. Although they did sign up quite a few members, it sort of drifted, probably because the union didn't have enough firm leadership and direction in that area at that time. By eighteen months to two years after they started they had drifted off into servicing roles and the recruitment side of things just stopped" (Donnelly 2001).

Arguably, therefore, the major achievement for these early years was that OW had proved itself to be a viable, useful venture. Now it needed to change form, and move more towards its second objective, which was to develop an organising culture within the union branches so that the work of organising could be properly supported and

directed by the branch. However it was much more difficult for a small centre like Organising Works, which was under the wing of the ACTU body, to influence the organisational culture of an external body, a union branch.

### **Second Phase: Redirecting Strategy, 1996 - 1998**

In 1996, with the election of the Howard Liberal government, it quickly became evident that the Australian political environment in which trade unions operated was worsening. In July 1996, the Trade Union Training Authority (TUTA), the government funded training facility that had provided training expertise to OW since 1994, was abruptly closed, and OW was left without a training facility or funded trainers. At the time, the financial situation of many union branches was being seriously eroded by declining membership, the abolition of both 'closed shop' workplaces and the check-off system (automatic employer deduction of union dues) and significant job losses in a number of companies. Achieving financial support was difficult as most branches could not afford to sponsor new recruits. With the abolition of TUTA and the inability of branches to fund trainees, OW used the recruitment fund set up by the ACTU in 1995 to remain financially viable. It also introduced a 'buy now, pay later' scheme. Drawing on the ACTU capital, OW structured the funding system so that the unions could pay the cost of their trainees back over time. The sales pitch was that the trainee would generate some up front recruitment for the branch to recoup their investment. "We said to the unions, take the training on, it's going to pay you back soon, but you don't have to pay us for it just yet." (Walton 2001). Soon after, in a joint initiative between the ACTU and unions, a new TUTA was formed and continued to provide training to OW trainees. Organising Works won this financial support from the ACTU and the unions due to the recognition by the unions that, collectively, they needed a training body, and the established credibility of OW made it the logical choice. This strategy bought OW enough funding to continue, although the numbers of trainees dropped markedly from 41 in 1996 to 27 in 1997 and 23 in 1998. Also, because of this financial difficulty the ACTU decided to rotate the program between states. Importantly, however, this reduction in trainee numbers was not only due to declining union sponsorship of trainees, it also had to do with a significant change in the focus of OW itself, a change devised during 1995.

Based on the experience of its first eighteen months of operation, it was clear that cultural change within unions, the second goal of OW, was not going to be achieved from the bottom up. The OW Directors devised a strategy to start influencing other levels of officials within branches, particularly management levels of these branches. In late 1995 OW had brought out an organising manual, *Organising in Everything we Do – the Craft of organising and Recruiting*. Crosby describes the rationale for this development:

We could see that we had to target the higher levels of union branch management. It's a top down union movement. Its notionally democratic, but a kid organiser is not going to tell a union official how the branch should run, and if they do they just don't last. So we had to get the branch secretaries converted (Crosby 2001).

However, although this strategy was recognised in 1995, it was not until 1996 that OW could gain entry to presenting training in the branches. "We had written a nice plan in 1995. We knew we had to redirect our focus to changing the mindset of

existing officials and the culture of the branches, but how did we get in there? To get in to a branch, you had to be invited in. Back then, the idea of the ACTU dealing directly with the branches was heresy, we always had to deal with the affiliates" (Walton 2001). In late 1996 OW began convening a one-day course *titled Organising in Everything We Do*, a course later retitled *Skills of Organising* and extended to two days duration. This course outlined the main features of the organising model and was specifically aimed at taking the debate about organising to union branch management. It was made mandatory for every union who took on a graduate, to also put their personnel through these courses. Importantly, the course was delivered on the union site, a major breakthrough in that this was the first direct influence OW had on the union branches. This phase of training signalled a shift away from the 'theory based' classroom training originally conducted by OW towards a more 'skills based' approach, which began to dominate the curriculum from this time onwards.

