Trade unions yesterday, today, and tomorrow
By Martin Thomas

Union density is falling, and has been falling for decades, almost across the world.

New independent trade union movements made great advances in Brazil, South Korea, and South Africa in the 1980s; Sweden’s high level of union density continued to increase until about 1990; Brazil’s unions gained a rise in density between 2000 and 2006, after a decline in the 1990s; some Scandinavian countries, and Belgium, where unions are intertwined with the welfare system, have limited their losses; but generally the picture is of decline through the neoliberal decades from the early 1980s.

Falling union density has come together with a falling blue-collar proportion in the workforce, but the two trends are not locked to each other. In some white-collar sectors, union density has held up, or even increased since the 1980s. In blue-collar sectors, union density, has generally declined, and many of those unions have become economically restructured, or have disappeared completely in some countries, as technologies and change more and more industrial enterprises gear to global rather than local supply chains and markets.

The bastions of trade-union organisation are now usually in the public services, notably education and health care.

An important role in trade-union movement for school teachers is not that new: as long ago as 1914-18 the teachers’ union was the only union in France resilient enough to keep functioning completely throughout World War 1. Health-care is a relatively new area for union strength.

In many other countries, again, union membership is ageing, and very low among young workers. Rates of industrial action, and the wage-share in value-added, have decreased worldwide.

The facts are grim. In response, we need analysis and understanding, not despair.

In a long view of capitalist development, the period between World War Two and the 1970s was an exception. The most basic cause of the retreat of union membership, though, by no means the whole story, is a return to the capitalist norm.

World-market capitalist competition has become more intense. The system has become more subject to periodic crises. Profits have become more unstable, capitalists have become more anxious to tighten control over workers and to reduce costs. From the 1940s to the 1970s much of technological progress was the inexpensive rolling-out, within national terrains and often within stable corporate structures, of techniques accumulated in the 1930s and 40s, but stifled or sidelined by depression and war. Since then new waves of technology have rapidly restructured industries and supply chains on a global scale, and continue to do so.

The decline in manufacturing jobs in the older industrial countries is not mainly or mostly due to those same jobs being moved to other countries. The new manufacturing jobs, worldwide, have generally been new jobs using new technologies and new supply chains. And manufacturing jobs are decreasing in number in “newly industrialised countries” — certainly Brazil and Korea, and probably now (though the statistics are slippery) in China.

Manufacturing is a small sector, but the nature of jobs there is changing, and jobs described as “services” are becoming the majority everywhere. Although containerisation has cut jobs in ports, it has come with a big expansion of the broader logistics industry.

Fundamentally, unions have failed to be quick enough on their feet in response to the changes in the terrain on which they operate.

In Britain and some other countries, big defeats in class struggle in the 1980s pushed along the decline. But those defeats do not explain it all. Over its history the working class has, again and again, muddle through from more severe defeats, even from defeats like the crushing of the Paris Commune in 1871.

The capacity to recover from defeat is built in the condition of the working class within capitalism: However big capital’s victories, it still has to recruit and concentrate new armies of workers, and in that process to give unions scope to rebuild.

In Britain, and some other countries, again, changes in industrial location, have been happening so fast that trade unions have ‘outlived their usefulness’. [Yet] trade unions, even the most powerful, embrace no more than 20 to 25 percent of the working class, and at that, predominantly the more skilled and better paid layers. The majority of the workforce, working in the old working class, has been only episodically into the struggle, during a period of exceptional upsurges in the labour movement. The very radicalisations of the 1970s, even the occasional revolutions of the proletariat, trade unions, as witnessed by all past historical experience [have] developed powerful tendencies toward compromise with the bourgeois-democratic regime.

There were some countries even then — Sweden and other

ers, including Australia — where union density was above Trotsky’s “20 to 25%” figure. Trotsky would have been aware of these exceptions, but those that were exceptions on the basis of unprecedentedly rapid and (relatively) smoothly expanded capital, and union movements strongly committed to all-round compromise.

Omissions in the 2017 Labour manifesto were telling. Omissions in the 2017 Labour manifesto were telling. Labour now had a left-wing leadership which was keen to, and did, put union demands into its manifesto.

To get good figures for world-wide union membership is more than 20 to 25 percent of the working class, and at that, predominantly the more skilled and better paid layers. The majority of the workforce, working in the old working class, has been only episodically into the struggle, during a period of exceptional upsurges in the labour movement. The very radicalisations of the 1970s, even the occasional revolutions of the proletariat, trade unions, as witnessed by all past historical experience [have] developed powerful tendencies toward compromise with the bourgeois-democratic regime.

