

Unions in New Zealand Organize the Unorganized, Win Gains in Minimum Wage

Thursday 21 May 2009, by [ANNIS Roger](#) (Date first published: 23 April 2009).

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AUCKLAND, NEW ZEALAND — On April 6, 2009, I spent a day visiting the offices of New Zealand's newest, and among its most dynamic, trade unions, Unite.

Unite is at the forefront of a revitalization of a section of the labour movement in New Zealand that has resulted in thousands of young and marginalized workers gaining union representation for the first time and winning significant wage raises, including to the national minimum wage. Many of Unite's members are from the nationally oppressed Maori indigenous and Pacific island populations.

Organizing the Unorganized

My day at Unite began with an invitation to observe the weekly, Monday morning staff meeting. Fourteen staff in Auckland were joined via teleconference by three staff who campaign in three other cities — Wellington (the New Zealand capital), Christchurch and Hamilton.

The meeting began with a review of new member recruitment. The previous week was a big one for the union, netting 250 new members. Unite was founded in 2004. In the past year and a half, it has grown by 3,000 to reach 8,000 members. The largest components are fast food, followed by call centers, hotels and a casino, and postal workers.

Unite uses a variety of tactics to win members. Staff and volunteers visiting worksites and convincing workers to sign membership cards. New Zealand law permits access to worksites by union organizers, though the latter often encounter obstacles.

It has led imaginative and militant strikes once workers vote for action. These have included the world's first strikes at the Starbucks coffee chain, in 2005, and short strikes at MacDonald's outlets in 2006 and again in 2008.

The most important campaigns, which best explain the union's success, are those fought on behalf of all workers. From the start, it fought for a \$12 per hour national minimum wage and an end to hated, slave-labour, youth wage rates. It gained support from other unions for these demands, and last year they won. The former Labour Party government legislated \$12. The right-wing government elected last November has been pressured to raise it another 50 cents as of April 1.

Wage rates for 16 and 17 year olds are still 80 percent of the adult rate. But as of 2009, these rates

have been abolished at all the employers organized by Unite, including McDonald's, KFC, Pizza Hut, Burger King and the major movie theatre chains.

The union's fighting reputation has earned it the affiliation of 500 members of the national postal workers union branch which covers the top half of the North Island (New Zealand is divided into two large islands of near equal size; about two thirds of the population of 4.2 million live on the North Island).

Several other unions have emulated Unite's tactics and have transformed themselves into more activist and representative unions as a result. The 22,000-member National Distribution Union (NDU) recently scored a breakthrough at the country's retail giant The Warehouse (New Zealand's answer to Wal-Mart), signing up 2,000 new members.

A Representative Union Staff

Unite's national office in Auckland is spacious and bright. It's strictly functional — no expensive furniture here. Staff are paid salaries that approximate those of the members it serves. No one earns higher than \$20 per hour. While that's tough to maintain when other unions can pay considerably higher, Unite National Secretary Mike Treen and the rest of the union leadership believe there are important matters of principle involved.

"Unite is not just a trade union that negotiates collective agreements," he says. "It's also a social project to better the lot of the entire working class." Most of our members live in very difficult economic circumstances and if our staff lead lives of significantly greater comfort, the broadened vision of the union will weaken.

"We want to encourage a turnover that brings in staff members who are young, female, or from oppressed nationalities. An entrenched staff that gets comfortable with big salaries will, over time, get in the way of this kind of evolution of the union and its staff."

Unions and the Social Domain

The weekly staff meeting reviewed several social projects that Unite is promoting for its members. One is providing basic information of a new national pension fund called "Kiwisaver." For every dollar of savings put into the plan by a New Zealand worker, up to a maximum of \$20 per week, an employer and the national government will each contribute one additional dollar. Workers have a choice of providers to direct their savings. Unite earns a small rebate when its member chooses the union's recommended provider (a fund that claims an ethical investment policy).

Unite also operates an education institution in downtown Auckland that accesses government education funding and offers courses in computer literacy, Maori language, and small business management, among others. Several thousand Unite members have attended the school since its inception in 2007.

Unite and the NDU are preparing a campaign to win a \$15 an hour minimum wage, itself a step towards an eventual goal of a minimum wage set at two-thirds of the average wage. Unite will soon launch a campaign for a national referendum vote on the matter. It needs 300,000 signatures to get the proposal on a national ballot and Treen has every confidence that it will succeed.

He explains, "The goal of the campaign is not only to win the \$15 minimum wage. It's also to expand

the base of support for trade unionism and progressive social policies."This campaign will place the world economic collapse at the center of New Zealand politics because it rejects the notion that workers must pay the price of that collapse. We can expect that employers and the government will fight us very vigorously.

"In the 1990s we paid a heavy price in New Zealand for capitalism's failures. Unemployment hit 12 percent and real wages declined by 25 percent. Wages have never recovered. We think that workers will respond very positively to a campaign seeking to retake some of that lost ground."

"We will use the 300,000 signature campaign to gather e-mail addresses permitting us to keep in touch with signatories. They will receive information bulletins that the union will issue on the \$15 campaign and other issues of broad social interest to working people. And of course, we hope and expect that workers will contact us to join our union or another of their choice."

Temporary Workers' Rights

The evening after the Monday staff meeting, Unite joined with several other trade union organizations to hold a widely publicized public forum to defend the rights of temporary, migrant workers in New Zealand. There are several hundred thousand workers at any given time in the country who work on temporary permits in such industries as agriculture and retail services.

Unite is concerned that with the rise of unemployment, temporary workers' rights are coming under attack by employers and the national government. It supports equal rights for all workers and is working with such organizations of oppressed workers as Migrante Aotearoa (a trade union-based, immigrant workers organization) and Runanga, the council of Maori trade union members within. Both of these organizations were co-sponsors of the public forum. Seventy five people attended.

Unite is also an outspoken participant in New Zealand's antiwar campaigning. Several of its leaders, including Mike Treen and John Minto, are founders and spokespeople for Global Peace and Justice Auckland, the country's largest antiwar group.

The union met its latest, difficult challenge at a call center in south Auckland. On April 9, the British-owned Synovate company locked out 30 workers at its call center rather than negotiate a fair collective agreement. The next day, union members blockaded entrance to the center. Unite organized flying pickets squads targeting major companies in Auckland and Wellington that are clients of Synovate. The lockout was finally lifted on April 15, and the workers won a raise of \$1 an hour.

P.S.

* From Monthley Review MRZine:

<http://mrzine.monthlyreview.org/ann...>

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