The big shift was when we went into a union branch, sat in the middle of their existing culture and challenged it. We would openly take the debate to the officials. And that was with 'Organising in Everything we Do'. This is when we would go to a branch as a whole and try to get a whole branch change, not just target one or two organisers (Walton 2001)

In 1996, Organising Works also began running a three-week residential course called *Union Management* which was aimed at branch organisers and a two-week residential course called *Craft of Organising* which was targeted to senior branch officials, particularly secretaries and assistant secretaries. The OW Directors believed that, to present their message effectively, they needed a dedicated program that would guide senior officials fully through the change in mindset. Delivering part of the message could be potentially damaging as it could be misconstrued as criticism of the current modes of operating. "We needed to lock these people away for two weeks, so that we could get the full message across, so they didn't go away after a day thinking that we are saying everything they've done for the last twenty years is crap. They could also bounce the new ideas off each other" (Crosby 2001). In addition to attendance at and participation in this course, branch secretaries and assistant secretaries were encouraged to make an overseas field visit to a selected union. The aim of this was to allow them "to see what others are doing, get them out of their comfort zone" (Crosby 2001). In this way they could see and experience first hand how this new model of organising unionism worked in practice overseas. OW gauged this strategy, and the related courses as being very successful: "this is where we first hit the leader level. A lot of breakthroughs in the unions can be tracked back to the leaders attending the leaders' course." (Walton 2001). The process of cultural change had commenced.

Also in 1996 OW released *Working Together - Recruitment in the Workplace*, a combined course and workbook aimed at workplace delegates. This course, however, while devised and documented by OW, was geared to delivery by union branches trainers. OW would 'train the trainers' who would then train the members. This approach was devised both to ensure that a consistent organising message was conveyed properly to union delegates and members and also to alleviate some fears that branch leaders rightly held regarding how the message of organising would be received by members.

This is such a huge shift - but when the branch has done it there is an overwhelming positive response from the delegates. Members get it. They know that the union promising the world is ridiculous. They have seen the changes first hand. They're not dumb. When you honestly take it to them and give them a positive plan, then they respond (Walton 2001).

In 1997, this course was rewritten and renamed *Winning in the Workplace*. It was again revised in 1998 to be called *Our Workplace, Our Union*, and was based on a manual for delegates and access to a web site. OW realised that it was important that organising concepts were presented correctly to delegates as they realised it was difficult for branches to present organising concepts if they had not gained an understanding of these new ways of working themselves. "You lose elections if you go up to the delegates and say, by the way, you're doing all the work from now on. You have to have a proper process and take them through the new environment. But when you do, they get it. Some delegates don't like it and they go. But in fact many enjoy the new way of working because they get to be involved and get the kudos" (Crosby 2001).

In 1998, two further developments took place. First, the role of OW was expanded to allow it to employ a pool of specialist organisers who would be 'loaned' to a specific union for specific projects. Second, the role of the mentor to the OW trainee was reassessed because it had become apparent that this role was pivotal in supporting the trainees' effectiveness in their union. Initially, "mentor selection was left to the unions, as long as mentors attended training" (ACTU 1994a, 9). Following this review, OW increasingly would 'make recommendations' as to who should be the mentor within the individual union branches and stress the importance of good mentoring to the union concerned. However, its role never got to the point of deciding on the placement of OW graduates in a union based on its assessment of the mentor available, as occurred in the AFL-CIO in USA.

Arguably, this multi-faceted strategy developed between 1996 and 1998 started to influence the existing culture of union branches. Over the previous two years OW had firmly established its credibility as a training centre for recruiters, and it was this credibility that enabled that organisation to garner ACTU and union branch funding in 1996 to continue in operation. Building on this survival, OW officials realised that, to effect cultural change, they had to focus more attention to working with union branches directly. Accordingly, they targeted their message at the higher ranks of the union hierarchy; simply putting trained organisers into the lower ranks of the branches was not going to effectively achieve cultural change. The strategy of training graduates to actually undertake organising was not abandoned, but less emphasis was placed on this facet so fewer cohorts of graduates were hired. Subsequent to this strategic refocus OW officials started to see some change in the attitude of some union managements towards organising. At leadership courses, for example, "many branch officials ... admitted 'we've had trainees who have gone off to your courses, and they've come back very enthused, and we've effectively crushed their enthusiasm' " (Walton 2001). However, it was still difficult to generate a positive shift in attitude and, particularly, policy. One official freely admits: "I think its fair to say that back then a lot of unions thought it was just all bullshit. But every union leader could see that some radical change was needed. Although, rather than being radical it was probably stuff that we always should have been doing" (Donnelly 2001). One senior official from the Community and Public Sector Union made a similar point, if less colourfully: "It's been an evolutionary experience. The history of

