

**Brown, Tony**

University of Technology, Sydney Australia

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## **Organising Learning: informal workplace learning in a trade union campaign to organise private-sector child care workers.**

### **Introduction**

The modern workplace is often portrayed as one that is being released from the constraints of traditional work practices and rigid organisational structures. The introduction of new technology combined with flexibility in production and labour relations, and greater individual discretion over work processes have been key elements in managerial terminology that predicted new types of work and jobs for a new economy. It was argued that old fashioned, low-skill jobs would be replaced by high skill work requiring qualifications needing regular updating. An unstoppable growth in the number of knowledge workers would replace the declining number of routine jobs.

However the experience in Australia undermines these predictions. The labour market has taken on an hourglass shape with a growing polarisation of the workforce as job numbers increase in the upper echelons, disappear in the middle levels and where the largest number of new jobs are created in low paying work that are predominantly casual and insecure. (Cully 2003)

This paper looks at recent developments in the restructuring of one service industry - private child-care - in Australia. It examines how a national trade union successfully developed new strategies to recruit previously unorganised workers in the rapidly expanding private-for-profit child-care sector. Finally, it discusses the inter-relationship of learning and organising among the union staff involved in the organizing drive and the implications for the union's approach to organisational learning.

### **What the union wanted to do**

#### **Methodology**

The data for this paper emerged as part of a broader project examining the changes in the work of organisers, and primarily the work of a group of Lead Organisers, in the Liquor, Hospitality and Miscellaneous Union (LHMU). During the time of the research the child-care organising was the largest coordinated campaign the union was running.

Twenty-five staff including Assistant Secretaries, the Organising Director, Lead Co-ordinators, and Lead Organisers from five state branches, were interviewed. Among those interviewed the longest time anyone had been a Lead Organiser was 6 years. However the mean time was less than two years and a significant number had been a Lead for less than 2 years. By contrast a larger number of staff had many years experience in the union, or in other unions, and the practice of being a Lead was relatively short and clearly varied across the branches.

In addition to the semi-structured interviews, union reports and planning documents were made available, two national seminars were conducted, many informal conversations with union staff were held, as well as participating in organised union activities including a State Convention, an organising blitz, and a number of planning meetings.

#### **The rise of private childcare**

The provision of childcare has undergone substantial change in Australia. When organised childcare centres started in the 1970s and 1980s they were almost entirely run by local not-for-profit community centres. They were jointly funded by federal and state government grants, which were dispersed through local municipal government with parents paying modest fees, and they were run by Committees made up of staff, parents and local government representatives. At the time no one imagined that the care of babies and pre-school children could, or should, return a profit.

The Keating Labor Government started to change the way childcare was funded in the early 1990s by extending childcare subsidies to private, for-profit centres. Then in 1997 the newly elected Howard conservative government ceased federal funding for the construction of centres, and instead under the rhetoric of 'choice' and 'competition' directed payments to parents as subsidies and later as additional tax concessions. An immediate impact was the decline in the number of public childcare centres as community centres struggled to meet costs, a reduction in the number of community childcare places, and sudden and steep fee rises. The regular stream of government subsidised fee income fuelled a growth of new private centres as a market in child care was created. Over the decade the proportion of privately owned centres increased from less than half to over 70 percent of the total, with many community centres closed or taken over.

The changes meant that in a few years Australian provision went from being predominantly community

delivered and resting on a cornerstone of affordable, quality childcare the Quality Improvement and Accreditation System introduced in 1993 to the rise of the world's biggest publicly listed for-profit childcare company, ABC Learning Centres.

### **ABC a new model for human service provision?**

ABC Learning Centres started in 1988 and listed on the stock exchange with 34 childcare centres in 2001. When listed it was valued at \$25 million, but by 2006 its value had risen to \$2.4 billion, with the original \$2 shares worth \$39. By 2006 ABC had become the largest operator of private childcare businesses in Australia, and the second largest childcare company in the world.

The biggest beneficiaries of the Federal government's changed policy from supporting centres to subsidising individual parents have been companies such as ABC, which receives 44 per cent of its income, or \$128m of its \$292m revenue in 2005, from government subsidies. It is in effect a direct payment from the federal government to ABC and its shareholders, and ABC has been perfectly positioned to benefit from the government's privatisation and 'choice' policies. Former prominent Coalition politicians including the previous Federal Minister for Childcare Services Larry Anthony, former Federal Opposition Leader Andrew Peacock, former Victorian Premier Jeff Kennett and former Lord Mayor of Brisbane Sallyanne Atkinson, dominate the Board. As Eddy Groves, ABC's CEO succinctly explained in an interview with the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) in 2005 "You cannot help (but) to make some money". (Hills 2006)

ABC has developed a carefully integrated business strategy that it expects can also be applied to other human service areas. The company has two colleges that recruit, train and accredit new childcare workers thus providing its own supply of carers trained in the corporate philosophy from the start. Its head office produces standardised curriculum for its centres across the country and also coordinates the menus and interior design. All play equipment and furniture is provided for each centre through an exclusive agreement with a company that ABC previously owned. It has a separate property arm that owns the centre sites thus reducing debt on the company.

