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**'STRATEGIC UNIONISM': NOT ENOUGH TO
STEM THE DECLINE IN TRADE UNION
MEMBERSHIP?**

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ABSTRACT

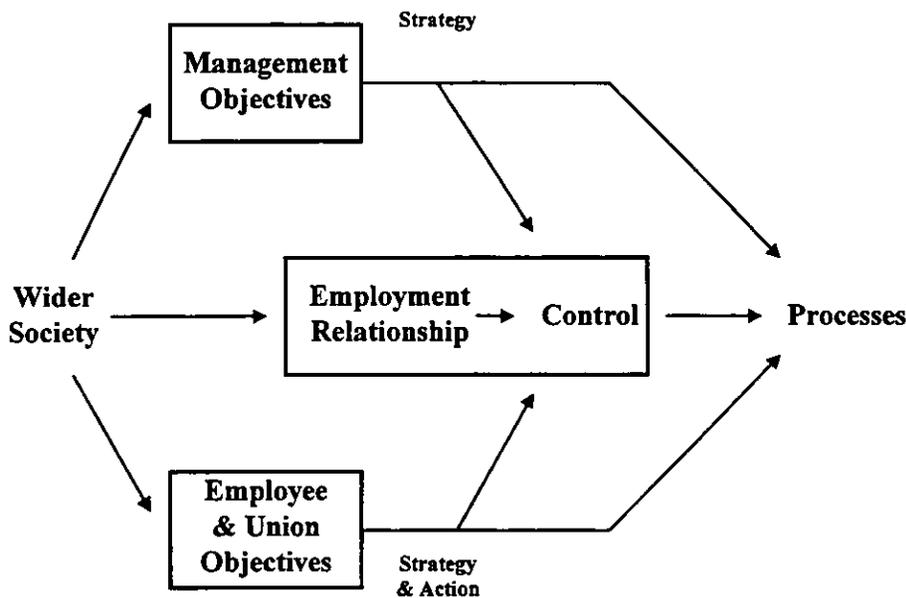
A number of key models of the employment relationship advocate that 'strategic choice', or the use of strategy, is of equal importance to all actors, including trade unions, in the employment relationship. Research into the use of strategy by the Australian trade union movement, however, is a neglected area. This paper reviews the 'strategic unionism' approach formally adopted by the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) in 1987 within the bounds of Fells' model of the employment relationship (Fells 1989). The approach is reviewed in terms of the factors of wider society, the objectives of relevance and effectiveness, its evolution, and the approaches level of success with regard to trade union density and membership. The paper finds that not only has the success of 'strategic unionism' been constrained by environmental conditions, but that several of its key features - the Accord and union amalgamations - may have undermined its potential impact.

'STRATEGIC UNIONISM': NOT ENOUGH TO STEM THE DECLINE IN TRADE UNION MEMBERSHIP?

INTRODUCTION

The Australian process of industrial relations has been the subject of discussion for many years, with various authors attempting to describe its inner workings, relationships and actors. In the 1950s Dunlop developed the Systems Model of Industrial Relations, in which the industrial relations system is considered to be an analytical sub-system of the wider society or 'total social system' (Deery, Plowman and Walsh, 1994, p.18). Kochan, Katz and McKersie (1986) then built on this model, proposing an alternative explanatory framework known as the Strategic Choice Theory, on the basis that "industrial relations practices and outcomes were shaped by the interactions of environmental forces along with the strategic choices and values of employers, employees, trade unions and governments" (p.5). Fells (1989) then extended this work by including the concept of strategy or strategic choice in his model of the employment relationship (Refer to Figure 1).

Figure 1: Fells' Model of the Employment Relationship



Source: Fells, R. 1989. 'The Employment Relationship, Control and Strategic Choice in the Study of Industrial Relations', *Labour & Industry*, 2 (3), p.472.

Fells' model of the employment relationship suggests that factors of the 'wider society' - social, economic, legal - combine to form the context within which management, employees and unions relate, and with which they must contend in order to achieve maximum return from the employment relationship. Fells suggests that the parties do this by forming strategies on the basis of core objectives, as a means of handling, or relating to, the environment.