the union's approach has been the opposite of organising, and so it was not easy for the union to embrace the idea of the workplace becoming more active. The culture has been for organisers to be the experts, provide advice and do things for people, which is contrary to the idea of what organising is about - empowering other people to become their own experts" (Larson 1999). In other words, cultural change is difficult. These new strategies did not achieve the widespread cultural change for which OW was looking. They did, however, gradually begin to influence the thinking of the branch leaders; a number of who now were converts to the organising model. Perhaps most importantly, this slow, evolutionary change was taking place against the backdrop of a continuing dramatic decline of union membership. Neither the OW program nor the other initiatives put in place by the ACTU to stem this decline has, apparently, worked. Some new initiative was needed.

### **Third Phase: Renewed Push, 1999 – 2001**

In 1999 the full weight of the ACTU leadership was put behind Organising Works with the publication of the [Unions@Work](#) report. This report was a product of a delegation of ACTU officials and union leaders who, during that year, visited, Belgium, Britain, Canada, Ireland, and the US. The impetus for the delegation was the ACTU concerns about both widespread changes in the Australian workplace and the continual decline in union membership. The delegation was sent with the purpose of "talking to leading unions about their strategies for growing stronger in the era of globalisation and the information age." ([Unions@Work](#) 1999, ii) This report outlined four areas where unions needed to focus their efforts for improvement. Two of these areas specifically related to organising, these were "boosting workplace organisation and union education so delegates can play a greater role in bargaining, recruiting and grievances"; and "investing in the organisation of non-union workplaces and making a commitment to expand into employment growth areas" ([Unions@Work](#) 1999, 3). The report also exhorted the branches to see organising as a priority "Funds are mostly spent on servicing and bargaining on behalf of existing members. And yet education, organising and recruitment is the key to growth, the key to better security and strength for union members and the key to continuing social and industrial advancement" ([Unions@Work](#) 1999, 3). It also established a committee of ACTU officials to "pursue and monitor the implementation of this report" ([Unions@Work](#) 1999, iii) pointing to ACTU commitment to the execution of these recommendations. The report also asserted that Australian unions "do not spend enough on growth". As a comparison they cite the AFL-CIO in the US that encourages local branches to spend at least 20 per cent of their funds on organising. The report also recommended that OW and TUTA be amalgamated to produce the Organising Centre, a merger consummated on 1<sup>st</sup> January 2001. This elevated the status of the OW program, and encouraged the individual union branches to more strongly take up the organising model. It also shifted the emphasis from recruiting, which had been the initial first objective of OW, to developing a true organising culture. Although the report does not specifically address cultural change within the branch it did acknowledge that the union branches had already undergone significant change due to amalgamations. However, it did state, "the process of change must continue with a greater emphasis on education and organising" ([Unions@Work](#) 1999, .34).

The organising model received significant stimulus from [unions@work](#). First, it located the model centrally within the union movement. Crosby noted of he and his fellow OW Joint Director, "before [Unions@Work](#) Chris and I could easily be

characterised as mad people off to one side; Unions@Work, meant that this stuff became much more politically acceptable" (Crosby 2001). Organising was clearly the dominant theme and focus at the 2000 ACTU Congress. One reviewer noted, "what is new is that unlike previous Congresses, at Congress 2000 we saw organising, for the first time, play a critical role in the debate over and formulation of a broader range of policies. ...the emphasis on organising as the key to the union's future" (Cooper 2000, 585).