To get good figures for world-wide union membership is difficult, but today the International Trade Union Confederation claims to represent 181 million workers in 163 countries. The International Labour Office has 216 members, and that is not a large number. In 1945, the World Federation of Trade Unions claimed 60 million. That smaller figure was definitely inflated by including tens of millions from the USSR. There were so many organs of the government and management that in 1967 Alexandre Shelepov was appointed to head the trade unions as a de facto and covert shift after nine years of heading first the political police, the KGB, then the Central Committee de-
“democracy and solidarity” agenda

dpartment overseeing the KGB. By comparison with what we have had in the past, the trade union movement is very far from being without resources, or facing impossibly hostile odds. The question is whether and how to mobilise the resources, and whether or how to try to beat the odds.

Dan Gallin, former general secretary of the International Union of Foodworkers, sums up the story: after 1945, “the trade unions... developed an over-reliance on the state. No longer was there any aspiration to represent an alternative society. Amidst the newfound peace and prosperity, the labour movement had disarmed ideologically and politically.

“Decades of complacency... diluted and trivialised its ideological and political heritage... Still powerful trade-union organisations were led, far too often, by blinkered and politically ignorant leaders, geared to administering gains of earlier struggles rather than to organising and engaging in new struggles, generally unquestioning in their acceptance of social partnership...”

“While the labour movement was asleep, the world changed dramatically... [with] new communications and transport technologies...

“The real crisis of the labour movement is a crisis of identity and perspective, and... this is the crisis we need to resolve in order to become capable of organising the world’s working class... [We need] the vision of freedom, justice, and equality that inspired the movement! It is its origins and made it the greatest mass movement in history”...

A short tour of history will help us put the facts into perspective.

**MARX**

When Karl Marx, in the 1840s, declared that trade unions and “combinations of workers” were central to the self-liberation of the working class, he was not repeating some generally-agreed truism, but arguing a case dismissed by the majority of the socialists of the time.

“In spite of both of them [i.e. both bourgeois ideologues, and socialists disdainful of unions], in spite of manuals and utopias, combination has not yet ceased for an instant to go forward and grow with the development and growth of modern industry... If the first aim of resisting was merely the maintenance of wages, combinations, at first isolated, constitute themselves into groups as the capitalists in their turn create for the purpose of repression, and in the face of always united capital, the maintenance of the association becomes more necessary to them than that of wages... In the struggle... this mass [of workers] becomes united, and constitutes itself as a class itself”.

At the time there were scarcely trade unions anywhere except in Britain. And, there, in Britain, early efforts at mass trade-unionism like the Grand National Consolidated Trade Union of 1834 had collapsed quickly. The stable trade unions were, and until the late 1880s continued to be, fairly small societies of skilled workers — as much welfare agencies which helped their members find jobs, get help when unemployed or sick, or pay funeral expenses, as class-struggle bodies, and often narrow-minded and exclusionary towards “unskilled” workers. It took the insight of a thinker like Marx to see the potential.

From the late 1880s to 1914, unions expanded massively in Britain and in many other countries. Numbers were still small. Germany’s labour movement, widely regarded as the world’s best-organised, had only 2.5 million members in its main union confederation, in a population of 68 million, in 1914. Britain’s trade unions were bigger, but still had only four million members, a density of 22%.

World War One brought a surge of union membership. Governments anxious to maximise war production with workforce reduced by military conscription were ready to allow or even help unions to expand, in return for wartime cooperation.

After the end of the war, as workers sickened by the slaughter and inspired by the example of the Russian Revolution, rebellions, and governments and bosses came to think that trade-union concessions were for them a much less and more manageable evil than social revolution, unions grew further.

The main German union confederation, for example, was up to eight million members by 1920.

As immediate post-war ferment subsided, unemployment grew, and bosses regained confidence, unions were pushed back. Engineering bosses in Britain staged a two-month lock-out in March-June 1922. The German union confederation was down to 2.5 million members by 1932, and then was outlawed altogether in 1933, as Italian unions had been outlawed in 1924-6.

Elsewhere, in France and especially in the USA, where unions had previously been weak, union membership grew in the 1930s, but through hectic struggles, not through gradual processes of organic growth.

In World War Two, union membership had already been banned in the Axis countries. Real trade unions had already been suppressed by Stalin in the USSR.

In Britain and the USA, though, the same processes happened as in World War One: governments anxious to give war production, and unable to rely on the forces of capitalist market competition to promote discipline and productivity, allowed or helped trade-union membership to rise steeply.

