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**Bringing the Community In: Possibilities for public sector union success
through community unionism**

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Abstract:

Public sector employment relations are increasingly difficult for public sector unions. This paper uses the concept of community unionism to explore how and when relationships between unions and community organisations may enhance union power and success in bargaining and policy reform. The paper uses a case study of the NSW Teachers Federation and their four year campaign for public education between 2001 and 2004. This case study shows the success of long term deep alliances between parents and teachers in achieving policy reform, while highlighting some limitations for community unionism strategy in salary negotiations. The paper concludes that community unionism is a viable strategy for public sector unions, and suggests that organisational relationships, common interest and multi-scalar forms of activity are important elements of success.

Keywords: public sector employment relations, labour-community coalitions; community unionism; community; union strategy.

While there is a marked decline in union density across liberal market economies, public sector union density has shown greater resilience. Public sector union density in Australia and the UK is twice that of overall density, and in New Zealand and the USA public sector density is three times that of overall density.¹ Yet, public sector unions remain constrained in their negotiations with Governments who are fiscally conservative and criticise the narrow vested interests of unions. They are also increasingly subject to restrictions on the use of traditional forms of industrial action like the strike.

Indeed, public sector union success has been affected by the ‘crises’ of union power apparent in many industrialised countries. Public sector unions in Australia, which in the past enjoyed accommodating, consent-based relationships with Government, now experience relationships with far more conflict. In New South Wales, transport and nursing unions which have a history of non-militancy and strong relationships with the Australian Labor Party (ALP) now find themselves in protracted struggles to prevent concession bargaining (Tattersall 2004). The passage of national legislation has also restricted the types of industrial action that are available to front-line public sector workers.

In this context the NSW Teachers Federation has experimented with what might be described as community unionism. This paper first develops a framework for understanding community

¹ In Australia total density is 23%, public sector density is 46%; in UK total density is 26% and public sector density is 60%; in Canada total density is 30% and public sector density is 70%; in the USA total density is 13% and public sector density is 36%; in New Zealand total density is 21% and public sector density is 66%: sources Australian Bureau of Statistics 2005; Human Resources and Skills Development Canada 2005; UK Dept of Trade and Industry 2005; US Dept of Labor 2005; Statistics New Zealand, QES March 2005.

unionism, then documents a three year case study of the NSW Teachers Federation to assess the potential of these strategies for public sector unions.

Community Unionism

Public sector employment relations are directly connected to public services, with many non-Government organisations and local communities sharing a direct interest in the quality of the services produced. The term 'community' has come into vogue as a possible frame for advancing the interests of unions in an environment of declining service quality and hostile employment relations (Johnston 1994; Carpenter 2000; Terry 2000). 'Community,' in the form of community unionism or (labour) union-community coalitions, is said to provide a mechanism for increasing power and enhancing union success (Brecher and Costello 1990; Tuffs 1998; Reynolds 1999; Nissen 2000; Clawson 2003).

Community is one of those troublesome 'keywords'; it is almost always invoked positively, conjuring up ideas of generalised public support (Williams 1976). This ambiguity has unsettled approaches to community unionism and labour-community coalitions, however, there are some consistent themes about the term community. Most commonly, community is used to substitute for the phrase community organisation. This slippage is so common it is built into the term labour-community coalition (Brecher and Costello 1990; Tuffs 1998; Reynolds 2004; Tattersall 2005). Secondly, community is also used to describe a group of people who have a set of common interests or identities, such as a community of women or environmentalists (Waterman 1991; Taksa 2000; Clawson 2003; Cranford and Ladd 2003; Fine 2005). Thirdly, community is also used to mean place, as in a geographic area or local neighbourhood (Patmore 1994; Jonas 1998; Savage 1998; Walsh 2000; Ellem 2003). These three definitions of community are not mutually exclusive but complementary: the greater the interaction between organisation, common interest/identity and place, the stronger the 'community' foundations.

Community unionism can thus be seen as a concept that describes the intersection between unions and these three forms of community. Thus the strategy of community unionism includes unions working to build power at the scale of a place, a union working with community organisations and unions working on issues of community identity (such as with immigrants, women) or on broader community issues (such as public education or peace). Within this, union-community coalitions refer to one kind of community unionism – that is coalitions between community organisations and unions.