Childcare centres' operating costs are high with the largest component being labour costs. Because of this, high occupancy rates are crucial for profits such that centres with occupancy rates below 50 per cent lose money and are only marginally profitable until the rate reaches 80 per cent, at which point they quickly move into the black. Therefore keeping labour costs and staff:child ratios down while achieving high occupancy rates are critical factors in the company's profit strategy.

In 2006 ABC floated additional shares with the income directed to pay off debt in order to position the company for further acquisitions and expansion in North America. (King 2006, Hills, 2006) With the Australian childcare industry expected to slow in the next three years, ABC has moved into a new expansion phase by purchasing centres in North America, and it is also looking to take this model into aged care and other areas of public education previously considered out of bounds to profit making companies. ABC's 'managed growth', is aimed at achieving a dominant position in the market by taking over smaller private providers firstly in Australia, New Zealand followed by North America, which provides some franchises and a foothold into, the Philippines, Hong Kong and Indonesia. In 2006 ABC became the world's largest publicly-listed childcare company when it bought Learning Care, a Nasdaq-listed operator of 460 childcare centres in twenty-five US states, for \$218 million. That was followed in June 2006 with the purchase of another seventeen centres in California and options to buy another seven centres in the State. In January 2007 it acquired the La Petite Academy with its 650 centres in 36 US states, with the capacity to serve 97,500 children, effectively doubling the number of centres operating in the USA. (AAP, 2006, AAP, 2007)

Critics of paid care services such as child and aged care, teaching and nursing claim that they are vulnerable to competitive pressures that often generate low-pay/low-quality outcomes, increased prices, and place profit ahead of social obligations such as catering for children with disabilities or for under two year olds because they are more expensive to look after. Folbre (2006) notes however this situation also creates the potential to build broader political coalitions that could push for a high-pay/high-quality alternative.

Introducing market relations into childcare provision has been extremely beneficial for some companies such as ABC, but it has also led to a massive increase in the cost of childcare for parents. Australian Bureau of Statistics data shows that childcare costs have increased by 62 percent between 2002-2006. (ABS 2005, ABS 2006) In addition, the uneven geographic distribution of childcare places arising from decisions based on profit expectations rather than meeting childcare need has meant that growing demand for places is not being met. With two-thirds of Australian mothers working, demand for childcare keeps growing and surveys show that there is a shortfall of up to 100,000 places.

### **The union campaign new ways of organising and learning**

The new arrangements for child care and the growth in employment in private provision posed new challenges for the childcare workers' union. In particular the dominant position established by ABC meant that it was in a position to set the wage and employment conditions for workers in the industry generally. The union had traditionally high coverage rates within public childcare provision. It had won important award

victories on pay, gender pay equity and skill related training in the 1980s and 1990s. Because the prevailing mode of delivery had been through public and community centres it had not paid much attention to private provision and had lower rates of membership coverage. Even after ABC had begun to establish itself the union had not made many advances in signing new members in that sector.

The union did however make a strategic decision to organise ABC workers as part of its emphasis on organising unorganised workers in strategically important industries. In late 2005 the union's leaders and Lead Organisers in childcare, devised a plan to take on ABC Learning. Its goal, or what the organisers call 'the mantra', was to build power across all the childcare industry into the future. The means to do that is summarised by three strategies, to take wages out of competition between the community and private sector, to build density, and to speak with one voice.

Its first efforts had been less than successful. It had treated the organising effort as though it was any other campaign. It had not taken into account the personal presence that Eddy Groves had among his employees, so that when the union issued press releases attacking the company it had alienated some of the potential members it was hoping to attract. It had also not taken into account the low level of union literacy among the workers, nor the company's success in communicating with its staff that the company would look after them and that therefore they did not need a union. In addition, Groves was a strong supporter of the government's industrial relations regime and had shown a willingness to make use of it, for instance recruiting staff to individual workplace contracts and wherever possible restricting union officials' access to the centres. When one State-Secretary issued a press release in 2004 claiming that the company had attempted to force down the wages and conditions of its employees in that state, Groves sued him, claiming defamation and effectively forcing a gag on the union.

