

# A Portrait of Australian Trade Union Officials

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## **Abstract**

*Details are given of the chief characteristics of Australia's trade union officials, using data drawn from the 1986 and 1996 Australian Censuses of Population and Housing. This research note provides an update on research published by a number of authors. Unlike previous work, however, use of Census data allows for direct comparisons of the characteristics of union officials with those of union members or, where such data are not available, with the employed work-force.*

## **1. Introduction**

This research note gives details of the chief characteristics of Australia's trade union officials, using data drawn from the 1986 and 1996 Australian Censuses of Population and Housing (the former being the first year in which union officials were identified as a separate category).<sup>1</sup> In doing so, it provides an update on the research published on this topic by Davis (1978), Dufty (1980), Cupper (1983), Plowman and Spooner (1983), Callus (1986), and Bramble (1995). Unlike most of the above, however, use of Census data allows for direct comparisons of the characteristics of union officials with those of union members or, where such data are not available, with the employed workforce.<sup>2</sup>

## **2. Number and 'density' of union staff and full-time officials**

Prior to the 1970s, the ratio of officials to members in most Australian unions was very low. Most unions operated out of trades hall buildings, and were equipped with only basic office assistance: a secretary/typist-cum-telephonist and perhaps only a part-time branch or national secretary. In the

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late 1950s, for example, the Amalgamated Engineering Union had only five full-time officials (a full-time district secretary, three organizers and an industrial officer) to cover 18,000 members in Melbourne, Australia's manufacturing heartland. While some unions had full-time research officers, for example the Ironworkers and the Mineworkers Federation, such officers were very few in number and were found in only the largest unions. What held true in individual unions was even more the case with trades councils. The first full-time paid president of the Queensland Trades and Labor Council was not appointed until 1967, while the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) had only a full-time president and secretary until the appointment of (future president) Bob Hawke as advocate in 1958.

From the late 1960s, the number of officials in Australian unions began to rise, with the number of industrial staff increasing between 1968 and 1978 by 160 per cent in the 34 white-collar unions reviewed by Cupper (1983: 181). Similarly, the ACTU expanded its employment of full-time officers from two in the late 1950s to ten by 1972 (Hagan 1981: 234). The result was that by 1979 (the first year for which there is any estimation of the population of Australian union officials) Australian unions were employing 2,400 full-time officials (Trade Union Training Authority data, cited in Cupper 1983: 178). Rapid growth in the number of union officials continued through the 1980s, tapering off only in the 1990s, a period of falling union membership in Australia (Table 1). The overall effect was a near doubling in the number of union officials between 1979 and 1996.

The result of these trends has been a continuing increase in the ratio of full-time officials to members. Between 1968 and 1978, the number of officials per 1000 union members within Cupper's 34 white-collar unions rose from 0.5 to 0.8. Census data reveals that the ratio of officials to members continued to rise steadily through the 1980s and 1990s, from 1.01 officials per 1000 members in 1986 to 1.27 per 1000 in 1991, and 1.56 per 1000 in 1996.<sup>3</sup> By way of international comparison, British unions in the late 1980s employed between 0.21 and 0.36 officials per 1000 members (Heery and Kelly 1990: 86).

TABLE 1  
Employment of Union Officials in Australian Trade Unions, by Sex, 1986–1996

	<i>Union officials</i>			<i>Officials per 1000 members</i>
	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i> <sup>a</sup>	<i>Total</i>	
1986	2406	825 (25.5%)	3231	1.01
1991	2856	1450 (33.7%)	4306	1.27
1996	2640	1724 (39.5%)	4364	1.56

<sup>a</sup> Figures in parentheses indicate female share of total.

Sources: ABS Censuses of Population and Housing, 1986, 1991 and 1996; ABS Cat. No. 6323.0 Trade Unions, 1986, 1991, 1996.