This categorisation of community need not only be descriptive, but can guide an analytical framework for assessing when community unionism is likely to be successful. Overall, community unionism is most successful when there is an interdependent interaction between union and community (Hyman 1989). This has three dimensions. Firstly, a relational dimension, made more successful when there are interdependent, trusting coalitional relationships between community organisations and unions which are supported and sustained by individuals in each organisations (Tuffs 1998; Rose 2000; Frege, Heery et al. 2004; Obach 2004). Secondly, community unionism is made more successful when the common concern between the organisations is in the mutual interests of those organisations, deeply connected to the experiences of union members and framed as a social concern rather than a vested interest (Flanders 1970; Brecher and Costello 1990; Moody 1997). Thirdly, community unionism has a spatial dimension, made more successful when acting at multiple scales, such as the local, city, state and the national, and seizing upon and creating political opportunities (Walsh 2000; McAdam, Tarrow et al. 2001; Reynolds 2004; Ellem 2005).

This framework tries to explain successful community unionism by moving away from the empirically intensive literature that often equates successful community unionism to successful

political outcomes. Community unionism is most capable of producing sustainable, long term union power through trusting, reciprocal relationships with community organisations which simultaneously build the capacity and politicisation of union members (Clawson 2003).

Community unionism may be more likely to develop in certain circumstances given opportunities such as a union's industrial or sectoral location, the existence of a crisis or an internal commitment to union renewal. While community unionism potentially has broad application, the strategy may be particularly useful for advancing union and community interests in the public sector, given the nature of public service and the crisis in public sector employment relations. A union's industrial location may make successful engagement in community unionism more likely. Labour geographers suggest that reaching out to the community is most likely industries with a capital-fix, which includes many service-based industries (Savage 1998; Walsh 2000; Pastor 2001; Ellem 2003). Johnston suggests that community unionism is useful for public sector unions, because these workers provide services of public benefit, creating a ready constituency of consumers with an interest in improving the quality of public services (Johnston 1994). Economic crisis and crisis in traditional union strategies are also said to compel the practice of community unionism (Brecher and Costello 1990; Robinson 2000). In addition, community unionism also requires internal union 'choices' in response to these external political opportunities. In particular, leaders are said to play a critical role in cultivating community unionism, with community unionism often developing through a process of internal union renewal (Voss and Sherman 2000; Turner and Cornfield forthcoming).

I will examine this framework using a case study of the public education campaign run by the NSW Teachers Federation from 2001 to 2004. This case study is a qualitative study of the union and its community partners undertaken between December 2004 and May 2005. Forty one interviews were undertaken with senior officers of the community organisations and the union,

union organisers and delegates, Department of Education Training officials and one former Minister of Education. Access was granted to internal union documents, union journals and Newspaper clippings between Feb 2001 and July 2004. Participant observation was undertaken at Union State Council meetings, Teachers Association meetings and union training. The case study explores how the successfulness of community unionism directly relates to the strength of relationships between the union and community organisations, the types of interests campaigned on and the scale of the campaign.

Community Unionism and the NSW Public Education Campaign

The NSW Public Education campaign was a four year campaign lead by the NSW Teachers Federation (NSWTF) in a comprehensive attempt to ‘do things differently’ by structuring their fight for improved conditions in schools as a broad-based campaign for public education (Author interview, Maree O’Halloran, NSWTF President). The NSWTF is the largest public sector union in NSW. It was formed in 1918, and represents public school teachers and teachers in the NSW-Technical and Further Education (TAFE) system (O’Brien 1987; NSWTF 2005; Tattersall 2005). Over 90% of full-time teachers are in the union and over 70% of its members are women (White 2004). It has a long history of radicalism for public education and on social issues as broad as peace and feminism (O’Brien 1987; NSWTF 2006). This radicalism has created tense relationships with the Australian Labor Party (ALP) (Author Interview, NSWTF Senior Officer). The union has a strong commitment to member involvement, with a 300 rank and file council that meets eight times per year and over 2 000 union delegates and 2 000 women’s contacts, one each in each school across the State (NSWTF 2005). The union has a regional delegate structure, with over 150 regionally-based teacher associations that meet monthly.