As the war ended, the bosses’ thought was, as an influential British Tory put it: “If you do not give the people social reform, they will give you social revolution”. Trade unions were allowed, even encouraged, to organise in the countries of previously Nazi-occupied Europe and in Japan, where they had been crushed. In France, for example, unions gained numerous legal guarantees of recognition and places for their officials in the state social security and pension systems.

There was a backlash similar to that in the 1920s. In the USA, the anti-union Taft-Hartley law was passed in 1947; in the same year, the U.S. occupied helped the Japanese bosses beat down Japan’s militant new unions. But, as capitalism emerged from the war, its contradictions became more pronounced, and the backlash was very much milder than in the 1920s.

The big capitalist corporations, enjoying stable profits and stable growth, considered the costs of dealing with unions too high, and of course management was fighting the boom in profits long before wage-and-condition demands — pretty much unavoidable, but entirely affordable. In France, even after a “soft” military coup in 1958 gave General De Gaulle the power to rewrite the constitution and substantially sideline parliament, unions were still able to grow with more-or-less favourable legal conditions.

The 1970s brought a new period of repeated, sometimes deep crises and of instability in profits. International capitalist competition, which had gradually increased over decades of falling trade barriers and falling freight costs, broke through to a much more intense level.

**SURGE**

The first result was a surge of working-class struggles across the world, which often at first won sizeable victories and in many countries led to new rises in union density.

But the stakes had been raised. The period from 1945 to the early 1970s had never been one that could continue forever, but an exceptional one, in which capital in the richer countries could expand fairly smoothly within a system of US hegemony, gradual freeing of trade and expansion of new technologies on lines of socialism and workers’ control, or to muddle through with little perspective beyond damage-limitation. Since the combative rank-and-file struggles of the 1970s had nowhere generated political forces strong enough to displace the old, uncombative leaders of the labour movements, they went for the second, and worse, choice.

Trying to turn the clock back is no answer. The labour movement cannot force capitalist governments to return to walled-off economies and old technologies, any more than we can bring back the handloom-weaving workforce of early 19th-century Chartist days. And if we could, if we were strong enough, then we wouldn’t want to: we would want a socialised economy, adapting technologies to social goals under democratic workers’ control, over a territory covering many present-day states. Socialism cannot be built in one country.

Labour movements can win reforms in countries with high technology and open to the world market. The Scandinavian economies still have very high union densities and good welfare provision, and yet are considered by the high-capitalist World Economic Forum to be among the most “competitive” in the world, because they have high levels of technical expertise and good infrastructure. Brazil’s union density was pushed up, and living standards for its poorest people were raised steeply, by reforms introduced by the Workers’ Party government after 2002. Despite all the shortcomings of the Socialist Party administrations in Chile, they have introduced laws to increase trade-union rights, and union density has risen modestly.

Nor have economic changes produced sectors impossible to organise. By the 1970s the car industry was seen as a bastion of union strength in many countries. But in their first decades the car factories were seen as places “impossible to organise”. Only after long and sometimes bloody battles did Ford in the USA recognise unions in 1941. In the USA,
Unions were slow to respond to the challenges of "containerisation", but technological change does not equal weak organisation again, the chief activity of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) in its heyday before 1914 was organising precarious, insecure, short-contract workers thought “impossible to organise”.

Changes in the workforce mean that unions have to be quick on our feet, and if we limit ourselves to conserving membership in “traditional” sectors then we will decline. But the changes do not necessarily make new sectors harder to organise than old ones. The spread of tightly-timed global supply chains gives more groups of workers industrial power by creating “pinch points” in those chains.

Unionists also say that the expansion of consumer credit has made union organising harder, because many workers, even on high wages, spend up to their credit-card limits, and box themselves into being narrowly focused on maximising wages to service their debts. There are surely some like that. But figures from the USA show a heavy concentration of maxed-out credit-card holders among students, not among better-paid workers. Workers say they cannot take industrial action because “they can’t afford it”, very often they are giving what they think sounds like a respectable reason, but the real reason is that they just don’t want to. If that response is common, it is an effect of unionism being a minority occupation.

A critical determinant of recent decades was that the crises of the 1970s hit Labour movements which, in Dan Gallin’s words quoted above, had “gone to sleep” for two decades.


One index is the decline of the working-class press. From 1912 to 1964, the British labour movement had a daily newspaper, the Daily Herald, from 1922 owned by the TUC. In 1933 it had the biggest circulation of any newspaper in the world. In 1964, long before neoliberalism, in a period when the unions were confident about their influence and strength, the paper was sold off, and became The Sun, under whose name it is notorious today as the vilest of the capitalist press.