### 3. Gender profile of union officials

The work-force of Australian unions is highly segmented by gender (Bramble 1995).<sup>4</sup> However, the level of gender segmentation has been under attack in recent years, with rapid increases in the number of female union officials (Table 1). In 1986 women comprised 34.9 per cent of Australian union membership but only 25.5 per cent of union officials; by 1996, however, the ratios were nearly identical (40.4 and 39.5 per cent respectively). This trend looks set to continue, with women accounting for 156 of the 280 (55.7 per cent) traineeships introduced by the ACTU's Organising Works programme between its inception in 1994 and 1998 (Turnbull 1995: 8; ACTU 1998).

### 4. Profile of union officials by place of birth

As with the case of women, migrants from non-English-speaking backgrounds (NESB) (the most important components being workers from southern Europe, Turkey, Lebanon and South-east Asia) have historically been relatively scarce in the ranks of Australian union officials (Hearn 1976; Nicolaou 1991; Bertone and Griffin 1992). In 1986, NESB union officials accounted for less than 5 per cent of the total, a figure that rose to 8.7 per cent ten years later. By contrast, 91.3 per cent of Australia's union officials were born in Australia (77.6 per cent), or Britain and Ireland (13.7 per cent) in 1986, a figure that fell to 89.4 per cent ten years later.

These data suggest gross under-representation of NESB workers. Table 2 provides representivity indices, which express the proportion of union officials from a particular national background relative to the relevant proportion of union members, with 100 denoting perfect representation, a

TABLE 2  
Representivity of Trade Union Officials in Relation to Union Members, by  
place of birth, Australia, 1986 and 1996<sup>a</sup>

<i>Place of birth</i>	<i>1986</i>	<i>1996</i>
Australia	106.0	103.8
New Zealand	93.2	105.2
UK and Ireland	145.2	150.4
Southern Europe	26.3	31.5
Other Europe	50.8	80.2
Asia	30.9	45.7
Other countries	145.1	91.6
Total	100.0	100.0

<sup>a</sup> 100.0 is perfect representivity.

1986: *N* (union members): 2,584,500.

1996: *N* (union members): 2,186,618.

Source: ABS Censuses of Population and Housing, 1986 and 1996.

figure of more than 100 over-representation, and less than 100, under-representation. The table confirms that union members from southern European, 'Other European' and Asian backgrounds were seriously under-represented in Australian union official positions in the 1980s. Ten years later the representation of such members had improved somewhat, although under-representation is still very evident for workers from southern Europe and Asia. Time has done nothing to reduce the massive over-representation of officials from British and Irish backgrounds in Australian unions.

### **5. Profile of union officials by educational qualifications**

Historically, Australia's trade union officials have risen from the ranks of union members and therefore have been characterized by fairly similar socioeconomic characteristics as union members, in particular as regards educational experience. For example, in 1970 81 per cent of officials in Western Australia had left school aged 15 or younger (Johnston; cited in Dufty 1980), in line with standards then prevailing among the predominantly blue-collar membership of Australian unions.

By 1986, however, the situation had changed dramatically. Australian union officials were by then commonly in possession of tertiary qualifications. In that year more than one-third (35.2 per cent) of union officials had university qualifications, a figure that rose to nearly one-half (48.5 per cent) ten years later. Other evidence confirming the increasing prominence of graduates includes the fact that they accounted for nearly one-half (46.8 per cent) of the 280 trainees taken in the ACTU's Organising Works programme between 1994 and 1998 (Turnbull 1995: 8; ACTU 1998).

Trade qualifications, once extremely common among Australian union officials, are now relatively rare, the proportion of officials with such a qualification halving from 25.6 to 11.8 per cent in the ten years to 1996. The overall result of these changes is that there are now more than four times as many Australian union officials having university qualifications as have a trades background.