Both the institutional framework of industrial relations proposed by Kochan, Katz and McKersie (1986), and Fells' model of the employment relationship emphasise that the strategies or strategic choices of all the key actors in the employment or industrial relationship are of considerable importance to the resulting industrial relations outcomes or processes. Yet, the predominant focus of writing in this field, whether in the area of strategic management or strategic human resource management, focuses solely on management's

use of strategy in explaining industrial relations activity. As a result the use of strategy by trade unions, in relating to the environment, and in attempting to remain relevant in the eyes of members, has largely been ignored.

The use of strategy by trade unions is a neglected area, as although "trade unions are no different from other organizations in that they have to operate in an environment which is generally malign...the notion of organizational perspective on strategy (as opposed to union practice, action and reaction...) has not been fully explored" (Fells, 1989, p.487). It is therefore hoped that the remainder of this paper will begin to redress this imbalance by exploring the concept of 'strategic unionism' (ACTU/TDC, 1987) within the broad boundaries of Fells' Model of the Employment Relationship.

STRATEGIC UNIONISM: TOWARDS A DEFINITION

The concept of strategic unionism has existed in the Australian trade union movement's vocabulary for more than a decade, yet few attempts have been made to fully define the concept or to discuss it at any great length. The initial definition was provided in *Australia Reconstructed: ACTU/TDC Mission to Western Europe* (1987), in which it was given to be:

- *a tendency for trade unions to go beyond a narrow focus on wages and conditions;*
- *the generation and implementation of centrally co-ordinated goals and integrated strategies...;*
- *sophisticated participation in tripartite bodies;*
- *a commitment to growth and wealth creation as well as its equitable distribution;*
- *the active pursuit of these goals and strategies in their own right both inside and outside of the arena of industrial relations; with*
- *the emphasis upon strong local and workplace organisation; and*
- *the extensive delivery of education and research services.*

(ACTU/TDC, 1987, p.169)

The initial approach to strategic unionism therefore entailed a shift in emphasis by unions from dealing exclusively in industrial matters, disputes and problems, to a position in which they embraced the political arena. The original definition also defined the concept from an extremely macro perspective, which provided a very nationally focused, ACTU oriented approach for the Australian union movement in its entirety. It therefore appeared that the Australian trade union movement hoped to gain greater involvement and control in Australia's political decision-making processes, which in turn aimed to provide it with an opportunity to increase its own importance and relevance to members. More importantly, however, the union movement's embrace of strategic unionism indicated a willingness to adopt a proactive and strategic oriented approach, rather than the traditionally reactive approach for which it was renowned (Gardner and Palmer, 1992; Watts, 1994; Evatt Foundation, 1995). Australian unionism had until this point been based on the movement's need to react to the environment, rather than plan for it (Way, 1992; Ford, 1983).

WHY STRATEGIC UNIONISM - FACTORS OF WIDER SOCIETY?

The Australian union movement's acceptance of the strategic unionism approach was described as an historic watershed (Ogden, 1993; Evatt Foundation, 1995). Why was this the case? The answer most commonly given, and outlined above, is that for the movement it indicated a move from its traditional reactive approach to a more proactive stance (Gardner and Palmer, 1992; Watts, 1994; Evatt Foundation, 1995). Traditionally, union strategies had been 'improvised' (Easson, 1992), a laxadassical approach on behalf of the Australian union movement which was a direct result of its protected position. This position was given to the unions through the registration, conciliation and arbitration provisions of the centralised industrial relations system initially provided for by the *Conciliation and Arbitration Act 1904* (Cwlth) (Gollan, 1968; Martin, 1981; Hagan, 1983; Deery and Plowman, 1985; Evatt Foundation, 1995), which led not only to a heavy reliance on the tribunal system rather than on itself, but also to complacency as the system protected them from the competition normally found in a 'free market'. The union movement's open

acceptance of strategic unionism in 1987 however, acted not only as an indicator of change, but also as a clear divider in the history of the union movement (Ogden, 1993; Briggs, 1994; Evatt Foundation, 1995). It signified the acceptance and realisation on behalf of the unions that the movement was in a period of both dynamic change and definite crisis (Rawson, 1992; Ogden, 1993), and that a formal strategic approach was required for survival. It revealed the ACTU's acceptance of the Swedish LO's (union movement's) belief that without a long-term strategy unions might remain trapped in a reactive approach, with little influence in setting the national agenda, or in pursuing the interests of their members (ACTU/TDC, 1987). Frenkel (1987) expressed the importance of the need for a strategic approach by the Australian union movement, when he wrote:

...unless Australian unions develop a more systematic, strategic approach to a variety of problems associated with industrial change, the union movement will cease to be a significant force...the working population will then be left largely unprotected...