The German SPD’s daily Vorwärts — once a source of light for millions of workers — was restarted after 1945 as only a weekly. In 1989, before the decline in union density, which started in Germany only in the 1990s, the SPD reduced its to an SPD members’ bulletin, which now appears only six times a year. The French Socialist Party’s Le Populaire had the biggest circulation in the country, after the CP’s L’Humanité, in 1944-6: it declined to a 27,000-circulation one-sheet bulletin by 1954, and was abandoned in 1970, at a time when the labour movement was expanding fast. L’Humanité itself declined from 600,000 circulation in 1945-6 to 170,000 in 1954.

Unions still have union journals, and now they have websites. But the best that can be said of the best of them is that they enable union activists to search for information about conferences, campaigns, and so on without difficulty. None of them thinks of seeking a readership outside union members.

The crises of the 1970s themselves galvanised thousands of young activists. Yet the new groups of young activists were just not strong enough to make a decisive change in the direction of the labour movement, or even to establish a continuing political presence strong enough to generate much increasing flow of new organisations for the movement. With all the political weaknesses of the new left-wing currents (the heritage of ideas on which they could draw had been heavily “overgrown” in the previous decades) it could not break through the accumulated tangle of “overgrowth”, both ideological and organisational, on the movement. Or not quickly enough: the bosses were moving faster.

Internationally, unions were and are slow to respond to capital becoming more and more transnational. There are now some dozens of “global framework agreements” between global union alliances and transnational corporations. But work for such agreements started very late — the first was in 1988, the second in 1995 — and many of them commit the corporation to no more than respecting ILO conventions. The International Trade Union Confederation runs no international campaigns, but is focused instead on “advocacy within the major global institutions”.

It was not that economic shifts in the world market, from the 1980s, made it impossible to fight; rather, the inability to fight of the union leaders let those economic shifts be carried through on capitalist terms, thus further weakening the unions.

From about 1999 through the first years of the 21st century, there was a new wave of radical activism among young people, represented in the “global justice” movement which gathered at protests of meetings of the IMF, WTO, etc., the World Social Forums and in organising networks like Students Against Sweatshops in the USA, No Sweat in Britain, ATTAC in France and other countries; the protests against the 2003 invasion of Iraq; and climate activism.

Some CP activists will have been writers, teachers and trade union activists for many years. If you looked at their faces you might have thought, “Those are the ones who could lead the revolution. We don’t need to organise new people.” It is a very different matter when you meet young people for the first time, or when you first hear of them. What is the nature of the new people coming in to the movement, and how do they compare with their predecessors in the 1970s? In what ways are they different? And how might they be different from the old people who are in the movement? And what do they think about the movement itself?
models of “socialism”, or a selection from those states (Cuba though not the USSR, for example), had heavily shaped and influenced the left (including left wings in social democracy, and including many of the most dissident groups) for decades. The political poisons which seeped out from them still inflect the terrain of the Left. Except fighting and rebuilding healthy ground takes time. The new young activists hesitated to call themselves “socialists”, instead using slogans like “another world is possible” or “smash capitalism and replace it with something nicer”.

Since the 1990s, many union leaders have announced a new organising agenda: “Power at work” (Rebuilding the Australian union movement (2005)). Crosby is candid about his “organising agenda” as being driven, top-down, by the top leaders of unions. The leaders should start by increasing union dues; merging union organisations to get economies of scale in administration and servicing; and thus freeing resources to employ an army of “external” organisers who will “think about nothing else other than building the union’s power in non-member workplaces.”

In approaching non-union workplaces, those organisers should be cunning and tenacious. Starting with one or two contacts — maybe workers who were union members elsewhere, and have kept up their union membership on transferring to the new workplace — they should assemble a list of names and addresses of workers, and systematically visit them at home.

Once they have sufficient numbers from home visits, they should construct a “map” of the workplace, enabling them to organise and monitor a process of spreading the union message from one worker to another in each section, on each shift, and to key “opinion-formers” among the workers.

**ACTIVITY**

Collective union activity in the workplace should gener- ally start with low-key actions focused on low-key demands winnable from even the nastiest employers. But by bit by bit they should build up to winning union recogni-

And — here comes the crux — once the union is recog-
nised, it should ease off the pressure, and shift organisers to new areas. The union must not “abuse its agreement to act mediately on disputes…” “The union office… will not normally be as-

As soon as workplace organising is under way, the union should use the influence which the union’s “power”, demonstrated in rallies and protests, gives them when lobbying politicians.

He emphasises education within the unions, but sees it as top-down. “The vast bulk of our… members haven’t got a clue about what is happening in their society”, so it falls to Crosby and his pals to give them that “clue”.