Background to the Case Study

The Public Education campaign grew out of a crisis in public education, and a crisis in the ability for the union to change it (Author interview, O'Halloran). The 1990s saw significant budget cuts to public education from both the State and Federal Governments (Currie 2002). At a Federal level there was a shift in funding from public schools to private schools (Watson 2003). At a State level the policy of fiscal tightening was directed at school restructures and reducing recurrent expenditure – the greatest item being teacher wages (Author Interview, former Minister for Education). Salary campaigns in the 1990s became 'increasingly bitter,' with condition stripping the basis for award negotiation (Author interview, O'Halloran). Evidence of the hostility is suggested by the *The Daily Telegraph*, whose campaign against the Teachers Federation culminated in a tabloid front-page article on the day of a strike that featured a cartoon of the Teachers Federation President drawn wearing a dunce's cap with the slogan 'if the cap fits!' (Telegraph 1999).

During 1998 and 2000, the union undertook three structural innovations that attempted to rebuild the union's ability to advance the conditions of public education (Author interview, Organiser, NSWTF). A group of teachers and organisers, mainly based in the South-Western suburbs of Sydney, an area of socio-economic disadvantage, began planning a program of new union strategies (Author interviews, NSWTF Organisers). The first initiative was to establish the Public Education Levy, a membership levy to assist the union to campaign proactively on public education through the commercial media and in the community.² The second innovation was the development of Public Education Lobbies: locally-based lobby groups, the same size as Federal Electorate Districts, operating as advocacy group for public education, run by a local parent, local teacher and local principle (Zadkovich 1999).³ Thirdly, the union's leadership decided to change

² The Levy was a \$17 increase in union fees for all members. The money was directed into a special public education account only to be spent on positive campaigns for public education.

³ The Lobbies were locally based union-community coalitions between parents, principals and teachers that ran local advocacy events in support of public education.

its relationship with principals, committing to a stronger relationship between Teachers and Principal Associations as key allies in public education.

These three examples of union renewal enabled the union to embark on a broad strategy of community unionism. The community unionism featured three elements. Firstly, the union formed closer relationships, and eventually a formal coalition with the Principal Associations (Secondary Principals Council, Primary Principals Association and Public Schools Principals Forum) and Parent Groups (the Federation of Parents & Citizens (P&C) and the Federation of School Community Organisations (FOSCO). Secondly the union shifted to frame all its campaigns as campaigns for public education. Thirdly, the union established capacity at a local as well as a state level in order to build member participation, political influence and public awareness about public education. We can analyse how variations in the relational, interest and scalar elements of the campaign shape the effectiveness of the community unionism strategy over the four campaign phases of the public education campaign.

Period One: Federal Election, Jan -Nov 2001

The public education campaign began with the aim of influencing the outcome of the 2001 Federal Election. The Election campaign consisted of a series of ad hoc events. It began with an advertising campaign focused on the merits of public education, then extended locally as the new public education lobbies undertook forums and meetings with politicians. The major activity was a Public Education Convention on September 8. Planning was coordinated by the Teachers Federation, with the other partners consulted to draft a joint statement and encouraged to bring people to the event (Author interview, Principal Representative). The Convention was attended by over 10 000 people in a space that fits 30 000, with the audience addressed by politicians from the major political parties. Teachers Federation organisers described the event positively, one even called it 'groundbreaking' (Author Interview, Teachers Organiser). Yet, many of the principal and

parent representatives who were less involved had quite modest reflections (Author interview, Principal Representative). In the end, the issue of education was overshadowed; September 11, refugees and border control dominated the election, and saw the conservative Government re-elected (Marr and Wilkinson 2003).

Period Two: Vinson Inquiry, March 2001-August 2002

The Vinson Inquiry was an independent Public Inquiry into Public Education. It was a political opportunity created by the Teachers Federation and the P&C in response to repeated restructuring proposals from the NSW State Government. The State Government's *Building the Future* proposal, released in March 2001, recommended the closure of 13 schools, and was immediately opposed by inner city communities through wildcat strikes and public meetings (O'Halloran 2001). The union initially called for the Government to review its proposals through a Government Inquiry, then, during its April Executive meeting one rank and file representative exclaimed 'why don't we just do a review ourselves' (Author interview, Simpson, former NSWTF President). With the Public Education Levy, which had accumulated over \$1 million, an independent review, while expensive, was possible.

