# The organiser's tale (of three barbies): Home grown community unionism in a less favoured region

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## ABSTRACT

In this paper we want to look at the experience of one unions attempt to successfully organise a Greenfield call centre site in an old industrial region of South East Victoria in Australia – the Latrobe Valley. The paper is based on discussions and formal research interviews that the co-authors have carried out since the early days of the unions attempts to organise the call centre. Gail Drummond was an organiser with the CPSU who led the organising strategy aimed at the Call Centre; she now works for the ACTU in the Organising Centre.

## Introduction

In this paper we want to look at the experience of one unions attempt to successfully organise a Greenfield call centre site in an old industrial region of South East Victoria in Australia – the Latrobe Valley. The area, about 150 kilometers South east of Melbourne covers four small to medium sized towns and has a population of just under 70,000. It still supplies around 85 percent of Victoria's energy needs through power generation based on open cast brown coal mining. With particular reference to union organisation in Call Centres, the paper picks up on Kelly's observation that we do not know much about how union organisation originates. In particular the paper can be seen very much as the Organiser's Tale and in that light can be seen as complementary to the work of Taylor & Bain (2003: 170) who outline the process whereby, in a UK call centre, from collective interest definition and attribution there arose the desire for unionism, that is for a particular form of collective interest representation. Taylor and Bain argue that discontent is necessary but not sufficient for collective identification. The role of individuals (officials, activists, delegates, shop stewards and their political orientation) is vital in channeling the emergence of interest identification and a sense of injustice. Following Kelly's use of mobilisation theory (Kelly 1998, see also Danford et al 2003: 17) it is argued that mobilisation depends on the ability and willingness of leadership to direct workers sense of injustice toward management, and further that such action often hangs on critical incidents which provide the opportunity for anti-management leadership. In effect such incidents allow for employer provoked collectivisation of employee discontent. As we shall see Gail's experience follows pretty much this pattern. However where Taylor and Bain told the story of the process of unionisation from the employees point of view, here we tell a similar story but from the point of view of the organiser.

## Call centres and local economic development

Governments and regional development agencies around the world are marketing themselves as call centre locations with these characteristics in mind. However, as Richardson and Belt (2001, p. 74) point out, all these competing regions do, in attempting to emphasise difference, is selectively harness positive images and data to present a sales pitch which simply reflects the sameness with all other localities involved in the game. It is, in effect, the latest twist in the downward spiral of dog-eat-dog regional competition fuelled by unchecked place marketing. Additionally, call centres are increasingly abandoning metropolitan locations and seeking areas further down the urban hierarchy. This is partly due to government action and incentives as well as rising land and labour costs, but also because regions that are disadvantaged by distance and/or perceived economic uncompetitiveness can be attractive to call centres, which provide the possibility of unlocking under-utilised labour markets.

According to Budde (2004) regional call centres can be ten to 15 percent cheaper to run than Metropolitan based centres but in rural and regional Australia they have to overcome problems of poor technology infrastructure, insufficient numbers of qualified staff and unreliable electricity supply.

There are however a number of shortcomings associated with call centre employment in such regions:

- call centres offer only limited possibilities for career development. Managers tend to be parachuted in and stay for limited periods. Belt (2001) argues that, for women, large numbers of routine jobs and flat organisational structures limit career opportunities.
- LFRs tend to attract only a limited range of call centre activities, which occur at the lower end of the spectrum in terms of skills and pay levels; and
- call centre employment may not be sustainable, through outsourcing, off shoring, and further developments in ICTs

Therefore, although much regional development rhetoric around call centres focuses on the knowledge economy, high technology investment and information industries, the reality may be both more mundane and more problematic. For the Latrobe Valley, the new Call Centres importance was couched in the familiar terms of job creation bringing the new economy to an old region. However, despite aiming at employing more than 500 people, the parent company played down the job creating role as the opening was accompanied by the rationalising of a number of smaller regional centres, including one in the town next door. What was not discussed was the level of subsidy that came with the location, the relatively low wage levels in the locality compared to metropolitan sites or how these factors might combine to reduce relatively high levels of labour turnover experienced at other parent company call centre sties. Crucially, for the first time the parent company had outsourced management of the site to an American specialist call centre operator, who hitherto had not recognised unions on any of their premises.