“...In the vast majority of unions”, writes Crosby, “the leader has the ability to determine the future of every staff member there”. His call is not to change that hierarchy but to use it more efficiently. He recommends less election of union officials, and stricter “performance management” of the officials by the union’s top leaders. One of his argu-

ments against elected officials is likely to be tied to the “constituency” of workers who elected them, and thus less manoeuvrable for purposes of organising new areas.

With some caricature, a Crosby-model union can be de-
scribed as having five parts:

- a union leader who is not only paying higher dues; and
- a corps of workplace activists settled in “mutually ben-

eficial accommodation with employers” but meanwhile keeping busy by organising among workers for blood don-

ations, switching off unnecessary lights, etc.;
- one corps of full-time officials sitting in a call-centre dealing with members’ individual grievances as efficiently as possible;
- another corps of full-time officials who are geared to “think about nothing but” recruitment in fresh workplaces, whose success is measured in new-member numbers re-
gardless of durability or organisation, and who are con-
stantly moved on from area to area so that they have no long-term accountability (even informal) to organised workers;
- a union leader who can “determine the future of every staff member” and will get rid of the laggards and misfits among the officials.

It is a caricature because Crosby conceives that some bosses are not only one-off, but also operated under the pressure to nudge them into “mutually beneficial accommodation”, and that unions must offer some democracy. But Crosby does not brush unions as far as towards the caricature model as possible.

Missing from Crosby’s vision is the idea of unions organ-

ising sustained, militant cross-industry campaigns for posi-

tive change. Responsible post-authoritarian rank-and-file workers. But that is the core of what’s needed now. Such a strategy would include unions employing full-
time organisers, but in very different terms.

**INDUSTRIAL**

Historically, the most active trade unionists have gener-

ally supported union mergers, especially mergers which bring all grades of workers in particular indus-

tries into one union. However, many of the mergers of re-
cent decades lack industrial logic.

Cases where the merger’s case is too shaky. Doing so re-
sources which should instead be directed to organising new sites. Once a workplace has been organised, unions should look for alternative ways for “workplace leaders” to “build the collective consciousness of the workers”. He suggests “organising a blood-bank collection drive… [or] activities designed to build solidarity with workers in other countries”. Another option is to mobilise union activists to “green” workplaces by switching off unnecessary lights, economising on use of paper, turning up air-conditioning temperatures, etc.

His recommendations on unions’ political activity explicit-
ly dismiss the idea of mobilising more union activists to use the positions to which unions are entitled in the Aus-

tralian Labor Party. Instead, unions should have their leaders use the influence which the union’s “power”, demon-

strated in rallies and protests, gives them when lobbying politicians.

Back issues of Workers’ Liberty are online at: http://bit.ly/2yTb9CJ
source of power than their organisation. If this organisation ceases to be responsive to their needs, they lose everything.

“Democracy is not a state of being, it is an activity, it is in fact hard work, and it is a constant work in progress... That is why it is the responsibility of every progressive and democratic trade union leadership to maintain constitutional and practical conditions in which membership participation and control is ensured and welcomed, without making conditions of participation too onerous for ordinary members.”

Union leaders need “politics based on the values that were at the origins of the labour movement and that made it great: solidarity, selflessness, respect for people, a sense of honour, and the modesty that comes with the awareness of being a soldier in the service of a great cause, a contempt for self-promotion”. It is probable that, in the current phase of capitalism, union densities will never be pushed back up to their rates in the era of 1950s and 1960s social consensus. It is certain that union strength can be rebuilt.

To regain strength, the unions need, not Crosby’s “organising agenda”, but a “democracy and solidarity” agenda. One model for us is the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) of its heyday, before 1914. The IWW organised thousands of workers disdained by the main union leaders of the time as “unorganisable”, by this approach:

- industrial unionism (as against craft unionism)
- energetic and colourful class-struggle education, propaganda, and agitation, in “civil society” as well as in workplaces, through IWW newspapers, songbooks, free-speech rights, and so on
- low or no initiation fees
- concentrated, high-intensity waves of organising
- addressing workers in new areas with a set of demands to be won by the union once organised (developed after a lot of preliminary discussion with workers in those areas) rather than with general agitation about the advantages of having a union in the abstract; following up the recruiting drive with immediate preparation for action on those demands
- organising areas by getting volunteers to go in and take jobs in those areas, then talk union on the job
- helping new recruits to elect their own job delegates and committees of delegates, and to take control of their own organisation
- trying always to make industrial action short, sharp, and decisive. If a dispute dragged on regardless — constantly and imaginatively trying new active tactics. Never leaving the workers passive
- an open, democratic approach, with disputes always run by strike committees elected from the workers and regularly reporting back.

