

New job, new start? Union attitudes and student workers

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ABSTRACT

A survey of 1153 undergraduate university students showed that while students have quite favourable attitudes towards unions, only one in three wanted to join a union after graduation. A large proportion of respondents were unsure of their views toward unions. Discipline and parental experiences with unions were sources of significant variation in union sympathy. Students with positive experiences of union membership, irrespective of union or future occupation, were more likely to want to join a union after graduation. The paper concludes that unions should do more to promote the role and achievements of unions to student workers, as well as develop coordinated strategies that respond to students' contemporary transition from part-time to full-time work.

Introduction

As the transition from full-time education to full-time employment has become more prolonged and more difficult, the group of 'student workers' has become a popular topic for those writing about youth labour markets. Students enrolled at university, vocational education, or secondary school are a significant proportion (32%) of the labour market of 20-24 year olds. Students form the majority (62%) of the part-time labour market within this group (ABS, 2002: 24). For young people, growth in employment has been in part-time jobs in the retail; accommodation, cafes and restaurants; and health and community service sectors while the number of full-time jobs in the manufacturing and finance sectors held by young people has fallen (Wooden and VandenHeuvel, 1999: 44). However, the student-work phenomenon has largely been informed by perspectives other than industrial relations: for example, educational sociology (McInnis and Hartley, 2002), workplace learning (Yashin-Shaw *et al.*, 2002) or social policy (Bessant, 2002). This paper considers what effects the now commonplace combination of full-time study and part-time work has on the union attitudes of Australian university students. Unions would be wise to appreciate the experiences common to student workers, as well as the differences, if they are to develop effective strategies to recruit this new generation.

Union density of young people has been low for at least twenty years (Sloan, 1985), with the concentration of young adults in the under-unionised retail and recreation (hospitality) sectors accounting for much of the difference. High labour turnover in these sectors in particular was seen as a factor inhibiting unionisation (Sloan, 1985). Even from this low base, the decline in union membership among workers under 25 over the last ten years has been dramatic. In 1993, 21.5% of workers aged 15-19 and 30.0% if 20-24 year old workers were union members. By 1999, membership had fallen to 14.2% and 16.6% respectively (ABS, 1999). These are the lowest levels of all the age categories. Overall, union membership fell from 37.6% to 25.7% in the same period. This trend is similar to that in Western Europe (Kahmann, 2002: 20; Waddington and Kerr, 2002).

Research in the area and union strategy has become more focussed on what unions can do to improve their representation among young people. Biddle *et al.*, (2000) identified a critical gap in knowledge about the function of unions. Young people maintained stereotypes of unions as dominant in 'male-dominated industry, where tough dangerous work demanded tough, even intransigent unions' (Biddle *et al.*, 2000: 38). Unions needed to make their role in protecting award entitlements clear, as well as their capacity to improve conditions at the workplace level. Unions also needed to be open to learn more from young people, especially about the way that they are seeking to manage their own working trajectories (Dwyer and Wyn, 2001). The challenge for unions was not to persuade young people of the benefits of unionism, but 'to assist them to see that unions can have an important role in *their* working lives rather than *other* people's' (Biddle *et al.*, 2000: 40). This is a particular challenge for student workers, who view their participation in the part-time labour market as temporary and have different workplace priorities.

The union movement has recently recognised that 'student-workers' have distinct priorities and occupy distinct spaces (Bessant, Lipsig-Mumme, and Watts, 2002). Bessant *et al.* argue that unions should actively engage with young workers in spaces like universities or TAFE colleges and acknowledge that their working lives have begun. It is predicted that this will serve two, connected purposes. First, it will assist unions in organising young workers in the sectors in their current casual and part-time jobs in retail and hospitality. Second, it will establish a positive relationship with young people that can be carried into their subsequent, professional careers. In this view, unions should foster university spaces as 'communities of unionism' (Lipsig-Mumme and Nielsen, 2002). The ACTU and many affiliates agree, and are devoting more resources to engaging with student workers (ACTU, 2003).