When the second round of organising commenced at the end of 2005 the union membership at ABC stood at just over 1300 members across Australia. One of the biggest hurdles the union faced before it could go into the field was the inaccurate data it had to work with. It didn't know how big the company was, how many employees it had, nor could it be confident of the accuracy of its own membership records and therefore what level of density the union had. The unreliability of the membership records meant they had to be cleaned up. The system was not a tool to aid organising and there was no discrete budget for growth, making the plan to be in a position of real bargaining power in only three months ambitious at best. After the changes had been made to the data system and the second round of organising commenced the union's aim was to increase membership to a density level where it could have real bargaining power with the company.

Since the late 1990's the union had been going through a major organisational change, implementing what it understood to be the organising model and changing the way union work was organised. Teams of organisers had been established with Leads appointed to implement organising plans focused on achieving membership growth. New organising techniques were developed and honed including systematic contacting of non-members in the workplace and in their homes. 'Blitzing', where groups of organisers would methodically contact potential members using prepared scripts with the purpose of signing them up to the union, had been trialed among casino workers and contract cleaners. The lessons learned from these first campaigns were now put to use in the childcare campaign.

The changes in work organisation had been taken up unevenly through the union but there was sufficient evidence of success in some branches, notably in Western Australia and South Australia, and in some industry sectors that the union was confident that continued attention to organising would reap growth rewards. Organisers and Lead Organisers had participated in traditional structured education programs but much of the important learning was now being conducted informally as part of team work. Leads were expected to brief and de-brief their organisers, the plan was continually monitored and organisers were prepped in one-to-one conversations, handling objections ('innoculation'), using a notation system that would record visits and conversations, and setting time limits on conversations in order to 'call the question', that is, asking the potential member directly if s/he would join.

The main objective of every visit was to recruit new members, or to get a 'sign-up', it was not to deal with any particular grievance the worker might have, nor to have a general discussion about childcare or unionism. There was however a straightforward message and it was the same across the country 'We'd like you to join up to the Union so that you can have a voice in the new national agreement.'

When organisers visited a childcare centre they were required to collect information about the Centre. As well as the number of childcare workers on the site, they were expected to record the centre's name, addresses, phone numbers, license holders and numbers of children. A record of each centre is kept so that when the organiser returns if one or more of the workers have moved the organiser will follow up by phone to find out where they have moved to, and the system will then be adjusted to record them against another site.

All visits and member conversations and responses are allocated a score indicating whether the

conversation was positive, hostile, undecided or raised some reason for not joining. Those reasons are also categorised according to the degree of objection, with the most common objections being "I'm not interested"; 'I have to talk to my spouse, parent, friend', and "I can't afford it". Organisers were prepared for these objections during pre-visit training and where new objections arose they were recorded and became part of the ongoing training in how to deal with objections.

Victoria, one of the campaign's Lead Organisers, is responsible for a team of organisers and for implementing the organising plan, preparing, briefing and debriefing the organisers, assessing and reporting on the resource needs of the campaign and participating in the national team coordinating the campaign. While not an explicit role, she also mentors the newer and less experienced organisers. She gave an example of the effectiveness of recording visit details and using the tracking system. At one centre she spoke to a woman about joining the union but was told that she couldn't join just then because she wanted to talk it over with her partner. Six weeks later Victoria returned to the Centre and this time commenced the conversation by asking 'How did the discussion go with your partner?' the woman was taken aback that Victoria had remembered, was unable to use that objection this time around and so a new conversation commenced.

The tracking is so detailed that another lead organiser recounted an example of a woman who on their first contact told her to 'Get F\*\*\*ed, I don't want to know about the union.' From this low starting point the organiser gradually developed the communication on each visit until on their ninth conversation she was signed up.

In the first six months of the drive over 3,000 centres were visited and access was gained at 2,600 of them. In some centres where access was gained the visit was restricted so that in 60 cases the Director escorted the organiser around the centre and in 225 cases the organiser was restricted to a single room. There were over 9,200 conversations held between workers and organisers and in all cases some record was made of the conversation. At the end of the first six-month period over 2,000 new members had joined the union, a conversion rate of 22 percent of all conversations. Another 6,500 had given a 'soft knock back', and only 600, or 7 percent had given a hostile response. In six months membership numbers across the country increased by 126 percent, while in some states, including big state branches, growth tripled and even quadrupled.