Second, since 1999, the ACTU has channelled an increasing amount of its finances into OW. In 2001, the ACTU devoted approximately 40 per cent of its overall budget to the now-titled Organising Centre, a significant increase on the pre-1999 figure of 10 per cent. This indicates its commitment to the initiative. More generally, increased funding has flowed to the Centre through general union patronage of Organising Centre courses and contributions such as office space and teaching rooms from union bodies such as the NSW Trades and Labor Council.

Third, the report gave encouragement to OW to expand and develop new courses. In September 1999, the *Craft of Organising* course was extended to become the *Leaders in Organising* course, was targeted at team leaders and Assistant Secretaries of branches and was designed to increase their exposure to the concepts and practice of organising. Further, after the short *Organising in Everything We Do* was held at a union site, the officials would then be encouraged to attend the *Leaders in Organising* course. This followed the same format as the *Union Management* course - a three-week residential intensive, often followed up with the official making an overseas visit later in the year to other organising sites overseas. What OW found was that, after a union official had attended a 'leaders' course, they would then go back to their branch and recommend that a number of their 'middle managers' also attended the program. In this way there was a flow-on effect where the new organising mindset would gradually filter down through a branch. In 2000 the practice of organising was further refined with OW setting up its own Organising Unit comprising of four 'Lead Organisers'. These were OW graduates who also had experience in the field and were considered to be among the top organisers in Australia. Their role was defined as "to assist unions on a one on one basis to implement [unions@work](#) and shift to organising". (ACTU 2001b, 9) These lead organisers are loaned to a union branch to initiate strategic planning in the branch, give advice on how the branch can free up resources for organising, and facilitate the development of campaigns, all with an aim to actually implement an organising program. The rationale for this was not only to be able to organise campaigns which would deliver strategic victories for organising but more importantly, by working alongside relatively inexperienced organisers, the trainee organiser would receive rigorous behavioural skills mentoring and witness how organising worked in practice. So far, however, this has not been particularly successful. The program was self-funding, which meant that the branch needed to sponsor and pay for the lead organiser to work on staff for an agreed time. With the branch funding the organiser, they then assumed control of the resource, and often the organiser's leadership efforts were overwhelmed by branch politics. This culminated in a string of only marginally successful efforts by these organising teams. In reviewing this strategy, Crosby concludes "we tried to overcome people's hostility and be diplomatic by getting them to be polite and to go in and say I'm just another organiser like you and I'd like to work alongside you. But they had to put up with all kinds of internal politics and were not given sufficient authority to operate successfully" (Crosby 2001). It has also been particularly difficult for Organising

Works to retain these lead organisers; they are highly sought after due to their expertise and now there are only two left out of an original team of four. However, the Organising Centre is not planning to abandon this program, but rather to be more selective about the deployment of this resource in the future. Now they will only put lead organisers into branches where their leadership role is clearly established: "now I'm going to go in there (to the branch) and say here is John, he is one of the best organisers in the country, he is going to be your lead organiser. If you don't like this arrangement, tell me now, and we will take him to another union, because we haven't got time to stuff around" (Crosby 2001).

In 2001 the Organising Centre trialed two further innovations. It further extended its scope by offering a consultancy that provided a full review of individual union branches. This consultancy is normally undertaken by Michael Crosby and is an in-depth review of branch operations as well as an analysis of under performing areas. It also includes recommendations for cost cutting and operational improvements and is used to establish "what they need to do to survive, and what the sort of structure they need to move towards for the future"(Crosby 2001). Finally, the Organising Centre has capitalised on this growing interest in organising by convening a major conference for delegates. The Australasia Organising Conference was held in March 2001 and was jointly sponsored by the ACTU, the Labor Council of NSW and the New Zealand Council of Trade Unions. It attracted approximately 650 union delegates from Australia and New Zealand, and issues such as the direction of unions in the region, campaigning, developing workplace leadership and organising strategies and techniques were discussed. The conference aimed to broaden the union perception of the role of the Organising Centre, to: "shift union perception of the Organising centre from simply delivering courses to broader consultancy and assistance." (ACTU 2001b, 9) Giving the keynote speech at the conference, Michael Crosby argued that it "would have been unimaginable two years ago to try to organise a conference like this. We would have been meeting in a phone box." A second conference is planned for 2002.