Determinants of union membership

Various factors have been demonstrated to be predictors of attitudes towards unions. Australian analyses have focussed on structural predictors, but favourable attitudes towards unions have become more important in the last ten years, since the end of compulsory unionism. Barling, Kelloway and Bremmerrmann (1991) found that, among their sample of Canadian high school and college students, young people's attitudes towards unions were significantly predicted by their perceptions of their parents' attitudes toward unions. Previous work experiences have been found to be critical to whether or not workers decide to join a union (Lowe and Rastin, 2000). Lowe and Rastin (2000: 209) find that attitudes toward unions solidify during the three years following university graduation. Unfortunately, the authors only tested subjects' job conditions, attitudes and job status after graduation, despite reporting that 62 percent of university students had been in paid employment during their final year of study (Lowe and Rastin, 2000: 209). Dekker, Greenberg and Barling (1998), in a small sample (126) of secondary and university students, investigated the attitudes towards unions of student part-time workers. Their study confirmed the strong influence of family socialisation. However, it failed to establish any connection between the quality of the young people's part-time jobs and their attitudes towards unions. They speculate that the absence of any connection between the two factors may be because part-time work contributes less to the general well-being of students, and that the transitional nature of part-time work for students ameliorates the excesses of poor job quality (Dekker *et al.*, 1998: 53).

Certainty, young people's beliefs during the time they are at university and shortly after are in a state of flux. Lowe and Rastin (2000: 216) hypothesise that values taught in university courses may affect young workers's orientation towards unions, but there is little published evidence to support the proposition. Schuster and Buckley (1981) found that female students who had taken management courses where unions were covered favourably were more likely to adopt positive attitudes towards unions. Numerous studies have indicated that university courses do have an impact on values, like conservatism and individualism, that are demonstrated to be associated with attitudes towards unions. While university students generally become more open minded and more liberal in their social views, they also are more likely to develop conservative views about their intended profession that reinforce elite notions of professional control and self-regulation (Anderson, Western, and Boreham, 1973). These values, once formed, are likely to persist into the first years of professional practices (Anderson *et al.*, 1973: 45). Jackstadt, Brennan and Thompson (1985) found that after a semester of introductory economics instruction, college students had more economically conservative views (such as supporting free markets and opposing government ownership and intervention). The authors could not distinguish, however, between the possible effects of the attitudes of the lecturers, bias in course materials, or the conservative leanings of the students themselves. A much more recent study (Magdol, 2003) suggests that the capacity of university courses to change values might be decreasing, as class sizes increase and personal interaction decreases, and as students participate in other sites of adult socialisation, such as paid employment. Nonetheless, Magdol did find that students taking introductory sociology classes did become more liberal, although students taking an advanced sociology course on the family displayed no significant change in family values. Thus, there is strong evidence to consider a young person's field of study as a factor that may influence their attitudes towards unions, independent of their occupation.

The magnitude of the decline in unionisation among young workers has prompted some to claim that this is due to fundamental differences in values of the new generations of workers.

Allvin and Sverke (2000) argue that young Swedish workers are more individualistic than their older colleagues. They found that younger union members were attracted to the instrumental benefits of union membership: representation that protects their employment and improves their conditions. In contrast, older generations continue to identify with the ideological mission of the union, such as economic democracy. On this basis, they argue that union strategy should respond by dispensing with a solidaristic ideology. In contrast, Waddington and Kerr (2002) found no evidence that a generation of 'Thatcher's children' in the United Kingdom had developed more individualistic, anti-union attitudes. Moreover, they also concluded that engagement in alternative forms of protest was complementary to, rather than a replacement for, union membership. Some North American commentators have even suggested that the upcoming generation of workers, who despite rising levels of education confront low job quality and non-standard employment, may herald 'a third wave of unionism' (Pfeiffer, 1999: 64, in Loughlin and Barling, 2001: 554). Although attitudes toward unions in Australia may be improving (Peetz, 2002), this is not a sufficient condition for increased membership.

