

# **New Zealand: Union wins gains for vulnerable workers**

Monday 1 June 2009, by [ANNIS Roger](#) (Date first published: 16 May 2009).

Auckland,

The Unite union is New Zealand's newest trade union and one of its most dynamic.

It is at the forefront of a revitalisation of a section of the labour movement that has resulted in thousands of young and marginalised workers gaining union representation for the first time. Significant wage rises have been won — including an increase in the national minimum wage.

In April, I visited Unite's Auckland offices to learn more about its successes.

## **Union growth**

I sat in at the weekly Monday morning staff meeting. Fourteen staff in Auckland were joined via teleconference by three staff from Wellington, Christchurch and Hamilton.

The previous week was a big one for the union, netting 250 new members. Founded in 2004, in the past year and a half, Unite has grown by 3000 to reach 8000 members.

The largest components are fast food, followed by call centre, hotel, casino, and postal workers.

Many of its members are from the Maori indigenous and Pacific island populations.

Unite uses a variety of tactics to win members. Staff and volunteers visit worksites and convince workers to sign membership cards. New Zealand law permits access to worksites by union organisers, though the latter still encounter threats and intimidation by employers, or worse.

For example, on April 9 the British-owned Synovate company locked out 30 workers during first contract talks.

The next day, union members and supporters blockaded the entrance to the centre. Unite organised squads of flying pickets to target major companies in Auckland and Wellington that are clients of Synovate.

A new collective agreement with the company was soon won.

Unite has led creative and militant strikes, including the world's first strikes at the Starbucks coffee chain in 2005 and short strikes at McDonald's outlets in 2006 and 2008.

## **Wage rises**

From the beginning, Unite has fought for a NZ\$12 per hour national minimum wage and an end to slave-labour youth wage rates. It gained support from other unions and last year won the minimum-wage demand, since raised to \$12.50.

Wage rates for 16- and 17-year-olds are still legally set at 80% of the adult rate. But these rates have been abolished at all the workplaces organised by Unite — including McDonalds, KFC, Pizza Hut, Burger King and the major movie theatre chains.

The union's fighting reputation recently earned it the affiliation of 500 members of the national postal workers union branch that covers the top half of the north island.

Several other unions have emulated Unite's tactics and have transformed themselves into more activist and representative unions.

The 22,000-member National Distribution Union (NDU) recently scored a breakthrough at the country's retail giant The Warehouse, signing up 2000 new members.

The proportion of union membership in New Zealand is 22% down from a high of 69% in 1980.

Unite's national office is strictly functional — no expensive furniture. 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 pay considerably higher, Unite national secretary Mike Treen and the rest of the union leadership believe this is a matter of principle.

"Unite is not just a trade union that negotiates collective agreements", Treen said. "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 broader 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."

The weekly staff meeting reviewed several social projects Unite is promoting. One is providing basic information on a new national pension fund called "Kiwisaver". For every dollar of savings put into the plan by a 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. Courses offered include computer literacy, Maori language and small business management.

Several thousand Unite members have attended the school since its inception in 2007.

## **New campaigns**

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.

Treen is confident it will succeed: "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 centre 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% and real wages declined by 25%. 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 signature campaign to gather email addresses to keep in touch with signatories. They will receive information 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."

The evening after the staff meeting, Unite joined with several other trade unions to host a widely publicised public forum to defend the rights of temporary, migrant workers. There are several hundred thousand workers in the country who work on temporary permits in such industries as agriculture and retail.

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 organisations of oppressed workers as Migrante Aotearoa (a trade union-based, immigrant workers organisation) and Runanga, the council of Maori trade union members.

Both of these organisations were co-sponsors of the public forum, which 75 people attended.

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

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## **P.S.**

\* From: International News, Green Left Weekly issue #795 20 May 2009.

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