(Frenkel, 1987, p.2)

This significant change in direction by the union movement was driven by several key changes to both its internal and external environment, or 'Wider Society' in reference to Fells' Model, which incorporated to threaten the survival of the movement, plunging it into crisis (Rawson, 1992; Ogden, 1993). These forces were said to include technological change, and workplace and management style changes, however the key forces were said to take the form of:

Globalisation

One of the major changes of the 1980s to impact on the trade union movement was the globalisation of the economy, which left Australia in a stark position (ACTU/TDC, 1987, Lambert, 1991; Ogden, 1993; Booth, 1994; Mansfield, 1996). This position was one in which Australia faced massive economic challenges and chronic problems in the areas of: budget deficits; foreign debt and balance of trade deficits; the terms of trade; the international competitiveness of the manufacturing sector; and in declining markets for Australian agricultural produce (ACTU, 1987). Booth (1994) suggested that the increased internationalisation of the economy had, through changes such as the reduction in tariffs and financial deregulation, opened up Australian business to the rest of the world. In addition, the ACTU/TDC (1987) and Lambert (1991) provided that the opening up of Australia to global competition highlighted the poor state of the nation's balance of payments and international trade record. This situation needed to be remedied if Australia was to be competitive. Booth (1994) suggested that globalisation, resulted in a greater focus on micro-economic reform, structural change, and productivity. These were all issues which directly affected unions. The globalisation of the economy therefore, according to Lambert (1991), resulted in:

[A] Broadening [of] the scope of the trade union role to include strategic concerns and productivity and the competitiveness of the enterprise in the international market place [which] required a profound change in the structure and practice of unionism.

(Lambert, 1991, p.3)

This change of emphasis to one which required a strategic approach, and a certain amount of co-operation, occurred as the well-being of union members was reliant on the success, and hence the competitiveness of their relevant enterprises (Booth, 1994).

The Membership Crisis

The second key force which drove changes in the union movement in the 1980s, was an internal problem, namely a decline in union membership density - the number of union members as a proportion of the employed workforce (ACTU, 1987) - which reached crisis proportions (ACTU, 1987; Hearn, 1989; Way, 1991; Lambert, 1991; Mansfield, 1996). Based on figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) union density had not only undergone a dramatic decline from 51 per cent in 1976 to 42 per cent in 1988 (Deery and Plowman, 1991), but the Australian union movement had also faced, between 1986-1988, the greatest decline in union density since the Great Depression (Way, 1991; Lambert, 1991). Numerous causes

of this decline in union density have been suggested, with the majority of explanations falling into two categories. The first category explained the fall in macro-economic terms, and suggested that the causes were poor economic performance and high levels of unemployment (Palmada, 1988; Patmore, 1992). The second category, which was also the most extensively discussed, revolved around the structural changes in the composition of the workforce. The 1980s comprised several fundamental changes in the structure of the workforce which meant that it became increasingly heterodox. That is, it was impacted on by an increase in both part-time and casual workers; an increase in the percentage of female and youth workers; growth in minority groups; and finally those areas which underwent the greatest growth were those industries which had traditionally been poorly unionised (Palmada, 1988; Shaw, Walton and Walton, 1991; Deery and Plowman, 1991; Way, 1991; Rawson, 1992). In addition to these core causes of the union density decline of the 1980s, Lambert (1991) also identified cultural and management changes as a cause of the decline. He suggested that the Australian culture, and in turn Australian workplaces, had moved further toward a culture founded on individualism. Lambert (1991) provided that the growth of this culture had acted to accelerate the decline in union membership, and further contended that this underlied the "...growing disinterest and disenchantment with trade unionism" (Lambert 1991, p.2) held by employees. Finally, Palmada (1988) stressed that the union movement, and its membership, had also been the focus of an offensive by the New Right. Led by the Business Council of Australia (BCA) and the Confederation of Australian Industry (CAI), this offensive aimed to discourage unionisation and to reduce the role of the Conciliation and Arbitration Commission in wage fixing by shifting bargaining to the plant or industry level (Palmada, 1988, p.19)

A multitude of forces therefore contributed to the 9 per cent decline in union density, which occurred between 1976 and 1988. This factor, combined with the effects of globalisation, plunged the trade union movement in Australia into crisis. Strategic unionism, or a concerted effort to utilise or adopt strategies for the future, was perceived as the solution to this problem. In terms of Fells' model, the Australian trade union movement's recognition of the need for strategy was an attempt on the movement's behalf to gain, or more appropriately regain, a sense of control (Dufty and Fells, 1989) in regard to its relationships with employers and 'wider society'.