This rate of growth for a relatively short period was very successful. It confirmed that applied systematic contacting with a clear goal would lead to the sort of growth that the union movement had been talking about in policy documents. Importantly the influx of new members also meant a new, steady income stream that would support further organising, research and campaigning for gains for those workers.

The growth is even more remarkable given the environment that the union is working in. Apart from the general climate where union membership has been in steady decline for more than 15 years and where the media paints a picture of unions as outdated, the conditions within the childcare industry present growth organising with particular challenges. The majority of workers in the industry are young, female, part-time workers in an industry characteristically described as 'soft skilled'. The company is hostile to unions, attempting wherever possible to employ staff on individual contracts and leading new employees to believe that they are not allowed to join the union.

There were other measures that the union needed to improve upon if the drive was going to be sustained. One of the most important was bringing forward new members to act as 'contacts' or 'activists' in the union. One intended outcome of the one to one conversations was for organisers to invite those who showed an interest in the campaign and the union to become a contact at the centre. The majority of new contacts who agreed to take on the role in their Centres are not only new to being a face of the union and to bargaining, they are also new to unionism. The success in getting new members to become contacts varied across the states, with a ratio of contact-to-members in the three largest branches ranging from 1: 5 in NSW, 1:7 in Queensland and 1:20 in Victoria. In the states with lower membership numbers the ratio ranges from 1:17 in South Australia and 1:37 in Western Australia.

### **Campaign outcomes**

In 2007 despite the union not having reached the density target it set itself before it would enter negotiations a new national union agreement was reached, which will set new standards for the industry. The agreement's key provisions include a two per cent annual pay rise for the two years of the agreement plus increases of between eleven and twenty per cent to reflect the phasing-in of pay equity and work-value increases awarded by state industrial relations commissions before WorkChoices was introduced; paid time to prepare programs for children; free uniforms; paid tuition for further study and the use of external cleaners in all centres - previously the workers were often expected to clean their centre, and significantly ended the use of individual AWAs in the company. Ninety per cent voted for the agreement and hundreds of staff abandoned their individual contracts in favour of the agreement. (LHMU 2006a, LHMU 2007)

### **Future challenges**

The campaign to organise childcare workers employed by ABC is part of a larger project. The union is in the process of a thoroughgoing change in its approach to organising workers, achieving membership growth, and building a different type of union for the future that involves both organisational and cultural change alongside new ways of learning and development for staff and members. The childcare campaign sits on a continuum between earlier state-based organising efforts in aged-care and more applied and strategic industry focussed leverage campaigns. Since the ABC drive, the union has embarked on an even larger scale, internationally-coordinated campaign in the cleaning industry that reflects not only a more sustained approach to organising but also a more sophisticated use of research and media and a more strategic outreach to community organisations. (LHMU 2006b)

One of the union's priorities has been to 'learn from national campaigns', and it locates this within longer term questions it has posed for itself: What sort of union does it want to be in 2010; how does it build power in key industries and the broader society; and what does it need to get there? Learning, referred to by the union leaders as 'development', that incorporates formal and informal workplace learning, is therefore a critical factor in its future development. (Brown 2007)

This poses new challenges for the union's leaders as they try to facilitate a new learning environment aimed at furthering the development process for individuals, teams, and the union as an organisation, at the same time as they embark on intense organising campaigns. It means thinking anew about the organisational structure that will help it achieve its objectives; about how to facilitate individual learning and development; and how to ensure that the teams, and organisation as a whole, can adapt quickly to changes in the external environment. It means planning how to incorporate Argyris and Schon's three levels of learning - operational learning (learning against norms built into plans), strategic learning (where existing plans are modified to respond to changes in the external environment), and learning related to questions of purpose and wider community values. (Argyris & Schon 1981)

The efforts to organise childcare workers can be assessed in this context. Staff working on the campaign concluded that its strengths were having clear aims and targets and clear methods of reporting. This was provided through a national organising plan, which was based on assessing the resources required, allocating the roles for national and branch offices; sharing resources across branches; identifying new contacts in centres, establishing effective community linkages; and supporting the organising effort with new capacity in corporate research and information technology systems. Dedicated growth organisers, including temporary member organisers, were appointed; weekly national tele-conferences of the lead organisers and coordinators were held to coordinate action, receive reports of progress and obstacles, assess information, arrive at decisions and then allocate tasks and responsibilities to state based teams.