## *Locality, community and union organisation.*

For Mather, Taylor & Upchurch (2004) current patterns of neo-liberal restructuring opens up civil society and presents unions with a new set of strategic choices, particularly given the crisis of what they define as social democratic forms of trade unionism:

> 'The challenge is thus to develop new methodologies that are able to grasp the reciprocal relationship between trade union power and the wider society following the crisis and decomposition of social democratic trade unionism.'

One such strategy may be community unionism, although as some critics have pointed out (Stirling 2004) examples outside of the US are few and far between, tend to be isolated, short lived and extremely local. Wills & Simms(2004) has argued that community unionism itself is not new and has taken at least three different forms over many years of collective organisation in the UK, culminating in what she describes as reciprocal community unionism in which unions work with their communities rather than on their behalf. In the current context, Stirling following Wills & Simms (op cit) and Lipsig-Mumme 2003) develops a three fold categorisation of community unionism:

> 'Firstly there is community as identity. In this sense the union is the community in that the trade unionists are members of a community dominated by a single employer such as a pit village…The community, the employer and union are entwined in a reciprocal relationship. Community action is likely to be oppositional to the employer and defensive – such as in a wage dispute or closure – and derived form a shared identity and a sharedness in the outcome.' (ibid: 4)

Stirling ascribes such an approach to old monoindustrial communities (such as the Latrobe valley). However, as we have seen, community unionism could take a number of forms in these circumstances and this approach does not take into account changing historical circumstances nor the contested nature of notions of community.

Stirling's second category sees community as resource. 'This describes a situation in which both the unions and the community can share common interests and utilise each other as resources. The relationship will have peaks and troughs and periods of dormancy but be associated with

the longer term development of reciprocal relationships that are not necessarily focused on an organising campaign in a particular workplace or in a particular occupation but in building mutually supportive strategies'.(ibid: 5)

This may be focused on longer term strategies with regard to particular communities (eg ethnic minorities) that challenge established union ways of working.

Finally there is the notion of community as instrument. 'This describes a situation in which there is no necessary 'organic' connection between the union and the community but both might utilise each other for instrumental reasons. Particular workers are targeted and they are often those at the margins of traditional trade unionism. House calls, public meetings and the local media become key strategies alongside the mobilisation as supporters of the community organisations that represent the targeted workers. On the other hand, the community might be seeking organisational help for a petition or for accessing people with power. In both cases, this is generally a short-term relationship with clearly defined outcomes that can be met and dissolve the relationship.' (ibid: 5)

As we shall see, in Gail's case versions two and three can be found within the same strategy, bringing into question the usefulness of the formulation. However, on this reading then community unionism offers a threefold possible advantage. Firstly it is part of a strategy that can increase union membership. Secondly by working with community organisations unions can achieve credibility with 'outsider groups'. Thirdly, the community itself provides a point of pressure on the company that is useful in developing corporate campaigning strategies.'(ibid: 12-13). However, Stirling goes on to argue that in all these cases there is an assumption that workplace union organisation is 'in place'. Community unionism, for Stirling, is dependant on effective workplace organisation which it can support but not replace. Our argument will be that this is a false dichotomy, the relationship between workplace union organisation and community should be dialectical not dichotomous. We now turn to experience of organising in the Call Centre, an organisation whose workforce was an archetype of the new flexible economy, being composed mostly of young women with no personal history of union membership.

## *Unionising the call centre: A tale of three barbies*

The union in general and Gail in particular had chosen the region specifically to test some of the ideas that were emerging from the Organising Academy as well as fledgling ideas of community based unionism.