In terms of trade-union tactics, the IWW’s decisive mistake was its “principle” of never signing agreements with the bosses. You could join the IWW to be a revolutionary activist, or to organise a more or less immediate strike in your workplace — but not for routine trade-union activity. Thus the IWW found it hard to consolidate a mass membership and a permanent on-the-job organisation anywhere (except on the Philadelphia waterfront, where it did sign agreements).

That false principle can be rejected while still adopting the IWW’s positive methods.

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Trade Union Decline

TRADE UNION DECLINE

Unite NZ: Organising the unorganised

In 2005-6, over those two years, there was a campaign to re-unorganise the fast food sector as well as call centres, hotels, casinos and similar industries.

At the end of that campaign we had union-negotiated collective employment agreements at all of the big fast food chains: McDonalds, KFC, Burger King, Starbucks, Wendy’s and some smaller ones.

We had recruited two to three thousand fast food workers. And we had organised a major political campaign associated with the key demand for $12 (about £5) an hour minimum wage and the abolition of youth rates for 16 and 17 year olds countrywide. From beginning of this year we will have a $12 an hour minimum wage and the abolition of youth rates in fast food. Winning those key demands was a big issue in New Zealand’s broader political and industrial news.

Where did it all start? It was a very long way from here. In the early 1990s, the New Zealand labour movement went through a deep recession, lasting five or six years. During this period, industrial activity declined to the lowest point since records began. Union membership went from 49% of the workforce to 22%.

Industrial laws were adopted that made it very difficult for unions to organise: outlawed strikes outside the negotiating period, outlawed political strikes, outlawed solidarity strikes. It made it very difficult to access workplaces to recruit etc. It was illegal to organise industrial action for a multi-employer collective agreement.

When the law was brought in every single worker was put onto an individual agreement that was the same as their previous collective agreement, but in order for the union to continue to negotiate on your behalf you had to sign an individual authorisation. It was very difficult for some unions to manage that. Many were eliminated overnight.

BUREAUCRACY

The central bureaucracy of the union movement capitulated completely to these changes and refused to organise broader industrial struggle, let alone a general strike, despite the fact that there was overwhelming sentiment for such a struggle and a general strike. Motions calling for it in workplaces were crushed by the bureaucracy.

The impact of the recession and the new law was intensified by the demoralising effect of this failure to resist. From that time real wages were under sustained attack. In New Zealand real wages, hourly rates, for unskilled workers declined by 25%. Real incomes for the people we represent declined by 30% or 40%.

All of the legal wage protections which stipulated overtime rates, Sunday rates and so on, went. Minimum conditions were now very limited — three weeks holiday, five days sick leave, that was about it, especially in areas where the workers were more vulnerable. The unions had no strength. Everything else had to be negotiated again. It was a stunning assault on working people.

Officially unemployment was 10% (although in real terms higher). Official unemployment for Maoris (who make up 14% of the population) was 30%, again higher in real terms. Working-class communities in south Auckland were devastated.

The free trade policies adopted by both Labour and the Tories [the New Zealand National Party] led to massive factory closures. The entire car industry was eliminated, textile industries were closed. Other industries with traditionally strong union organisation, like the meat industry, were restructured and thousands lost their jobs. There used to be four meat plants with one or two thousand workers each. There is now one plant.

Union bargaining became concession bargaining only. Over 13 years there was no attempt or struggle to maintain levels of income or organisation. In so far as you had a collective agreement, it was how much below inflation your settlement was going to be. It was accepted that it was
going to be below inflation. There were exceptions, but in general that was it, especially in the private sector.

In the private sector levels of unionisation went down to 9%. In other countries union rates went down, but collective bargaining coverage remained very high (in Australia for example). In New Zealand that wasn’t the case at all. Concession bargaining remained the norm until 2005. In that year things began to change. Even the more conservative unions, for instance the engineering and manufacturing sector, were calling for more union bargaining at 3%. This was a radical change. But it happened far too late.

From the mid-1990s there was a sustained economic recovery. It came after a decade of rising employment. Unemployment levels are down to 3.3% of the workforce, one of the lowest in the OECD. From 1996 the union movement should have been reorienting and rebuilding in the private sector. Unemployment was no longer the terror it had been prior to 1996.

In 1999 a Labour-Alliance [the Alliance Party was a leftish split from Labour] government changed the law on union rights. Union organisers regained access to workplaces. The unions now had the right to pursue multi-employer collective agreements through industrial action. Political and solidarity actions are still outlawed, and you can only take action in the bargaining period. But there are few other limitations. You don’t have to give notice to employers or ballot for employees, replacing striking workers with outside scabs was also outlawed. However, there was still voluntary unionism, there was a free market in unions and the unions still competed for each other’s members.