Overall, in the period since 1999 OW has become much more central to the union movement. It has secured a more solid financial status, developed a wider and better targeted range of courses, has garnered wide support for its organising philosophy and has significant political support within the ACTU and key national unions. So, has Organising Works actually worked?

### **Assessment: Has Organising Works Worked?**

Much of the first objective of OW - recruit, train and support new union recruiter/organisers – was relatively easy to achieve. Indeed, during 1994 and 1995, OW was swamped with applications for traineeships and, drawing on the initial \$1 million ACTU funding, recruited significant numbers of dedicated, enthusiastic young applicants, a not inconsiderable majority of whom remain within the union movement. Relatively soon, however, OW realised that it was naive to place new graduates at the base level of the union branch and expect to achieve its second goal - cultural change. Although Organising Works achieved a level of credibility in the early years through recruiting new members, it did not, and could not, achieve effective union cultural change. Walton freely admits that it was "an absurdity to think that we could put a bunch of people in the bottom pile of the union and think that we could get cultural change" (Walton 2001). One OW graduate of 1994 has argued that, although Organising Works talked about cultural change, neither it nor the union

branches, at that stage, understood how to go about implementing it. Nevertheless, the potential existed: "I can say that Organising Works has provided a forum for discussion around all these topics. The program has opened up the debate within the union movement. ... When unions stop being self-enclosed, talking in acronyms and issuing challenges to prove left wing credentials, it will be ready to take the step forward that programs such as Organising Works promise" (Blake 1997, 174).

By late 1994 it had become clear to OW officials that promoting change through this 'bottom-up' method was likely to be stymied by the traditional layers of union organisational hierarchy; in short, this was an ineffective and inefficient way of trying to produce organisational change. The question could be raised as to whether OW should rather have started training branch secretaries in 1994, instead of commencing the program by training young organisers. Walton argues that such an approach was not feasible in practice:

In retrospect should we have done it differently? Yes. Could we have got to the higher levels earlier? I don't think so. It would be nice to be able to say in marble 'we should have had all the leaders in a room and we should have debated this all out', but the reality is that this is also unrealistic. In part, we needed a bottom-up impetus for change before we had a hope of getting the top people to listen, or even getting the top people into a room together. Getting to these top levels was a sign of the change that had been occurring in the bottom levels (Walton 2001)

In a strategy document produced in November 1994, OW announced its intention "to generate recognition among union leaders and organisers that organising non union members is a priority" (ACTU 1994c, 2). However, in those early years, the OW strategy to reach the leader level was simply "addressing union executives and organiser meetings and federal councils", and "addressing ACTU and executive councils and trades and labour councils" (ACTU 1994c, 2). This second goal of developing an organising culture within union branches was proving altogether a much more difficult target to achieve. In practice, OW was asking union officials, in many cases officials who had successfully used the servicing model, to change their whole method of operating, a method that, among other things, had delivered these officials their current positions. Further, branches were being asked to change at the very time many of them were undergoing major structural change through mergers and were also faced with the major challenge of moving away from the centralised arbitral model towards a system of enterprise bargaining. Perhaps inevitably, the impact of the new kid on the block, with its new philosophy frequently interpreted by branch officials as an attack on their servicing model, was very limited. Cultural change is always difficult. The possibility of effecting change from outside the branches is even more difficult and time consuming. In this context, the achievements of OW in the early years were limited but important: first, simple survival of the organisation when many officials thought it a waste of time and money; second, the induction of a number of bright, young, enthusiastic employees into the union movement; and, third, it became the focal point for a debate around the concept of organising, and the relevance of that concept to Australian unions.