One factor that should be central to unions' strategies toward young people is awareness and opportunity. An ACTU survey in 1989 found that young people have little awareness of trade unions and that their main reasons for not being members of a union was that they had never been asked to join, or that they had had previous negative experiences with unions (Gallagher, 1999: 237-238). This survey, now fifteen years old, also found that young Australians had quite negative views of unions. In particular, they saw unions as not offering any assistance in the transition to the workforce (Gallagher, 1999: 237). Young workers in the United Kingdom were inhibited from becoming union members by a combination of employer hostility and union absence. In a survey by Waddington and Kerr (2002: 313), non-members nominated 'my employer does not allow or recognise unions' was the most common reason for not joining a union, and 'not been asked to join' was nominated by a quarter of non-members as one of the two main reasons for not belong to a union. And yet contact of itself may not be sufficient. The quality of the interaction with the union is also an important consideration. Gallagher (1999: 250-251) cites research that suggests that 'experiences such as being personally invited by union officials to attend a union meeting; being informed of employee rights under the contract; or being introduced to the local union steward were significantly related to the worker's support of a union'. Thus the picture of what may influence a university graduate's decision to join a union is complex. Three important factors are family socialisation, the influence of their studies, and previous experiences with unions.

Method

During 2003, 1153 students completed surveys in 52 final-year classes across a range of degree courses from two universities in the same capital city. In a majority of instances, students completed the questionnaire during class time. On other occasions, they were asked to take a questionnaire and return it later. Based on the total enrolment figures for the classes, 1153 represents a response rate of 29%. The number of questionnaires distributed to 8 classes was not recorded. Of the remaining 44 classes (representing 86% of responses), 1565 questionnaires were distributed and 998 returned, giving a response rate of 64%. The questionnaire is the first stage in a study designed to track young people's expectations, beliefs, and values as they move from combining study and part-time work to full-time work. Beliefs about management and unions were measured using a series of single items. Students responded using a five-point Likert scale (1=strongly agree, 5=strongly disagree) with the additional option of expressing 'NA=no opinion'.

Sample characteristics and overall union attitudes

The results confirm previous studies that show a very high degree of labour market participation by university students, especially those under 25. Table 1 summarises the key characteristics of the sample. Nearly three quarters of young workers in the study are employed on a casual basis, but nearly half of all respondents under 25 were working in industries other than retail and hospitality.

TABLE 1

Key characteristics of sample

	18-24	25+
N	912	241
Currently employed	73.7	67.7
Employed as casual	76.5	50.7
Working in retail or hospitality	54.2	18.2
Working in job relevant to university studies	27.5	43.5

The results from this survey indicate a level of union preference much closer to what actual membership figures would suggest than previous surveys, taken from data compiled by ACIRRT (Bearfield, 2003: 6). Thus the results of the survey could suggest a higher level of support amongst the whole young worker population, except that university-educated professionals have the second highest rate of unionisation of all occupational groups (ABS, 2001). What is more likely is that both sets of results reflect the gap between intention to join a union, and opportunity to join. Differences in wording may account for some of the discrepancy between the two data sets.

TABLE 2

Attitudes towards unions: comparison with earlier surveys

	1996		2002		2003	
	18-24	25-44	18-24	25-44	18-24	25+
I'd rather be in a union	54	48	51	44	-	-
I expect that in my job after graduation, I will want to belong to a union	-	-	-	50	34	27
Unions in Australia don't look after their members	35	41	19	29	15	26
Australia would be better off without unions	24	26	12	19	10	16

1996 and 2002 surveys: Bearfield, (2003: 6).

The sample suggests opinions of union performance among young people continue to improve. Interestingly, the over 25 year old age group included in the sample also recorded a much more positive view of trade unions.

TABLE 3

Management trustworthiness – comparison with other surveys

	1995 (AWIRS)				2003	
	18-24	25-44	18-24	25-44	18-24	25+
Management are trustworthy (1995)/ Management can be trusted to keep its word (2003)	50	36	32	43	21.8	16.6

When asked about management trustworthiness, both groups of respondents again recorded more emphatic responses than in the previous AWIRS results. However, younger students are much closer to their older colleagues in their views: Table 3 shows both groups indicated a very low degree of trust in management. Among students in the sample under 25, those who work, in whatever industry or occupation, have a more cynical view towards management than those students who do not.