The upgrading of educational qualifications of Australia's union officials has been paralleled by a general rise in qualifications across the Australian work-force. However, union officials far outstrip members in this respect. In 1986, 35.2 per cent of union officials had university qualifications, compared with 14.0 per cent of the employed work-force. In 1996 the figures were 48.5 and 25.6 per cent, respectively. The representivity indices in Table 3 indicate the large gap that had developed by 1986, which, albeit to a somewhat lesser extent, still continues.

### **6. Profile of union officials by incomes earned**

Finally, we turn to incomes earned. Australian union officials tend to be significantly better paid than the work-force at large. In 1996 more than

TABLE 3  
 Representivity of Trade Union Officials by Highest Educational Qualification Attained,  
 1986 and 1996<sup>a</sup>

<i>Highest qualification attained</i>	<i>1986</i>	<i>1996</i>
Higher degree, postgraduate diploma	363.4	277.9
Bachelors degree or undergraduate and associate diplomas	231.0	170.9
Skilled vocational qualification	96.4	76.4
Basic vocational qualification	153.9	98.4
No qualifications	65.3	65.2
Total	100.0	100.0

<sup>a</sup> 100.0 is perfect representivity

1986: *N* (union officials): 2,976; *N* (employed work-force): 5,805,162.

1996: *N* (union officials): 4,171; *N* (employed work-force): 7,044,813.

Source: ABS Censuses of Population and Housing, 1986 and 1996.

one-half (52.8 per cent) of all full-time officials were paid more than A\$800 per week, compared with less than one-quarter (23.2 per cent) of the full-time work-force (Table 4). By contrast, the proportion of union officials paid less than A\$500 per week (10.6 per cent) is a fraction of the proportion of full-time workers (38.4 per cent) in this salary bracket.

Female union officials tend to fare less well than their male counterparts. While women accounted for just under 40 per cent of all union official positions in 1996, they accounted for two-thirds (66.0 per cent) of those with incomes of less than A\$500, and less than one-quarter (22.9 per cent) of those with incomes of more than A\$1000. While an element of this difference is due to seniority differences between male and female union officials, the latter tending to be younger and having put in fewer years of service, the representivity indices in Table 5 suggest that there is more to the issue, as, with the sole exception of very poorly paid young officials, women's representation falls steadily as income rises for every age band, while the opposite occurs for males. Overall, female officials are four times more heavily represented, relative to their share of all union officials, in the lowest income bracket than they are in the highest income bracket.

TABLE 4  
 Distribution of Income of Union Officials and Full-time Work-force, Australia, 1996

<i>Weekly income bracket</i>	<i>% union officials in bracket<sup>a</sup></i>	<i>% full-time work-force in bracket<sup>a</sup></i>
< \$299	3.80	9.49
\$300–\$499	6.85	28.88
\$500–\$799	35.88	36.71
\$800–\$999	31.09	10.88
\$1000–\$1499	19.38	8.24
\$1500 or more	2.29	4.04
Not stated	0.71	1.75
Total	100.00	100.00

<sup>a</sup> *N* (union officials): 4,365; *N* (full-time work-force): 5,180,227.

Source: ABS Census of Population and Housing, 1996.

TABLE 5  
 Representivity of Trade Union Officials by Sex, by Age and by Income Band, 1996<sup>a</sup>

<i>Weekly income</i>	<i>Age band (years)</i>											
	<i>16–24</i>			<i>25–49</i>			<i>50+</i>			<i>All ages</i>		
	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Total (N)</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Total (N)</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Total (N)</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Total (N)</i>
< \$299	106.4	96.1	62	42.5	182.4	72	51.5	229.9	32	54.8	169.2	166
\$300–\$499	96.5	102.2	52	52.4	168.2	201	65.7	191.9	46	57.0	165.8	299
\$500–\$799	97.6	101.5	138	82.2	125.5	1200	80.7	151.6	228	80.9	129.2	1566
\$800–\$999	110.0	93.9	12	116.3	76.7	1028	111.8	68.4	317	117.8	72.7	1357
\$1,000–\$1,499	0	0	0	125.4	63.6	616	114.4	61.6	227	126.3	59.7	843
\$1,500 or more	0	0	0	144.3	36.5	60	113.3	64.4	40	138.9	40.5	100
Total	100.0	100.0	264	100.0	100.0	3177	100.0	100.0	890	100.0	100.0	4331

<sup>a</sup> 100.00 is perfect representivity.