From 1996 onwards, a number of factors worked to increase the relevance of OW and its philosophy. First, membership density had continued to decline significantly during the mid-1990s; palpably, the merger wave of the first half of the 1990s decade, the union movement's strategic response to declining membership, had not

succeeded in halting decline. Consequently, the OW approach assumed more strategic importance. Second, the election of a conservative federal government in March 1996, with its neo-liberal agenda that included, among other things, an emphasis on individual contracts of employment and a reduced role for the AIRC – the traditional ‘supplier’ of union membership, also enhanced the appeal of the organising model. Third, the internal union debate around the organising philosophy gradually won a number of key converts among union leaderships. Together, those factors provided a basis for the growth of Organising Works. As discussed earlier, it re-structured and re-targeted its courses, and grew steadily during its second phase.

The OW focus shifted from training graduates to training union management. This period was fundamental in influencing union branch officials to take a more favourable attitude towards organising as a concept. Although it is debatable how much organising was actually implemented in practice, it was not so much the practice of organising that was needed at this time, but rather a re-education of union officials towards the organising model. The full adoption of the organising model meant significant transformation of union practice. For the union official, it posed nothing less than a fundamental re-definition of the meaning of their entire role. Therefore, being allowed to present the organising message to officials within their own branches was a significant step forward for OW; it marked the start of its ability to stimulate cultural change within the branch. This was recognised by a handful of officials, for example: "The experience has been that Organising Works is an important part in attempting to change the thinking in unions about what constitutes organising and what organising does" (Larson 1999).

Despite these advances, by 1999 the adoption of the organising model by most union branches was still problematic. The [Unions@Work](#) report conferred much needed credibility on to the program. It brought OW into the union mainstream and an increasing number of unions begin to take the rhetoric of the organising model more seriously. The subsequent elevation of the main author of the report to the secretaryship of the ACTU, and the subsequent increase of funding flowing to OW, and the increasing support of union leaders, both at the branch and at the national level, combined to give the organising philosophy a major boost. A further boost was provided in 2000 with the first increase in absolute union membership for twelve years. The Organising Centre report for 2000 claimed, "the year 2000 saw the most rapid progress in achieving cultural change among Australian unions. Six years of hard work in taking the debate about the importance of organising has paid off with significant progress with a number of unions" (ACTU 2001b, 1). Clearly, the Organising Centre is now a well-financed, mainstream, influential organisation, an organisation with a coherent message to sell the union movement. That message is increasingly being well received by significant sectors of the union movement. In short, the battle for cultural superiority has been won.

And yet, if this battle has been won, the war is not going well. While the 2000 union data, as noted above, detailed an increase in absolute membership, density continued to decline from 25.7 per cent in 1999 to 24.7 per cent in 2000. Also, recall that density in 1994, the year OW commenced, was 35 per cent. These figures show that, of itself, the organising model has not, so far, been effective in stemming the decline in membership density. Donnelly of the NUW points out that measuring the program in terms of numbers does not take into account the more enduring values of the program: "it can't just be about getting numbers of members. If you look at it purely economically, they don't have to sign up many members to recoup the cost of

their training. But the focus can't just be on the immediate economic return. I don't want officials just running around getting numbers, and then leaving it to someone else to deliver on promises, and not thinking about what they leave behind" (Donnelly 2001). Nevertheless, at the end of the day, membership is an important measuring stick. A union movement that, no matter how well organised, represents only a small proportion of the workforce is not as important a social partner or actor in the macro-level industrial relation system, and not as important an influence on overall workers' wages and conditions.

Moreover, it remains the position that the organising philosophy still has much headway to make within Australian unionism. For example, at the 2001 Australasian organising conference, during his keynote address, Michael Crosby asked those members of the audience dedicated to the organising function to stand up. Out of a room of approximately 650 people, only twenty-three members stood. Of this figure, Crosby says: "although I did predict it (the response), for me those sort of numbers are a disaster" (Crosby 2001). Further, a relatively small number of union branches have actually embarked on fully-fledged external organising programs - somewhere between a dozen to fifteen branches and probably only two or three unions as a whole have actually implemented long term external organising programs. To see the outcome of eight years of work producing these small numbers is not very encouraging.