A surprising outcome of the survey was the large number of respondents who felt they had no firm opinions about management, unions, and the employment relationship. Of 891 respondents under 25, 93 had no opinion as to whether they would want to join a union after graduation and 186 had no opinion as to whether Australia would be better off without unions. Similarly, 196 or 22% of respondents had no opinion as to whether unions in Australia do not look after their members. This likely indicates a large degree of ignorance about the function of unions in the

workplace and society among this age group. They have not been exposed to the role of unions either their workplaces or in the school curriculum. This lack of exposure has seemingly led to ignorance about how employment conditions are determined. Over a quarter of respondents under 25 years of age reported that they did not know how their pay and conditions were determined. These results suggest that more than one in five university graduates enters the full-time workplace with little understanding of the processes or institutions of industrial relations, despite having many years experience in the part-time labour market.

Previous union membership

As Table 4 shows, only 10.1% of the sample aged under 25 (or 13.3% of those currently employed) reported that they were currently a member of a union. A further 11.1% had previously been union members. A similar proportion of respondents 25 and over were current union members, although a much higher proportion indicated they had previously been union members (most likely a reflection of their longer experience in the workforce).

TABLE 4
Union membership by age and work status

	<i>No, never belonged</i>	<i>No, but once belonged</i>	<i>Yes</i>
25 and over			
Not currently working	48.8	36.6	48.8
Currently Working	49.7	36.8	49.7
Total 25 and over	49.4	36.8	49.4
Under 25			
Not currently working	84.5	12.8	2.7
Currently working	75.5	11.2	13.3
Total Under 25	77.8	11.6	10.6

Of the 125 respondents under 25 who indicated, nearly two thirds of current and former union members had been members of the Shop, Distributive, and Allied Employees' Association (SDA), the union representing retail workers.

TABLE 5
Experiences of union membership by membership status and union

	<i>A lot or little worse off</i>	<i>Made no difference</i>	<i>A lot or little better off</i>
Membership status:			
Former member	13.2	68.1	18.7
Current member	2.2	47.2	50.6
Total	7.8	57.8	34.4
Union:			
No union indicated	12.5	67.9	19.6
SDA members	3.7	50.0	46.3
Members of other unions	9.3	58.1	32.6
Total	7.7	57.5	34.8

Perceptions of union benefit demonstrated consistent relationships with current and future union membership. Although the number of responses is small, it suggests that very few young workers have negative experiences of union membership.

The top half of Table 5 shows that a high proportion of workers, even among current members consider that union membership has made no difference at all. Predictably, over half of current union members feel their membership has advantaged them. Those respondents who did not report a union (who were mostly former union members) were less positive towards their union experience than respondents who were members of the SDA or other unions. A Chi Square test revealed however no significant differences between the union experiences of current and former SDA members and student workers who are current or former members of other unions. As would be expected, positive experiences of union membership had a strong, significant correlation (Kendall's tau b -0.258, $P < 0.001$) with wanting to join a union after graduation. A Chi-Square test revealed no significant differences ($p = 0.0196$) in wanting to join a union after graduation between SDA members and those belonging to other unions.

Impact of discipline, industry, occupation and parental union membership

The impact of external factors on attitudes towards unions is now considered.

TABLE 6
*Union attitude
by Discipline*

	<i>In my job after I graduate, I will want to belong to a union (%)</i>				
	<i>Strongly agree</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Neither agree nor disagree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Strongly disagree</i>
Arts/ Social Science	27.8	18.9	41.4	6.6	5.3
Business/ Law	9.4	17.3	44.6	17.6	11.2
Science/ Health/ Engineering	10.6	20.1	47.4	10.6	11.3
Total	15.0	18.8	44.7	11.9	9.5

There were significant differences among the students based on their discipline group (Chi Square $p < 0.001$). As evident in Table 6, students studying business or law programs were the least likely to favour union membership in the future, whereas students studying arts or social science programs were more supportive of union membership. This mirrors union membership levels in the future occupations of the graduates, particularly as business and engineering professionals have much lower rates of union membership (ABS, 2001).