Left activists, in the Alliance Party, were bewildered by the failure of the unions to take advantage of this new law. If someone rang up a company to say it was time to organise, they said ‘we would like to get a meeting, but there wasn’t a place to meet and they would have to have an influx day at 3%’. This was a radical change. But it happened far too late.

From 1996 more unions began to raise their sights. We decided to form a new union. Many of us still wanted to be part of a political anti-capitalist project, but we felt we had to re-organise the right to do that. One way we can do that is by seriously engaging in single issues to advance the interests of workers, through political and industrial campaigning. In some cases that involved getting jobs with existing unions.

In my and Matt McCarten’s case there was another job we wanted to do — to organise the working poor, to re-orient unionism. We had a membership form which we copied off an other union with all the usual personal details. One day we went to one of the nice hotels in Auckland to speak to the housekeepers and came back with a notebook full of names and addresses of people interested in joining the union, 60 names. We thought “if only she’d taken some membership forms.”

Then we thought, hang on, all the information we want is name and address, phone and email. So our membership form became like a petition, with half dozen names per sheet. The process of signing up became more collective.

We made our fees simple. Our fees were 1% of earnings up to a maximum. We had to give people something before they started to pay. We told them we would deliver the company to the negotiating table. You don’t have to pay the fees until we’ve got them to sit down with your representatives.

We hand over the memberships at that point. Everything is a collective process and there is no chance of victimisation. What we achieve at the negotiation is up to you we decide. That depends on how many members you have, how willing you are to fight, what sort of struggle you want to organise.

A lot of people hadn’t seen a union before, they didn’t know what a union was. Our message was that you can’t negotiate individually, you can only do it as part of a collective.

The trial in two places, two cinema complexes, was a great success. It was a very young, very casualised workforce. We signed up around 300 workers, which was pretty much everyone.

We discovered the big issues were ones involving personal dignity. These kids were given two free tickets each week, but they were taken off you for every petty infractions. If you were five minutes late, if you had a sick day, booked the wrong way at the manager, you lost your “comps”. The main issue was having the tickets as a right.

We also got an extra five minutes one of the paid break in the shift inserted into the contract, so that people could actually have a cup of tea, or a cigarette, or whatever. This was the first time a paid break had actually been negotiated in New Zealand for a very long time.

We also found that we could sign people up very quickly. That gave us confidence to move on.

We were never going to be able to organise trench warfare in these industries, pull people out for long periods of time. But we were going to be able to push employers into signing agreements.

We went after the brands with a public, political campaign, to humiliate them.

In May 2005 we launched a recruitment drive in against Restaurant Brands, who run Starbucks, Pizza Hut and KFC in New Zealand. They were the biggest. They had 7,000 employees, the biggest employers of young people in the country. We signed up about 1,000 members in Auckland.

We had little strikes, for a couple of hours each, in different stores, moving from store to store. This helped build confidence. But it wasn’t enough. So then we did marches in Auckland, a Town Hall meeting with a broad range of speakers, a big concert in the park. But none of this was enough.

Then a group of high school students came to us and said they wanted to organise a strike of their own. They had been inspired by this campaign (and many of them worked in the stores). They wanted twenty buses, so we hired twenty buses. They filled them! The police tried to stop them marching, but they streamed through the centre of town, stopping, sitting down and screaming outside every fast food outlet. A few days later the company called us and said they wanted to talk.

We got a deal. Security of hours, a youth rate that was 90% of the adult rate, minimum length of shifts, and the right to union rights. It was only a matter of time before we knocked over McDonalds. They fought it. They gave a pay rise to all the non-union staff, they threatened to sue workers who went on strike, they threatened to sue us; but we won. The very last was Burger King.

What was proved conclusively was that young workers will fight if they think they have a chance of winning.

During the campaign there were lots of texts and email messages going out. We did mass texting and emailing to let people know what was going on. We should have a regular electronic newsletter, that’s on our agenda. Even when we do our stop-work meetings, at Sky City for example, we will do a mass text to everybody. We use it whenever we have an event.

How will we keep up the membership? We have an absolute insistence on routine visits to all of the sites. We have a monthly newspaper, which gets out to all of the sites. We also have a consistent process of trying to identify delegates and get them to our regular delegates’ conference. They have a role in maintaining the organisation on their site. We can keep up membership through developing a delegate structure.

Getting the supervisors in is very important. They are the people that carry the experience to pass on to new people. We are careful about formulating demands in contract negotiations that relate to that group, and each time we’ve negotiated we’ve managed to win improvements. We’ve not had to have strikes in this round, mostly, though there have been a few in the picture theatres.