### **Conclusion**

The union hopes to show that the lowest paid workers can fight back and win, even within the restrictive framework imposed by Australia's WorkChoices legislation, and that the lessons of winning campaigns can be extended to other industries. The child care campaign gives pointers for successful organising - planned, national, well-resourced, dedicated growth objective, disciplined, and strategic - as well as some limitations. Achieving the membership growth in this campaign required considerable staff and financial resources and means that other areas of the union's coverage receive less attention. Maintaining that commitment over a longer period requires a different type of organisational discipline especially where the original targets are not met.

The focus for a six-month campaign is also easier to maintain as everyone's attention is geared towards a clear timeline. Beyond that and new challenges of coordination, motivation and development arise. Honing the techniques of organising, especially in the hostile industrial relations environment now pertaining in Australia, is crucially important for unions and new union organisers to develop. But perhaps more important than learning the 'how' is to understand the 'why'.

This is an area requiring more attention if the union is to deepen its organising drive in the future and consolidate an active membership base as it tries to convert members into contacts and contacts into activists. It will be a test of whether the union can move from staff led organising drives to one where members begin to play a larger role in directing the union's strategies. But what then? What will the shape of the bargaining look like? Who will determine? How will contacts become activists? What support will need to be provided? And what of the learning for the organising staff? How will the knowledge, experience and learning acquired in campaigns like ABC be used in the organisation to effect change, to deepen individual and organisational development? Will new learning tools or artefacts from campaigns be developed and turned into artefacts for learning? How will those lessons become absorbed? These are the next stages of organisational development if there is to be an active, engaged and informed membership driving the organisational and cultural change necessary to renew unionism. (Lerner 2003)

In the twentieth century there were workers who were considered hard or impossible to organise - waterside and construction workers, those employed as day labour but as a result of militant organising campaigns led by unions with clear political and industrial objectives those workers became the backbone of organised

labour. Today employment growth is in industries and areas that are similarly considered too difficult to organise - call centres, hospitality, retail, contractors, and childcare.

Therefore it is important to understand how workers, in what are often precarious areas of work, can organise to defend their interests and to win against those who would keep them in this position. In the case of childcare workers we can observe particular decisions and efforts that reduce their pay, their conditions, their satisfaction at work through deliberate intended actions designed to create a marketable commodity to trade and increase the wealth of a few. It is facilitated by government policy that not only approves of but also creates the opportunities and frameworks for precariousness, or flexible work, to occur.

There is now a substantial international literature that debates and describes aspects or activities in the organising model (Bronfenbrenner 1998; Carter 2006; Carter & Cooper 2002; de Turbeville 2004, 2007; Ellem 2003; Lerner 2003; Lopez 2004; Milkman & Voss 2004). Less available are the details of specific organising efforts that offer the opportunity for learning from those campaigns and more specifically how union organisers learn to change their work in order to achieve membership growth.

The union's efforts to organise previously unorganised childcare workers reflects its belief that the best defence for low wage workers is for them to combine in order to alter the arrangements that dictate their pay, working hours, conditions, and in this case, quality issues around staff: child ratios, safety, and the physical, educational and social environment for the children. It is an orientation that has the transformative potential of changing the workers' understanding of their position in the industry and their ability to exercise agency. It raises the democratic potential of re-shaping not only their working conditions but also their union, that is, the vehicle for their agency and voice by exercising leadership therein. These potentials remain at this stage unrealised. Studying the progress of these organising campaigns and the process of organisational change can assist in redressing the underpinning foundations of precariousness.

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<sup>1</sup> The largest US childcare provider with 3 per cent of the market is Knowledge Learning Corp, which is substantially owned by the former junk bond king Michael Milken.

<sup>1</sup> The Liquor, Hospitality and Miscellaneous Union (LHMU) is one of Australia's largest unions covering predominantly low wage service workers in hospitality (hotels, clubs and casinos) human care (child and aged care); and property services (cleaning and security).

<sup>1</sup> The steps involved in this kind of one-to-one organising have been borrowed from the US Service Employees Industrial Union (SEIU) and have been adapted and gradually evolved through practice in organising blitzes in both the workplace and in home visits. (see Lopez 72-78)

<sup>1</sup> Work Choices was introduced in March 2006. The main target of Work Choices were trade unions and their right to organise workers and the legislation's centrepiece was the introduction of individual contracts known as Australian Workplace Agreements (AWAs) that would override any existing collective industrial award or agreement. AWAs were stripped of the safety net that had underpinned the individual contracts first introduced in 1996. Under Work Choices an AWA need only guarantee a minimum wage, four weeks' leave, personal leave, sick leave and a 38-hour week averaged over 12 months, and the legislation allowed employers to dismiss any worker without reason if the company employed less than 100 people, effecting 4 million Australian workers.