Why has the organising philosophy not had a markedly greater impact on Australian unions? One US study comparing and contrasting 'organising' with 'non-organising' local unions suggested a combination of leadership and some crisis in the local were two key factors in driving the local towards an organising model (Voss & Sherman 2002). More generally, positive leadership is identified in much of the organisational change literature as a key to achieving cultural transformation. For example, Patrickson *et al.* (1995, 4) contend, "most organisations accomplish large-scale metamorphosis successfully only if they have appropriate leadership". Crosby suggested similar influences were at work in Australian union transformation: "there needs to be a crisis in the branch, a capable leader and a leader that has some courage. It's very difficult to do this when the leader is subject to electoral challenge, because then they are just hanging on trying to win the election, and this is difficult time to make a radical change" (Crosby 2001). Typically a crisis would manifest in the form of haemorrhaging of branch membership. Walton adds that, in his experience, the branch leaders need to have seen another way of working. This has often been sparked by the branch secretary attending the two week *Organising in Everything We Do* or the three week *Leaders in Organising course*, along with taking an overseas trip where they have seen the organising model in action. Accordingly, one of the reasons for a slow adoption of the organising model in Australia may well be the long-term retention/re-election of branch officials. Pocock describes this institutional sclerosis thus: "the pervasive culture of resistance to electoral challenge and of protection of incumbents, accompanied by the limited career opportunities available to the defeated union leader, make for a stodgy and poorly circulating mass of leaders in some locations. Many such leaders have been unable, perhaps unwilling, to effectively build a level of workplace activism that is essential to genuinely democratic unions" (Pocock 1998, 27). A closely related factor is that, even when the need for change is recognised by a leader, it is very difficult to actually implement change due to the constraints of the union political system. Crosby is well aware that "its one thing to say that organising is the policy of the union movement, but it's another to get a union secretary to say I'm going to sack

people who refuse to get on board with this new model of unionism. When you realise that some of the people that they would have to be prepared to sack are people who helped them get elected in the first place, this is a very hard slog" (Crosby 2001).

In many ways, therefore, the organising philosophy is currently at a critical juncture among Australian trade unions. There is no doubt that the last eight years of training graduates and union officials has fostered receptivity towards the organising model, and acceptance of organising as a goal. Related to this training, it is highly likely that, within virtually every union branch, at least some officials will have adopted the 'organising mindset'; a number of these officials are graduates of the OW program, graduates who are increasingly climbing the union officialdom ladder. Further, the Organising Centre now has the strong support of what might be termed the national union leadership group, both at the ACTU and at the individual union level. Overall, therefore, it is not difficult to paint a potentially positive scenario for the organising model. Threats to such a scenario arise both from internal union factors, such as politics and inertia at the branch level, and external factors such as the range of factors that have contributed to the decline of union density including industry restructuring, the changing nature of work and increasingly hostile employers. To ensure that the positive scenario is achieved, the Organising Centre is going to have to, among other things, build up the bank of skilled organisers and work to retain existing organisers, further develop its mentoring system for now graduates, convince more branch officials to adopt fully the organising model, provide skilled strategic planning and research support staff to support branch campaigns, and continue to work toward the long-term goal of fundamentally changing union organisational culture. Over the next few years, some minimum level of organising success will be critical both for the continuance of the Organising Centre, and for the union movement in Australia to start re-building critical mass. If success is not achieved in this time period, the union movement will likely become a relatively marginal and niche player in Australian industrial relations, rather than the representative of Australian workers, as in the past.

## **CONCLUSION**

Organising Works/Centre has now been in operation for approximately eight years. During that time, it has achieved a number of successes, including the recruitment of a significant number of young activists into the union movement, the training of a wide range of union officials, the increasingly wide spreading of the organising gospel and, of course, particularly in the early years, its own survival. Its impact has not, however, been felt on union density figures, although the increase in absolute membership in 2000 has raised the hopes of union leaders, and, so far, the practice of external organising is still being embarked upon only by a handful of branches. So that unionism does not become a niche activity, practiced only in pockets of the economy, the Organising Centre needs to ensure that organising practice is more widely adopted. The groundwork has been laid, and laid well. Chris Walton (2001) has described himself and his colleagues as "social arsonists, we go around putting people on fire, not putting out fires". The next few years, possibly three to five years, will determine if the fires have indeed flared and the needed cultural transformation taken place.

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