> 'I actually targeted here because of the union history of the area'

> 'I was hoping that the culture of the union was still alive and some rubbed off'

Survey data from the region (Rainnie et al 2003, Rainnie et al 2004) would seem to suggest that working people in the region were concerned about the nature of work and employment in the Valley, particularly its apparent casualisation, and remained relatively well disposed towards trade unions. On the other hand, the once powerful Gippsland Trades and Labour Council was almost on the verge of extinction.

Earlier organising attempts by another union through the activity of a locally based organiser had failed. The CPSU initiative was triggered from within the Call Centre itself:

> 'A call came into the CPSU Membership Service Centre in June of last year (2002). The caller worked at TeleTech in the Latrobe Valley and was not happy with the way that he and his colleagues were being treated at work. He asked if I would come to his house to talk to them about the benefits of joining the CPSU. He invited four other people employed by TeleTech to his home to meet with us.'

> 'From this first meeting the four other employees also arranged meetings in their homes and invited more employees along. We had started to get people interested in joining the CPSU using friendships and networks in the community. This group of people was quite amazing. They were not scared to let other employees of TeleTech know that they were now Union members, they even went as far as wearing CPSU lanyards - a mammoth step for workers in such an intimidating environment.'

'We started calling other CPSU members working in different areas of the Valley to see if they knew of anyone that was working in the TeleTech call centre. We found another six people willing to join the CPSU by doing this.'

It is worth stressing again Stirling's point that there are not a lot of living examples of community unionism upon which to draw, therefore strategy and tactics emerged and evolved in practice. However, in any situation, organising is never going to work and form the basis for collective organisation and action without an issue that can be identified and attributed to the actions of management. In this case it was rosters and pay, rather than the much vaunted issue of surveillance which has occupied the minds of researchers on Call Centres:

'I went in over the pay slips that they actually weren't recording the actual hours worked. They were recording that they were working 38 hours a week. In actual fact they're required to come in 15 minutes earlier every day. So they're actually working more than 38 hours a week so their pay slips aren't true. So there was my breach. And it was hilarious. We went into the call centre. I think we signed up 30 people in two days. People were just so keen to have a union inside that call centre.'

Organisation and action spiraled and soon we arrived at the first of a series of important barbeques.

## Barbie #1

'During July last year the few members that we had, along with some of our members from other work places in the Valley, arranged a BBQ in the local park. The members decided that the situation at TeleTech was not improving for them. Getting paid the correct amount each week seemed to be the biggest problem. Our members were ready to bring things to a head. Our members organised a stop work meeting for the following Monday morning. They used a phone tree to call their workmates at home and to let them know about the intended action'.

'Forty-five workers marched up - that's pretty huge but that Friday morning ..they've never done that marched up and asked the HR manager for a meeting.'

'She wouldn't come out and meet with them in the lounge together and it was absolutely stunning because one person said she bugged us every day when we were by ourselves and so you could see these 45 people feel the power... absolutely wonderful, because they've got it. And they have and they haven't been disappointed and nothing has happened for them taking that action. So it's been a really very good process for them and they are a union.'

The action involved a large risk of going badly wrong and was extremely stressful for all concerned:

'It was one of the scariest things that I had ever been involved with. I was worried that no one would walk off the job at the designated time. I was also worried that the employees could get the sack. Yet seeing the empowerment that it gave the workers was just amazing. This action had been a huge risk and luckily it paid off.'

'They were all paid by twelve o'clock on Friday which is what we demanded.'

The implications of the success of the action ran far beyond the Call Centre itself:

'Out of this action we got a lot of local support and media. The community was appalled that locals were not being paid correctly and getting the sack for taking too many toilet breaks.'

This action was closely followed by the second barbecue which was deliberately aimed at problems of the region as a whole and not just the Call Centre.