*N* (union officials): 4,331.

*Source:* ABS Census of Population and Housing, 1996.

## 7. Summary

This research note demonstrates several important characteristics of Australian unions and their paid leadership. First, the full-time official infrastructure of Australian unions grew substantially in the last third of the twentieth century, with a tripling in the ratio of officials to members over this period. Second, female members and those from non-English-speaking backgrounds continue to be poorly represented in the ranks of the official structures of Australian unions, although the gap between officials and members in this respect has narrowed marginally in recent years. Third, university qualifications are becoming the norm for union officials, and trade qualifications a rarity. And finally, Australian union officials continue to be significantly better paid than the Australian working class in general.

The exact causes and ramifications of each of these trends vary. However, a common theme that is suggested by them is the growth of the union apparatus and its colonization by university graduates. The traditional internal labour market that existed for trade union officials is being progressively destroyed, with entry into union official positions direct from university supplanting the traditional method of election or appointment of experienced rank-and-file activists. This suggests that the prior life experience of union officials is increasingly diverging from that of members. A second and related theme suggested by these data is the increasing appointment of 'expert' staff in unions and the growth of this category relative to organizers and other field staff.

I have argued in greater detail elsewhere (Bramble 2000, 2001) that these changes are not so much a cause as a reflection of significant changes to Australian union strategy since the late 1960s and early 1970s. Specifically, the development of 'outsider' leaderships instead of 'organic' leaderships and the tendency towards the appointment of officials with 'expert' qualifications, are indicative of the top-down and class-collaborationist character of the strategies pursued by Australian unions since the early 1970s and serve as the mirror image of the decline of militant rank-and-file activism in the same period. The latter phenomenon, evident not just in core areas such as building and construction, the waterfront, the metal and engineering industry and the railways, but also in teaching, the public service and other white-collar areas, has been associated with national union strategies emphasizing political (corporatist) or legal strategies rather than membership activism as the chief method for defending members' pay and conditions. The relationship between the two factors is mutually reinforcing: the decline of membership activism drains unions of potential union leaders from the ranks, while the pursuit of top-down legal and political strategies and 'working within the system' highlights the importance of 'professional' skills in the upper echelons of the unions, a phenomenon that in the 1980s and 1990s was actively encouraged by federal government funding for such positions. Both have combined to marginalize 'organic democratic' unionism in favour of 'outsider bureaucratic' unionism in the Australian labour movement (Bramble 2000).

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## Notes

1. Although the Census does not provide information on 'trade union officials' as a distinct occupational category, it does identify employment in what the Australian Bureau of Statistics identifies as 'labour associations' (Australian and New Zealand Standard Industry Classification 8472 in 1986, and 9622 in 1996). In this note I use the occupational classifications 'managers and administrators', 'professionals' and 'para-professionals' (Australian Standard Classification of Occupations (ASCO) First Edition Classification 1, 2 and 3 employees) from the 1986 Census, and 'managers and administrators', 'professionals' and 'associate professionals' (all ASCO Second Edition Classification 1, 2 and 3 employees) from the 1996 Census as equivalent to 'trade union officials'.
2. Although a consistent comparison with union members would have been ideal, Australian Censuses provide only a very restricted range of data concerning trade union members.
3. Hall *et al.*'s Australian National Trade Union Survey generates a similar union official 'density' rate of 1.53 officials per 1000 members for 1996 (Hall *et al.* 1998).
4. See also Nightingale (1991) and Pocock (1995) on the representation of women in Australian union structures.

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