Generally the employers know we could cause them quite a bit of difficulty if they don’t negotiate seriously. So delegates are pretty proud of the union and make sure people join the union.

We have mostly kept up the membership, despite the huge turnover, so we must be doing some things right.

We are now looking at ways to get the minimum wage up to something like $15 an hour (which is almost two-thirds of the average wage). If we can do that for some groups of workers, it will help win it more generally. The next big thing is to raise the bar of the minimum wage. We need to develop a public campaign around that.

The other thing is fluctuating hours. Hours are more secure now, but not good enough; the companies are still able to unobliged to offer regular hours. There is still lots to be done.
Unions as centres of organisation

From Karl Marx's Theory of Revolution

The historical problem in the socialist movement [before Marx] was seeing the positive side of trade-unionism, which was never free of denunciation of the limitations, deficiencies, and faults of trade unions. The socialist orthodoxy that Marx overturned leaned exclusively on the latter.

By contrast, argued that “the working people, in the management of their colossal Trade Societies” also prove themselves “fit for administrative and political work.” This applies not only to the training of union officials — who sometimes become fit only to administer a labour market — but, in a larger sense, to the growth in or out of them, are of the utmost importance not only as a labour market — but, in a larger sense, to the growth in or out of them, are of the utmost importance not only as a means of organisation of the working class for struggle against the bourgeoisie — this importance being shown by the fact, inter alia, that even the workers in the United States cannot do without them despite voting rights and the republic — but in addition, in Prussia and Germany generally, the right to organise is a breach in police rule and bureaucracy ... in short, it [the right to organise] is a measure to make “subjects” come of age...

In his later resolve, independently of themselves, the Trade Unions were forming centres of organisation of the working class, as the mediaeval municipalities and communities did for the middle class. If the Trade Unions are required to organise the struggle between capital and labour, they are still more important as organised agencies for superseding the very system of wages labour and capital rule. Their present: Too exclusively bent upon the local and immediate struggles with capital, the Trade Unions have not yet fully understood their power of acting against the system of wages slavery itself. They therefore kept too much aloof from general social and political movements. Of late, however, they seem to awaken to some sense of their great historical mission.

THEIR FUTURE

Apart from their original purposes, they must now learn to act deliberately as centres of the working class in the broad interest of its complete emancipation.

They must aid every social and political movement tending in that direction. Considering themselves and acting as the champions and representatives of the whole working class, they cannot fail to enlist the non-society men into their ranks. They must keep the standard alive after the interest had renounced powerless by exceptional circumstances. They must convince the world at large that their efforts, far from being narrow and selfish, aim at the emancipation of the downtrodden masses.

The kind of trade-unionism that Marx opposed had been strongly enough criticized in the International resolution of 1869: “Do not understand unionism in the broad sense. Business unionism needed little theory; bourgeois political economy provided more than enough for its purposes. It existed entirely within the confines of the ruling ideas of the ruling class. As a bourgeois enterprise, it took care of the same shortsighted, blinkered concentration on considerations of immediate advantage that historically distingushed its masters.

One of the self-defeating forms of business unionism was the guildlike job trust. Many unions were shackled not only by bourgeois traditions but also by "workingmen’s traditions, inherited from their first tentative efforts at independent action, such as the exclusion, from ever so many old Trade Unions, of all applicants who have not gone through a regular apprenticeship; which means the breeding, by every such union, of its own blacklegs [scabs].” Then the dockers are raising an outcry against the immigration of foreign paupers (Russian Jews).

But with such social and political movement there is always a colossal heap of traditionally transmitted rubbish which has to be got rid of by degrees. There are the prejudices of the skilled unions — the petty jealousies of the various trades, which become accentuated in the hands and heads of leaders into outright hostility and battles behind the scenes; there are the clashing ambitions and intrigues of the leaders (and so on)...

"The tools want to reform society to suit themselves but not to reform themselves to suit the development of society. They cling to their traditional superstition, which does them a mischief and which is instead of getting out of the rubbish and thus doubling their numbers and their power and really becoming again what at present they daily become less — associations of all the workers in a trade against the capitalists. This, I think, will explain many things to you in the behaviour of these privileged workers."

Later, at the time of the New Unionism movement in Britain, Engels wrote: “These new Trade Unions of unskilled men and women are totally different from the old organisations of the working-class aristocracy and cannot fall into the same conservative ways; they are too poor, too shaky, too much composed of unstable elements, for anyone of these unskilled people may change his trade any day. And they are organised under quite different circumstances — all the leading men and women are Socialists, and so on.

"In them I see the real beginning of the movement here."