The Vinson Inquiry was born of a tight formal partnership between the P&C and the Teachers Federation. This partnership across the 'education community' had the legitimacy to comment on the future of public education (Author Interview, Gavrielatos then Senior Vice-President NSWTF). A committee with representatives from the NSWTF and P&C was responsible for the day-to-day operation of the Inquiry. It appointed an Inquiry head, Tony Vinson, an Emeritus Professor of Education at the University of Sydney, who had previous experience in reviewing Government Services. He established a separate body to undertake the Inquiry, setting up an office in separate premises, hiring a research team and given control over discretionary funds provided mainly by the Federation's Public Education Levy, but also by the P&C.

The Inquiry's independent status gave it authority within Government and amongst the partner groups. Vinson independently sought out a constructive relationship with the ALP Government and the Department of Education and Training, requesting their support as a condition for the inquiry proceeding (Author interview, Tony Vinson). Although it was created by the parents and teachers, the inquiry sat above them, allowing it to focus on the common concerns of education and not conflicts of interest. The Inquiry looked like a formal Government Inquiry, with submissions, hearings and public meetings. But it was also consciously structured to increase awareness about public education for the 2003 State Election and to maximise teacher and parent participation. The union constantly used mass-based activities for every stage of the Inquiry. Submissions were advertised in the major daily newspapers, the Inquiry was launched through a Sky Channel meeting,⁴ 772 Submissions were received and the Inquiry held 28 public meetings and school visits across the State (Vinson 2002).

During the Inquiry, the Teachers Federation began to broaden how it framed its campaigns in the media and how it engaged its members. Maree O'Halloran, NSWTF President recalls 'I made an effort ... of saying parents, principals and teachers say' not just speaking as the union, but as the education community (Author interview, O'Halloran). Union members were key participants in the Inquiry, which required them to reflect on public education. Sue Simpson, former President noted 'it is a more engaging collective process to write a submission compared to a strike which can be organised in an individualised way ... this was deeply collective and participatory (Author interview, Simpson). The activities of the Inquiry constantly engaged the union membership on issues beyond wages about the education system.

⁴ A Sky Channel meeting is a live satellite television broadcast that plays live in over 40 locations around the state to mass meetings of teachers and parents, which is then followed up by formal meetings of teachers and parents in those locations.

The Inquiry's hearings lasted for six months and allowed it to operate simultaneously at the local scale and the scale of the State. The hearings were school-based events, inviting teachers and parents to air their grievances and make recommendations, generating a deep level of rank and file participation. As Maree O'Halloran commented 'it touched the middle teacher that doesn't get involved in their union' (Author interview, O'Halloran). The hearings were also a vehicle for media attention, as a senior official noted 'there was hardly a day where there was not a story about public education' (Author interview, Gavrielatos).

The Inquiry developed a research agenda on the future of public education, synthesising the concerns of teachers, parents and principals into a positive vision (Vinson 2002). The issue of public education was broad enough to mutually and directly engage the organisational interests of the NSW Teachers Federation and the P&C, and rank and file teachers and parents. Teachers and parents have a direct interest in public education funding, and by asking them to raise specific grievances, the Inquiry engaged the rank and file on their specific concerns. This intermixing of broad interest and specific issues enabled the common concern at the heart of the coalition to act as a mobilising, participatory force that deeply engaged the rank and file.

Period Three: The State Election, August 2002 to March 2003

The NSW Teachers Federation formed the Public Education Alliance with a group of six public education partners to win targeted reforms identified by the Vinson Inquiry during the 2003 State Election.

The Public Education Alliance evolved out of the coalition initiated during the Inquiry and Federal Election (Author Interview, O'Halloran). The Alliance sought to create a 'united front ... of parents, teachers and principals speaking with a united voice' (Author interview, Principal Representative). It operated through irregular but constant meetings held at the Teachers

Federation which were attended by the senior executive officers of all of the participating organisations (Author interview, Principal Representative). The participants put aside differences within the Alliance, as one representative acknowledged:

‘I wouldn’t say we are close now as individuals, but when it comes to a public face in terms of pursuing those ideas for public education, well then we are buddies (Author interview, Principal Representative).