There were few differences in attitudes between students aged under 25 and working in retail and hospitality and other industries; and those working in jobs relevant to their studies and those who were not. Students working in retail or hospitality were more likely to agree that management should try to cooperate with unions ($p = 0.011$). Students working in relevant jobs were less receptive to unions: they were significantly less likely to agree that they would want to belong to a union when they graduate ($p = 0.010$) and that management should try to cooperate with unions ($p = 0.038$).

Table 7 cross-tabulates attitude toward union membership, with the respondent's parents were union members. Again, an unanticipated result was the high proportion of respondents (44% of respondents under 25) who did not know if either of their parents had been a member of a union while they were in high school.

Respondents who knew their parents had been members of a union were twice as likely as the other respondents to indicate a future preference for union membership. Those who were aware their parents had not been members of a union were more than twice as likely to have firm views against union membership than the other two groups. Students who did not know their parents' union status were more undecided.

TABLE 7
 Union
 attitude by
 parental union
 membership
 (under 25 only)

<i>Parents member of a union</i>	<i>In the job that I have after I graduate, I will want to belong to a union (%)</i>		
	<i>Agree or Strongly Agree</i>	<i>Neither agree nor disagree</i>	<i>Disagree or strongly disagree</i>
Don't know	27.9	56.9	15.2
Yes	49.8	33.3	16.9
No	23.0	38.8	38.3
Total	33.8	44.7	21.4

Discussion

The results of this survey provide evidence that the attitudes towards unions of young Australian workers are determined by the same factors as in other countries and that students, even those in the part-time workforce, demonstrate 'a high degree of neutrality' towards unions (Willoughby & Joyce: 1986, quoted in Lowe & Rastin, 2000: 216). Comparison with earlier surveys suggest that fewer young workers have hostile attitudes towards unions. However, this does not equate to a high level of support for union membership. Only a third of students under 25 indicated they would want to join a union after graduation. This is higher than the level of unionisation among young people but only longitudinal data can confirm what proportion of graduates will actually join a union. It would also be beneficial for future surveys to explore further young people's opportunity to join unions, taking into account such relevant factors as working in a unionised workplace, and cost of membership and demand for union services.

The increase in 'student-workers' has not created a generation of university graduates who view work as inherently exploitative. Although retail and hospitality are the popular choice for a clear majority of teenage student-workers, more than four in ten student-workers, by their final year of university study, are working in other industries. Students with an early start on their career, who are already working in jobs relevant to their field of study, demonstrate less cynicism towards managers and less interest in union membership. This might be due to such students seeing unions as less relevant to their real career, but it may also be due to workplace and job factors not explored in the study. Moreover, attitudes toward union power and performance were not related to any variable related to students' employment. This does suggest that attitudes of other student workers may become less favourable towards unions after graduation.

Other factors showed a stronger relationship with attitudes towards unions. A students' area of study, even at the broad category level used here, had a predictable relationship with attitudes toward union membership. However, the results do not indicate the source of this relationship. There are three possible sources of this relationship, and each would have different implications for union strategies. First, there are the structured, obvious relationships that a number of professional unions, such as teachers, nurses, and journalists, have established with final-year programs in these courses of study. Second, there are the values embedded in the curriculum, and those held by lecturers. Third, there is the possibility that program choice reflects values already held by the student. This is a question that should be addressed in future studies, especially if increasing class sizes and a lower engagement with the university have reduced the impact that university courses may have on changing students' values (Magdol, 2003). If this effect is confirmed, it is likely to be particularly noticeable in Australian universities, where class sizes and student disengagement have increased markedly over the past ten years (McInnis, 2001).

One finding of the survey that unions should take particular note of is that young people may be participating in the workforce in greater numbers than ever before, but they are unaware about the achievements and continuing role of the union movement. However, there is some evidence that this is not contained to young people (Joint Governments' Submissions, 2000: 87). The current generation of workers under 25 years of age are not aware of the way in which unions can be integrated into the social fabric of the economy and society in the way that they were until the end of the Accord (in 1996).