OBJECTIVES - THE DRIVING FORCE BEHIND STRATEGIC UNIONISM

The introduction of the imported concept of strategic unionism into the Australian union movement in 1987, resulted not only in a greater emphasis on the proactive and long-term use of strategy, but also acted to formalise the objectives of the movement. As a consequence of the strategic unionism approach being imported into Australia from the European countries of Austria, Norway and Sweden, the Australian union movement adopted the broadened formal objectives of the three European countries mentioned (ACTU/TDC, 1987; Ogden, 1993). This adoption saw the initiation of a transitional period, in which the historical Australian union objectives of maintaining or improving working conditions (Webb and Webb, cited in Gardner and Palmer, 1992) and wages; the provision of direct services; organisational security; and political involvement (Dufty, 1968; Deery, 1983; Deery and Plowman, 1991) were extended. The broadened objectives were first outlined in *Australia Reconstructed*, in which the prime objective of strategic unionism, although idealistic and philosophical, was held to be full employment, and it was based on this objective that the strategies, policies, and actions of strategic unionism were to be constructed, implemented, and appraised (ACTU/TDC, 1987). The additional key objectives of strategic unionism were given to include:

- *steady improvements in the social welfare system;*
- *an incomes policy which reflects economic conditions and maintains and improves wageearners' living standards;*
- *a comprehensive labour market policy including training;*
- *an effective investment strategy including collective capital formation; and*
- *an industry and trade policy which promotes productivity and industry development.*

(ACTU/TDC, 1987, p.169)

These objectives suggested an extension from a narrow focus on wages and conditions, to one of national significance and influence. A national focus which potentially placed the union movement in a position of influence in areas historically within the political domain. As a consequence, the union movement would have an influential role in macroeconomic policy, trade and industry development, industry restructuring, labour market policy and industrial democracy (ACTU/TDC, 1987; Ogden, 1993). Consequently, the original objectives of the union movement were expanded, theoretically, by the adoption of the strategic unionism concept, to a position in which the union movement was not only concerned with wealth creation, but also with its equitable distribution (ACTU/TDC, 1987; McCollow, 1990; Deery and Plowman, 1991; Ogden, 1993; Watts, 1994).

If these broadened objectives are viewed within the bounds of Fells' model of the employment relationship, then the Australian trade union movement's attempt at achieving a position of national significance and influence, can be given to be motivated by the two objectives Fells' believes to be intrinsic in any trade union, and become sub-objectives. Given that the strongest and most primal motive for any union decision or action is survival, the first of these central objectives is the maintenance of relevance and viability, whilst the second objective is effectiveness. Both of these objectives are interrelated and act to reinforce the other, given that the more effective a trade union is the more members it will attract and the more viable it will become. Fells (1989) contends that the effective union therefore has better resources, which in turn allows it to operate even more effectively.

The crux of Fells' view of trade union objectives, if accepted, is that the objectives of strategic unionism, published in *Australia Reconstructed* (ACTU/TDC, 1987), were secondary objectives intended to support the movement's more essential objectives of maintaining its relevance (and viability) and effectiveness. Through the adoption of strategic unionism the movement sought to advance its members interests by becoming actively involved and influential in areas beyond their traditional concern with wages and conditions. In doing so, in attaining a position in which they could influence government policy on a national level, the movement hoped to make unions more relevant to workers in society. The formal recognition and adoption of a strategic approach to union management in 1987, therefore aimed to increase the relevance of unions to the members of wider society, and to increase the effectiveness of trade unions, adding to the viability of the movement. All of these factors should have improved the crisis position in which the Australian trade union movement had found itself during the 1980s, due to changes in wider society and dramatic falls in trade union density. Whether or not the formal adoption of strategic unionism and its objectives achieved this end, however, is an important question.

STRATEGIC UNIONISM: AN ORGANIC CONCEPT?