The Alliance negotiated through its differences in formulating six United Demands for the election campaign. The Teachers Federation prepared the initial draft of demands, then ‘shopped it around’ for discussion (Author interview, O’Halloran). Other groups then amended the documents, as a representative from FOSCO describes, ‘we always had the power to veto ... anything that we didn’t approve of’ (Author interview, Allen, FOSCO). The Demands included reducing class sizes, improving school maintenance, supporting quality teachers and professional development. The Demands sought to balance the specific interests of individual organisations within a broad interest frame of public education – binding organisations to the campaign through their own self-interest. As one Principal noted ‘we were all encompassed by those recommendations’ (Author interview, Principal Representative).

The major controversy was how the Alliance framed its concern for salaries. The Teachers Federation knew it ‘couldn’t get away without having salaries there’ in the united demands (Author interview, O’Halloran). After the election, the union would move into salary negotiations. Mentioning salaries would offset disquiet in the union’s membership that the Federation was forgetting its core responsibilities (Author interview, Federation official). However, the parent groups, particularly FOSCO, were equally adamant that salaries would not be mentioned, arguing it was ‘inappropriate,’ fearing that this issue would overshadow the Alliance,

given the dominant role the union was already playing (Author interview, Parent representative, Feb 2005). Eventually the Federation compromised, with the United Demands calling for ‘the development of strategies to attract and retain teachers in an era of teacher shortage’, which was a way of expressing a need for salary justice to union members without mentioning the word salaries.

This controversy reveals a limitation in how community unionism establishes common concerns. While an alliance flourishes on issues of mutual common interest, organisations also have autonomous internal needs that must also be satisfied. For unions, salaries are inevitably a concern as wage justice is a key reason why people join unions. The art of coalition practice is balancing organisational interdependence – the contradiction between autonomous organisational needs and common unity (Hyman 1989).

The Alliance planned a series of joint events in the lead up to the State Election to secure its demands. The events were focused at the scale of the State Government – where the key decision makers were based. The Public Education Lobbies did undertake local activities – displaying school signs that said ‘public education is the issue,’ and continued with local lobbying. But the momentum was drawn to State-based events – including central lobbying of key politicians and a State Public Education Forum.

The Alliance’s agenda setting power created political opportunities. In November 2002, the Opposition leader in the NSW Parliament endorsed the Alliance’s demands over class-sizes five months before the election (Totaro 2002). This escalated pressure upon the Government. The Alliance met with the Premier (Government Leader) on 22 January, an incredible achievement given the Teachers Federation had not met with the Premier in years (Author interview, O’Halloran). The Alliance also hosted a Public Education Forum on 16 February 2003. Unlike

the Convention in 2001 – this forum was meticulously planned within the Alliance and was ‘packed to the rafters’ mainly with teachers, but also with parents bussed in from around the city (Author interview, Principal Representative). This escalation of public and private pressure created political success with the Government announcing it would reduce class sizes and increase funding for professional development two weeks out from the election (Doherty 2003).

Period Four: The Salaries Campaign, March 2003 to May 2004

The final stage of the Public Education campaign saw a rapid deterioration of the close relationships built over the last 2 years. The public education agenda set up the teachers’ salary campaign. As Angelo Gavrielatos noted, ‘we had created a platform from which we were able to launch into salaries (Author interview, Gavrielatos). Indeed, the momentum gave the union an early meeting with the Premier, and to the Federation’s shock, an early pay offer. The offer of a 6% wage increase over 2 years was significantly below union expectations, but it was a dramatically better starting point than the concession bargaining of the 1990s. The Government’s strategy was to make an offer and push for arbitration using the NSW Industrial Relation’s Commission’s powers to hear demands for pay claims and determine an independent settlement (Author interview, Department Official).

The Federation prepared for Commission hearings on shifting ground. One problem was that the union had not secured a commitment from the Government to fully fund any pay recommendations. A fear was that if the Industrial Relations Commission awarded a pay increase above 6%, then the Government would pay for that increase out of the existing public education budget – in effect cutting money from schools to pay for teacher salaries. Secondly, there was an organisational problem. During 2002 the P&C experienced an acrimonious change in leadership. The new leadership of the P&C prioritised building a stronger relationship with the Government, distancing the P&C from the Teachers Federation (Author interviews, Parent representatives).

