

Immigrant Workers and Trade Unions

Bertone, Santina and Griffin, Gerard *Immigrant Workers and Trade Unions* Bureau of Immigration Research/Australian Government Publishing Service, 1992, pp. xii-xiv.

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Executive summary

The central thrust of this study has been to examine the various dimensions of the relationship between trade unions and their NESB (non-English speaking background) members and to analyse the perceptions of this relationship, and of each other, held by both parties. The existing level of knowledge on the relationship is brought together in a review of the literature in **Chapter 1**. This review highlights both the relative paucity of material and its dated nature. Further, most publications were based on limited or no research but rather relied on the views and opinions either of individuals or of union activists. Accordingly, the review focused mainly on a limited number of significant studies. The arguments and findings of these studies were then fused with the contentions of the activist-based material to identify for analysis the major elements of the relationship between unions and their NESB members. Some elements of this relationship could be tested factually, for example, the level and extent of special union services targeted to NESB members. Others necessitated a mixture of qualitative and quantitative testing.

Chapter 2 outlines the three research stages used to gather the data necessary to assess this relationship. Stage 1 was a questionnaire sent to all Victorian unions and Victorian State branches of federal unions. In the main, its

purpose was to determine the factual elements of the relationship between NESB members and their union. In addition, the attitudes of union officials on a limited number of issues were sought. Stage 2 focused on six case study unions which, cumulatively, covered 30 per cent of all NESB unionists in Victoria. The research in this stage comprised a detailed, extensive search of internal union documents and lengthy interviews with sixty-one officials of these unions. Stage 3 involved the administration of a questionnaire survey to members of the case study unions which sought to gauge these members' attitudes to a number of union-related variables. Chapters 3-8 utilised the data collected in the three-stage research process to analyse the major elements of the union-immigrant relationship identified in chapter 1.

Chapter 3 details the range of special services provided by unions to their NESB members. Very few unions collect data on the extent and nature of their immigrant membership, a necessary prerequisite for the effective targeting of such special services. Equally, few unions have adopted formal policies dealing with the problems of NESB members. What seems to have happened is that over time, and spurred by events such as the appointment/election of new officials, the realisation of the extent of NESB membership or demands from such members themselves, a growing number of unions have introduced, on an ad hoc basis, special services to meet the needs of NESB unionists. These unions have clearly perceived a need for such services. The services usually cluster around the issue of communication, with the provision of information in non-English languages having the highest priority. This focus on language is further underlined by the increase in the number of union claims for English-on-the-job training.

Despite the increase over the past decade in the

number of unions offering targeted services, only a minority of unions, at best a third of all unions, offer such services. Further, many of these services are provided only on an occasional basis. Accordingly, while the range of services on offer is now quite impressive, we would argue that their consistent provision and utilisation is probably restricted to no more than a dozen unions and their memberships. Because of the congregation of NESB immigrant workers in a limited number of occupations, and hence unions, these dozen unions would cover a significant, but still minority, proportion of all NESB unionists.

Chapter 4 focuses on NESB membership participation at three levels of their union: full-time officialdom, honorary official level, such as shop stewards, and in the general affairs of the union such as voting, reading literature and attending meetings.

While the participation levels of NESB members in full-time positions have significantly increased in the past two decades, the greatest improvement is restricted to certain groups such as male Italians and Greeks. NESB members, including relatively newly arrived immigrants, are increasingly participating in honorary positions. We argue that a strong case can be made that, with appropriate union action to overcome existing barriers to participation, country of birth need not be a major influence on general rank-and-file participation in trade unionism.

Chapter 5 examines the attitudes of union officials of the case study unions towards their NESB members. These attitudes varied from genuine concern at the disadvantaged position of immigrant workers through assimilationist views to perceptions of blatant racist views held by other officials. The majority view among officials was, however, basically sympathetic to NESB members, and four of the six unions had adopted explicitly multicultural policies. Some officials found themselves torn between an egalitarian approach - 'we treat all members equally' - and an affirmative action approach which recognises the disadvantages faced by a

subgroup and attempts to eliminate or compensate for such disadvantages. In practice, many of those officials who promulgated the egalitarian line effectively pursued the affirmative action approach. A number of officials believed that racism existed both in the workplace and among union officials, a view also held by 23 per cent of the membership surveyed. An analysis of the extent to which unions took into account the specific interests of NESB members in the award restructuring process led to the conclusion that many unions need to improve their performance if their NESB members are to benefit from the changes currently affecting Australian industry.

Chapter 6 analyses the attitudes of NESB members towards their unions. The findings of this analysis can be easily summarised: relatively few significant differences exist between the attitudes of ESB (English speaking background) and NESB members. This holds true regardless of whether the attitudes are towards the concept of unionism, their own union or their perceptions about a number of dimensions of their union's operations. NESB members were, however, more likely to want special services provided to them by unions and more likely to perceive racism within their union than were ESB members. One further significant difference did exist: NESB members had a higher predisposition than did their ESB counterparts to become involved in their union. The implications of these findings, allied with generally similar attitudes of both groups of members, are quite important for trade unions. In an era of declining membership union attention to immigrant workers would be well rewarded with increased participation, commitment and membership.

The basic similarity in attitudes of ESB and NESB members is reinforced by the examination, in **Chapter 7**, of the industrial attitudes and behaviour of union members. Despite some myths to the contrary, NESB unionists hold attitudes that are at least as militant as those of ESB members. Further, the attitudes of a subgroup of members born in Southeast Asia were equally as militant as those

of a subgroup of members born in Southern Europe. The statistical basis for this claim was strengthened by views to the same effect held by the vast majority of union officials interviewed. Indeed a number of officials strongly claimed that their NESB members were the strongest and most militant unionists.

The relationship between trade unions and their female NESB members is the subject of **Chapter 8**. A number of contributions to the literature assert that such members suffer from a double disability in their dealings with unions: they are the subset of two groups, women and immigrants, which have traditionally either been ignored by unions or, perhaps more kindly, not incorporated into the power structures of trade unionism. As a consequence female NESB members are held, among other things, to have negative attitudes towards unions, to participate less in unions and to be less militant than female ESB members. Our analysis partly supports these propositions. In particular, unions provide limited special services to their female NESB members, such members are not represented in the senior, decision-making positions within unions and, based on interview data, they face a number of difficulties in participating fully in their unions. In contrast, the findings dispute the contentions that NESB female members hold different attitudes from their ESB counterparts: both groups have similar levels of participation, similar attitudes towards their union, similar priorities for their union and similar attitudes towards industrial action. In short, female ESB and NESB members hold similar attitudes to and perceptions of their unions.

Overall, we argue strongly that, in terms of members' relationships with trade unions, there is no major division between ESB and NESB members. There is, however, a need for trade unions to recognise the specific problems and barriers facing their NESB members which could limit these members' effective participation in their unions. NESB members do have a number of legitimate grievances with the union movement. And, while significant improvements have occurred in some of these

issues, scope for additional improvement exists.