In 1987, when strategic unionism was first conceptualised in *Australia Reconstructed* (ACTU/TDC, 1987), and its objectives first outlined, it was considered to be a watershed in the history of the Australian trade union movement. Yet over the past decade the concept of strategic unionism, and its objectives, have changed to keep pace with the needs of the union movement and wider society, as the macro focus provided for by its original conceptualisation was found to be too narrow and too limiting. The boundaries of strategic unionism were initially expanded to encompass a micro, or a shop floor focus, as it was deemed necessary for members at all levels to be empowered (Booth, Lavery, and McCreadie, 1989). A view supported by McCollow (1990, p.13) who suggested that "...strategic unionism fundamentally...[meant] going beyond the old agenda of wages and conditions - not just at the national level, but also at the shop floor level." The first revision of strategic unionism therefore saw a shift in meaning, from a largely macro focus to one which placed greater emphasis and significance on a micro focus.

The concept was further refined in the mid 1990s to bring it in line with the findings and recommendations of *Unions 2001: A Blueprint for Trade Union Activism* (Evatt Foundation, 1995) which found that the union movement's survival beyond the 20th century and into the 21st required a more militant strategic unionism than that originally proposed in *Australia Reconstructed: ACTU/TDC Mission to Western Europe* (ACTU/TDC, 1987). The movement required a strategic unionism characterised by:

- *An independent and strategic set of union policy targets and visions.*
- *Well-resourced and well-managed trade unions which employ 'state of the art' technology and organising tactics to represent their members.*
- *A more radical democratisation of the union movement and the workplace.*
- *A more dynamic involvement of rank and file unionists in all aspects of union decision-making and action.*
- *cooperation with industry and government where this is in the interests of workers.*
- *A continuing forceful challenge to economic rationalism, both within and outside the labour movement.*
- *An uncompromising opposition to the fragmentation of workers' rights and conditions.*
- *A set of long-term strategic national policy goals and outcomes with the means for campaigning and implementing them.*
- *A capacity for pro-active unionism, in which unionists influence the agenda and do not just react defensively.*

(Evatt Foundation, 1995, p.281)

This conceptualisation of strategic unionism was broader and more inclusive than the early approaches to the concept, and attempted to incorporate both the original macro view and the later micro focus which had developed in the area, providing a holistic approach. The Evatt Foundation's definition recognised the need for strategic unionism to be taken up at all levels of the union movement, ranging from the peak representative bodies to the individual member on the shop floor. It recognised the need for a participatory and democratic framework. A framework which would foster and support the vision and strategies required for the union movement to realise the transition from being reactive to proactive. Hence, the resulting view of strategic unionism had moved away from the original macro conceptualisation provided by *Australia Reconstructed*, in which great emphasis was placed on political involvement (Ewer et al. 1987). Instead, it was proposed that "strategic unionism encompasses relations with government, particularly Labour in government, but it is a strategy which is broader and more profound than [sic] this relationship. Strategic unionism requires that the union movement guards its independence: strategic unionism is a strategy which is capable of review and adjustment..." (Evatt Foundation, 1995, p.278) in the face of the changing environment, and the membership crisis that threatened the very survival of the Australian union movement.

Since the concept of strategic unionism came to the fore in Australian industrial relations over a decade ago it has been in a continuous period of transformation. During this period it was expanded, and broadened from its original narrow focus to become an umbrella term for "a multilayered response to the varied demands of the crisis confronting the union movement..." (Briggs, 1994, p.2), in which emphasis had been placed on the creation or building of a long-term strategy, and the process of working towards its achievement.

The objectives of strategic unionism, first outlined in *Australia Reconstructed*, were designed to support the original conceptualisation of the approach. As a result these too have been modified over the past decade to ensure that they remained in line with and supportive of the reconceptualised approach to strategic unionism outlined in *Unions 2001: A Blueprint for Trade Union Activism* (Evatt Foundation, 1995). In support of this 'militant' approach, the Evatt Foundation (1995) provided a new core objective for strategic unionism, which differed to the original strategic unionism objective of full employment. It went beyond this and provided that the major long-term objective of the union movement in Australia was "...to play an active role in creating an egalitarian society of the 21st century..." (Evatt Foundation, 1995, p.282). This extended focus of the Australian union movement's future was then given substance, and was stated to include the following:

- *Full employment involving high skill, creative, responsible and well-paid jobs.*
- *A stable and growing economy and society with high quality, efficient and profitable industry and services.*
- *Excellent social services and protection for the less well off.*
- *Greater democratic control of the ownership and operation of public and private businesses.*

- *An environmentally sustainable economy and society.*
- *Greater equality within a rich and tolerant multi-cultural society.*
- *Greater democratic social and individual rights, choice and control over the dimensions of each person's life.*