Thirdly, the Teachers Federation decided to campaign on salaries alone. The Commission hearings took the union into a courtroom separated from the public agenda it had just created. While the union brought their members into the courtroom and ran a public campaign around the hearings, they distanced themselves from their education partners. For instance, the Teachers Federation produced a pamphlet about their pay claim that they circulated in the Sunday newspapers, which talked about ‘parents’ without consulting the parents first (Author interview, Union official). Union interviews suggest that these entwined issues pulled previously close relationships apart, reducing trust between parents and teachers (Author interview, NSWTF Official).

The campaign events were organised by the union and were industrial, not community focused. The rallies had only union speakers, the first had only speakers from the Federation, and the second added the Secretary of Unions NSW (Central Labour Council in NSW). Similarly media commentary focused on the percentage of wage increase that was being offered, and union advertisements also narrowly focused on the issue of teacher pay, rather than the link between pay and quality education (NSWTF 2003).

Further pressure came from the Government who placed sought to influence the Commission in the lead up to it making its award (Author interview, O’Halloran). The Premier ‘warned’ the Commission not to hand out ‘affordable wage increases, and then opened the Salaries case to lodge evidence about incapacity to pay wage increases (Dixon 2004).

The Government’s aggression inadvertently changed the political opportunities of the campaign, shifting the issue from the quantum of pay to fully-funding the pay rise. The Federation believed that its hurdle to a pay rise now would be whether the Government would fund an award made by the Commission (Author interview, O’Halloran). With this broader frame, the Federation reached

out to its education partners and its members. It staged a strike and leafleted parents at schools, arguing that full funding was in the interests of the public education community as it protected the public education budget (Zadkovich 2004).

The Commission handed down their award creating a 12.5% pay increase, much lower than the Federation had hoped. But, by this stage the union was focused on the issue of full funding and was galvanising the public education community. This shift in message was reflected in media reports: for instance, *The Daily Telegraph* noted ‘this is not the usual fight by teachers over money, this has become a fight for the survival of a valued and quality public education system’ (Parker 2004). In this context, the Federation prepared for a state-wide strike on 25 June over full-funding.

The union’s strategy was magnified by a historic vote at the P&C. For the first time since the 1980s, the P&C voted to support the strike. It was a controversial vote too, because the motion was not supported by the President of the P&C (Author interview, Parent Representative). That afternoon, news of the vote hit the press (Author interview, Parent Representative). The next day, and the day before the strike the Government changed its policy and came out in support of full funding (Burke 2004). In Maree O’Halloran’s opinion, the support of the P&C ‘kicked the balance in terms of full funding and was why we got it in the end’ (Author interview, O’Halloran). This support came even while there was poor relationship between the leaders of the two organisations. Beneath the leadership, officials in both parent and teacher groups had continued to talk, and those relationships had generated the support that cemented the teachers’ victory (Author interview, Parent Representative).

Reflections on the Campaign

The community unionism strategy across the four phases of the public education campaign varied significantly. It began as a formal coalition, dominated by the Teachers Federation during the Federal Election. Its most successful period was the deep coalition during the Vinson Inquiry, which engaged parents and teacher organisations and members through a tight organisational structure, strong mutual interest and participatory activities at both the local and State scales. This deep relationship evolved into a formal mutual-interest coalition, called the Public Education Alliance, which focused on action at the Scale of the State while maintaining a set of concerns that engaged organisational self-interest through the frame of public education. Finally, the relationships significantly deteriorated during the salaries campaign, where a change of organisational leadership, the slippage into an industrial campaign and the space of the industrial relations commission undermined deep organisational relationships. That said, during the full-funding aspect of the salaries campaign, the ad hoc relationship between parents and teachers was able to secure support that enabled a victory.

The three elements of community unionism help explain how the success of these strategies varied. Firstly, relationships were critical. The organisational dominance of the Federation in the Federal Election campaign mitigated other organisations' involvement. Yet the deep relationships of the Vinson Inquiry, assisted by the formation of a separate 'coalition office' in the form of Vinson's research team, helped the organisations find common ground. The Public Education Alliance provided a space for negotiation and planning, where differences over salaries could be debated. The change in leadership at the P&C before the Salaries campaign altered the organisational relationships, and was one factor that contributed to a weakening of the community unionism during the salaries campaign.