Many had not even entered the workforce at the time of the MUA dispute. Recent projects such as the NSW curriculum project *Union Teach* and the Clara Weeke's project, where young trade unionists visit classrooms to discuss the movement, are positive indications that the union movement is prepared to increase awareness and support among young people.

One of the most difficult issues for unions to adjust to is the different priorities that young people have for their part-time work. In particular, job security is not the concern for student workers that it is for the majority of current union members. The quality of work is also less salient for student workers, and hence less of a motivating force to seek union membership', as they view their current employment as transitional (Gallagher, 1999: 244). Most young workers who are or have been members of a union report it making no difference. Yet there are young people who have had positive experiences of union membership, and they are significantly more likely to display a positive attitude towards unions. In a Canadian study, young workers expressed a stronger desire than adults for unions to be involved in resolving their workplace issues (Gomez, Gunderson and Meltz, 2002). Moreover, even if young people do not intend to stay in their student jobs for long, this is not necessarily the barrier to unionisation that it is often assumed to be (Cregan, 1991: 516). If unions can establish credibility with young workers before they enter the full-time workforce, they will be better placed to capitalise on the graduates' unmet expectations. Graduates from a range of disciplines have increasing difficulty finding permanent, full-time work. Often they have had to settle for temporary or casual jobs, requiring them to hang on to their student jobs as well, or accept jobs for which they are over-qualified as a 'stepping stone' to their career (Dwyer, Harwood and Taylor, 1998). Those that find jobs are often disappointed to be under-utilised and not given appropriate support and developed (Arnold and Mackenzie Daly, 1992; Feldman and Turnley, 1995; Peronne and Vickers, 2003). It is in unions' interests to establish their credentials on job quality as early as possible, if graduates are to feel they have an alternative to high job turnover (Dwyer *et al.*, 2003: 8).

The best prospects for engaging these young people and building a sense of unionism is for all unions with a stake in them working together. But such a strategy would need to overcome considerable political obstacles. Although in the Netherlands, the central trade union body was able to introduce a type of 'young union card', the central body has a lot more influence over affiliates than the Trade Union Congress in the UK (Waddington and Kerr, 2002: 314) and the ACTU. This would require a degree of cooperation and integration that has seldom been evident in the union movement up to this point. But the potential benefit is great: a more central, conscious strategy could give unions more control over early interaction with trade unions. In particular, contact with union organisers who can respond to the relevant work questions in students' lives, which span both current part-time job and future career. Organising in these spaces also increases the likelihood of recruiting potential 'core' union members, who rather than being neutral or unsure toward unions already have positive attitudes towards union and union membership. These young workers would then be more likely to join their union both in their student job and graduate job, even where union presence may be low or weak (Cregan and Johnston, 1990: 101). This is the practical effect of creating a 'community of unionism' in universities.

Conclusion

For the union movement, these results show that this generation is there to be persuaded. Young people have not made up their minds about trade unions. That being so, there is strong evidence in this survey, consistent with other studies, that there are a number of determinants of union membership. Young people who are aware their parents were union members were significantly more likely to agree that they would want to belong to a union. Young people who were aware that their parents were not union members were significantly less likely to agree that they would want to belong to a union, although the relationship was not as strong. However, a third of respondents could not answer whether or not their parents were members of a union. As a result, the effect of family socialisation is weakening, especially insofar as it is a negative influence on union sympathy. The students' area of study also correlated with their intention to join a union after graduation. This may be the result of values held by students before beginning their courses, or the result of broader values and more specific pro-union encounters during their university studies. The final element however, is previous union membership. This is something

that is a consistent factor in previous studies but it is something that hitherto has received scant attention with regards to university graduates' transition from part-time and casual student jobs to full-time professional jobs. Professional and white-collar unions will likely find it easier to recruit new graduates if they have already had positive experiences with unions. Their interests, and those of the movement, may best be served by investing in new, collaborative strategies to reach out to student workers.

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