(Evatt Foundation 1995, p.282)

The objectives of strategic unionism prescribed by the Evatt Foundation in 1995 differed greatly from those first proposed by the ACTU/TDC (1987) in *Australia Reconstructed*. Although they retained a macro focus, they reduced the importance initially placed on achievement through a political approach, and took on more of an egalitarian approach, with a greater focus on equity. In addition, the approach wanted to achieve equity not only for members of the union movement, but for all the members of Australian society. Through the remodelled objectives it was hoped that the Australian trade union movement would, over time, contribute to, or be influential in attaining a 'better society'. Again, such an objective can be considered to 'fit' within the boundaries of Fells' view that relevance and effectiveness are the two primary objectives intrinsic in all trade unions, because by choosing to work towards equity for all members of society and the realisation of a better society, it was clearly evident that the trade unions of Australia were attempting to increase their relevance to the members of 'wider society'.

THE KEY OUTCOMES OF STRATEGIC UNIONISM

The Accord, productivity-based enterprise bargaining and union amalgamations have all been lauded as outcomes of 'strategic unionism' (Gahan, 1997). Yet if the outcomes of strategic unionism are viewed in terms of Fells' key trade union objectives of relevance and effectiveness, then the key outcome it is necessary to review is the impact of strategic unionism on trade union density, and in turn trade union membership. Consequently, the question which needs to be answered is 'Did the adoption of strategic unionism halt, or turnaround the decline evident in trade union density leading up to 1987?'

Unfortunately for the Australian trade union movement the formal adoption of 'strategic unionism' in 1987 did not halt the decline witnessed in trade union density in the 1980s. In fact, between 1990 and 1995, trade union density fell from 46 per cent to 35 per cent. Even more debilitating for the union movement however, was that during the same period, the levels of union membership fell in both absolute and relative terms. ABS figures provide that in 1990 there were more than 3 million financial trade union members in Australia, a figure which had fallen to just over 2.4 million in 1995 (Morehead, Steele, Alexander, Stephen and Duffin, 1997).

Strategic unionism therefore failed in its bid to turnaround, or to at least stem the decline in trade union density and membership, as both continued to decline at an increasing rate. Of even greater concern, however, is that much of the responsibility for this poor outcome has been attributed to two elements lauded as key components of the strategic unionism approach - the Accord, and the move to establish a movement of 20 'super unions' through a program of union amalgamation and rationalisation.

It has been suggested that the Accord may have had a detrimental effect on membership as it resulted in a substantial decrease in real wages which in turn may have acted to decrease the perceived utility of membership (Patmore 1992), whilst increasing the likelihood of 'freeriders', with all employees receiving the non-pecuniary benefits gained, be they unionists or not. Deery, Plowman and Walsh (1997) also suggest that the way in which the Accord centralised authority within the Australian trade union movement, made unions more remote and less representative of members at the grassroots level, further eroding union density and membership.

The amalgamation program driven by the ACTU in the past decade has also been apportioned some of the blame for the failure of strategic unionism to halt the decline in trade union density. Critics of the amalgamation process claim that the forced formation of large centralised industry unions may have led to deunionisation, with members dissatisfied with the erosion of their right to remain in the craft-based union to which they were committed (Booth, 1994; Gahan 1993). In addition, the amalgamation process acted to

intensify the centralisation of authority within the movement, to the detriment of union membership, and in turn union density.

CONCLUSION

Strategic unionism was adopted by the Australian trade union movement in 1987 in a bid to increase the relevance of Australia's trade unions in the eyes of 'wider society'. In doing so, the movement believed that it would not only stem the decline in membership it was facing, but that it would ensure its very survival. Strategic unionism, however, has not stemmed the decline in trade union membership, nor has it increased the movement's relevance to a level which would ensure its existence. A direct consequence of this outcome is the intention of Australian unions to distance themselves from the initiatives of strategic unionism (Gahan 1997). Nevertheless, the Australian trade union movement should not consider its experience with strategic unionism to be a complete loss. The movement has at least gained a proactive approach, and is keenly aware of the need to plan for the future. This in itself is a watershed for a movement renowned for being reactive, and which believed its existence was guaranteed. Australia's trade unions are, and will continue to be confronted by an environment which is continually changing. Thanks to the proactive mindset gained when strategic unionism was adopted, the movement is at least better equipped to meet the challenges it will face in the future.

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