Secondly, common concern was critical. The Vinson Inquiry, with its broad common interest around public education allowed individual teachers to connect education to their personal

experiences, deeply engaging members. The negotiated united demands of the public education alliance also facilitated organisational commitment through organisational self-interest. The lack of mutuality over the issue of salaries, exacerbated by the fact that the Teachers Federation framed the campaign as an industrial campaign, mitigated the formation of common interest and thus mitigated the success of the campaign.

Thirdly, community unionism success also relied on the campaign operating at multiple scales, so that rank and file members as well as organisational leaders were engaged in the campaign (Clawson 2003). The public education lobbies established campaign capacity at multiple scales, which was deepened by the participatory processes of the Vinson Inquiry. These deep engagements were not as deeply sustained as the campaign moved into achieving outcomes, first through the State Election campaign and then through the Salaries campaign. The movement of the Salaries campaign into the Industrial Relations Commission and into an industrial frame reduced the perceived need for multi-scaled action.

The analytical framework of relationships, common concern and multi-scaled action help explain the varying successfulness of community unionism that goes beyond a superficial equation of political outcomes with a successful strategy. In this case study, the community unionism was powerful not simply because smaller class sizes or full-funding were achieved, but because deep relationships between organisations and individuals flourished, union member engagement was expanded and an agenda for public education was created. These achievements do not simply represent outcomes, but a transformed capacity for the union and for the coalition, and signify the emergence of a variable but strong community unionism.

Conclusion

Public sector unions have the capacity to use their role as public service providers as a ‘sword of justice’ to enhance their power in public sector employment relations (Flanders 1970). This case study demonstrates key possibilities and limitations for community unionism as a public sector strategy. Public sector unions can utilise a variety of opportunities that support the development of community unionism. Confirming Johnston’s argument about public sector social movement unionism and Walsh and Savage’s arguments about service unionism, the Teachers Federation’s location in a public, capital-fixed service-based industry, with local workplaces that interact with a stable ‘customer’ base, provided a steady, organised constituency of parents and principals, committed to supporting public education (Savage 1998; Johnston 2000; Walsh 2000).

The development of community unionism in the Federation arose out of an environmental crisis that triggered an internal union crisis and structural change (Voss and Sherman 2000). The structural innovations of membership fees and local lobbies contributed to a powerful community unionism, as they enabled the union to finance and resource multi-scaled campaigns. In addition, the union’s pre-existing internal capacity, with large numbers of delegates and regional associations supported the multi-scaled campaign.

Community unionism may also have limitations, particularly when it comes to the issue of salaries. While the broad issue of public education was in the mutual interest of all the partners, the issue of salaries – a core concern of the union – was controversial. The case study demonstrates that salaries can be an issue of conflict, while also showing that it does not have to be the case. This salaries campaign broke down because of how it was run given the decline in consultation between the parties; yet relationships were able to be rebuilt when the campaign shifted to full-funding and quality education. These are variables and while salaries campaigns present a challenge to community unionism, there is not evidence that these are insurmountable barriers effective community unionism.

From the experience of the public education campaign, we can speculate about the applicability of this strategy across public sector unions and public sector employment relations. The idea of a constituency of service recipients that is organised in a local area is a common across public sector industries, particularly for front-line public sector workers like public transport, police and emergency services, health care and childcare (Pastor 2001, 275). Public sector unions generally negotiate wage claims in an environment of fiscal crisis that often includes privatisation. These issues deeply affect union members by affecting the capacity of a union to bargain. In such circumstances, a broad-based community campaign not only enhances the power of a public sector union, but provides a proactive frame for the campaign – a union becomes ‘for’ quality, public services, rather than reactively against privatisation or wage cuts. In addition, public sector unions, by having relatively strong union density and a larger pool of union members may also have the internal financial and human resources capable of mounting a community union strategy. Yet variables still remain, and success will depend on the ability of a public sector union to mobilise its own membership base and the supportiveness of union leadership.

This study demonstrates that community unionism is not a simple recipe for union power or union success. Rather, community unionism varies over time, given the shifting relationships between the organisations, the changing issues at the heart of the campaign and the capacity to resource local as well as state and national activity and organisation. Community unionism has the potential to enhance the success of public sector unions in achieving policy reform, political influence and bargaining outcomes. However the success of these strategies is a product of the dynamic political opportunities, relationships and interests evident in particular campaigns.

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