## Barbie #2

'I was still trying to increase visibility and community involvement. I got in touch with St.Vincent de Paul, a local charity. They do things pretty hard in the Valley because of

the high level of unemployment. I arranged to hold a BBQ to help raise money for the soup kitchen that they run. TeleTech would not let us do this on site and we were forced to do it on the nature strip outside the call centre. The local council gave approval for the BBQ and also waived the fees that you would normally have to pay. Whilst speaking to the woman at the council, she arranged for me to meet her daughter, who worked at Teletech. She signed up as a member. Our attempts to increase visibility were paying off, people were joining the union.'

The thinking behind a community issue and community involvement went beyond a simple recruitment drive, rather it was driven by an understanding that with the increasing casualisation of the labour market (exemplified by the turnover rates in the Call Centre), the union would have to have relevance in all areas of people's lives if they were to retain an active and committed membership. Furthermore, in contrast to the old heavily male dominated unions whose image was not always positive even to those sympathetic to unions, integrating social justice issues into the activity of the union contrasted with the old view of such issues as optional extras to bread and butter workplace organisation.

The next stage in the recruitment drive was a weekend blitz. This involved Gail and three graduates from the Organising Academy collecting names and addresses of people who worked in the Call Centre and then visiting as many as possible at home during the course of one weekend. Gail was also aware that as a tactic a blitz was flavour of the month but not guaranteed of success:

'It's a bit of a silver bullet with Unions at the moment, the blitz idea. Everyone wants to try it for recruitment of course, because all the Unions are in trouble with memberships flagging, blah, blah, blah, so it's seen as a bit of a silver bullet, which is a shame, ……….. Um, and if you're going to try a blitz, I guess you would try somewhere like Moe. That's a logical place to try… well that's what I think anyway, because it's pretty open to Unions down here. It's not completely hostile, and if you're going to try, you have to try somewhere that's likely to succeed. And we thought that Moe would.'

Almost inevitably, organising for the blitz required another barbeque, just around the corner from the Call Centre.

## *Barbie #3*

'We…came up to Moe, had the barbie as you know, and invited a few people along to that. That was just to make it look legitimate, just to see if we had the support locally. The guys at the CFMEU who had done the Pilbara blitz – I wanted them to talk to people. Coz' we were all pretty scared, we were all pretty nervous. We're not trained sales people, so cold calling as it is, knocking on peoples doors can be pretty scary.…we had the barbie, had way too many drinks, got up the next day…'

The involvement of local unionists from the Trades and Labour Council who had been involved in the Pilbara organising drive was important for two reasons; first, as Gail points out, to draw on that experience; but second because their presence on the barbeque signaled a local recognition of what Gail and CPSU was doing. The GTLC was an all but moribund organisation at this point and all Gail's attempts to get in touch with local union officials in an attempt to gain support had, hitherto, failed or been ignored. But now organisers form a number of different unions came to lend support.

However, for the blitz to work a degree of organisation within the call centre itself was necessary. This Gail believed would not work at the first stage of green field site organising strategy:

'…look that's biggest thing about a blitz, to have the visibility in the call centre before you do it. You have to have the visibility. I didn't want to get to people's doors and have to explain what the CPSU was and what a union is, coz that's just going to take way to long, and we allocated 15 minutes for each person. Um we thought that was plenty of time really, and you've got to have the visibility and people have got to know who you are, and that was a huge help that I was so known in the call centre, like to look at 90 percent of people know who I am.'

The blitz in particular and community based unionism in general are not substitutes for workplace union organisation, but can be effective in building and maintaining such organisation. Despite all their fears and apprehensions, the blitz worked very well, at least partly due to the traditions of the locality working in the unions favour:

'Everyone was very friendly. I mean you'd get… I'd knock on some doors, and the people would ask you in before you spoke! So you'd be inside and you'd be 'oh…'; and they didn't work for Teletech – I'd be at the wrong address! So it was very funny!! Or you'd knock on some doors and the parents would let you in and their kid wasn't home yet. And so they would ring their child, coz' they knew where they were and say 'Look, you've gotta come home – your Union's here.' 'Alright,' and they'd come home which was really cool, and they'd chase their kid, like if their kid was supposed to be at someone's house and they weren't there, they'd chase them to find them and send them home again! I think about 50% of the people we saw were in their jammies, which was very cute and one of the interesting things was, you weren't just talking to the person that was at Teletech – you were actually talking to the whole family. So you'd go into the lounge room and the whole family would be there, which was quite interesting too. Coz' a lot of the Dad's, if they were there, were saying how they were with the Union when they were at the power station, etc. So the family wasn't hindering, they were helping a lot. They were helping a lot – they're pretty incredible families down here.'

By the time that Gail parted company with the CPSU to join the ACTU, the project looked like a success:

'The project so far has paid off and is continuing to do so. We have eight workplace delegates in the Valley and two in Melbourne. We have a weekly WOC at one of the delegate's homes and regular phone hook ups with the Valley and Melbourne delegates. The delegates discuss what issues are happening in the two Victorian workplaces and campaign around them simultaneously. We have started lobbying the Latrobe Council for a council funded child care centre that could be placed in the community centre next door to the call centre and the list goes on.'

'Lots of hard work is still being done but it is getting to the point of, if you start work at TeleTech, you join the CPSU, this is the normal and O.K thing to do. Like the members say "it is like being in a special cool club.'

Furthermore, organising the Moe site had knock on effects beyond the site itself and the Melbourne office:

'I wanted to feed back to the rest of Teletech across Australia and that's worked perfectly. Everybody in Teletech in Australia knows about Moe and they know what goes on. Because as I said management's stupid! And will put emails to the whole company; "what the CPSU's saying is lies!" So they email it to the whole company which of course gives us visibility everywhere and gets us into the other sites. Moe has helped every Teletech site in Australia. Every single site.'

But the work is extremely labour and resource intensive and different from the work of standard union officials:

'… the work that I do here is different to what any organiser in the CPSU I think would do anywhere. Because I'm giving more of me, and more of my time, and you become more personally involved. You do, but I think you have to. To do proper community organising you have to. You do have to become involved with the community. And that involves giving more of yourself. But that's okay, it works.'

For Lopez (2004) such a form of organising requires long term commitment of time and resources and a fundamental rethink of union organisation both locally and nationally.

Connection with community paid off in terms of workplace union organisation. The two are interlinked and feed off each other, but such work demands a new approach from activists and organisers:

'Personally I feel that we have been accepted into the community. Going to the Valley for me is a very rewarding experience. I can sit in the call centre for four hours and have at least 30 people pop in to see us and just say hi. Even the security guard that TeleTech

hire to watch us encourages workers to come in and see us. We are invited into member's houses for dinner and to see their kids perform at local concerts'.

'So for us working with the community has been a rewarding and challenging experience. The success of organising the call centre in the Valley has flowed through to other TeleTech workplaces in Melbourne, Sydney and Canberra. It has also helped with organising our more traditional areas of coverage in the Valley.'

## Conclusion

Understanding of and involvement with the community outside of the workplace was crucial in determining the success or otherwise of the organising drive in the Moe Call Centre. Such involvement is hardly new in Australia or outside of it. But the examples of union organising in and with communities, even within Victoria itself (Wonthaggi in the 1930s) had largely been forgotten. In recent years Australian union organisation has tended to be highly centralised and institutionally focused. Even in areas, such as the Latrobe valley, that did have a tradition of workplace based union organisation, that organisation had often been conservative, male dominated and centred on a small number of heavy industries. The predominantly young female labour force in the Call Centre was employed by an American multinational company very different form the old SEC. Nevertheless, knowledge of and involvement with that Unionate community allowed for a successful campaign amongst workers who are archetypes of the new flexible and supposedly unorganisable workforce. As Lopez (2004) points out, such an approach does not consist of a simple laundry list of tactics, rather it involves a process of change within the labour movement itself.

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