

New Zealand Union Campaigns to Organize Young Workers

Monday 1 June 2009, by [ANNIS Roger](#) (Date first published: 27 November 2007).

Melbourne, Australia — Four years ago, some experienced social and political organizers sat down with young people in Auckland, New Zealand to map out a plan for a novel trade union, one that would potentially represent the thousands of workers who toil in poorly paid and mostly part-time jobs in the fast food and other service industries.

When the group approached existing unions with its ideas for such an organizing effort, it was told, “Not possible,” or “Too difficult.” Most workers in the targeted industries are too young and itinerant, or too distracted by consumerism and other vices to think about collective industrial action.

Undeterred, the group launched an organizing drive that would ultimately result in the Unite Union. Today, Unite counts 5,000 members. Of these, 2,000 work in the fast food industry, 600 at the main casino in Auckland, 500 in call centres, and another 700 work in hotels. Most of the union’s members are in and around Auckland, New Zealand’s largest city.

The union is exploring a merger with a larger union, the 20,000-member National Distribution Union. That union is itself undergoing a transformation into a more democratic and fighting organization in the wake of a successful campaign in 2006 to defeat a lockout of 500 workers by the giant Australian retailer Woolworth’s.

Mike Treen, National Director of Unite, gave an interview on the story of the union while attending the Latin America and Asia Pacific International Solidarity Forum here from October 11 to 14.

“We had several things working in our favour when we started the organizing campaign. The unemployment rate was low, so it gave young workers confidence that if things came to worse, they could always move on to another job.” We also had several features of New Zealand labour law in our favour. The law requires employers to grant union organizers access to the work site. And union recognition is granted to whatever proportion of a workforce wishes to be recognized. All we needed was a minimum of two workers to sign up and we had our foot in the door. “The union quickly realized that it could not win representation by traditional tactics of industrial action. Treen explained, “Our campaign was above all political. We used a combination of on-the-job pressure tactics and mobilization of broader community support to win union representation.” “Our central demands were one of the main reasons for our success. There were three — abolish sub-minimum wage youth pay rates; a minimum wage of \$12 per hour; and secure hours of work. These demands became very popular, not only among the workers we were organizing but also among their friends and family and in broader society. “Unite’s organizing work was anything but traditional.” We bought a bus, decorated it with the campaign material and attached big bullhorn speakers. Then we would use it to travel from one worksite to another and mobilize very loud and visible support outside the workplaces where we were organizing or bargaining. Dozens of short strike were held with the young workers making a real noise on the busy highways and intersections where these fast food outlets are situated. “Treen explained how one company, Restaurant Brands, was organized. It owns Pizza Hut, KFC and Starbucks. “When we launched the campaign, we did it with what we called ‘the

world's first Starbucks strike'. Because the pizza delivery network had one national call centre, it didn't require a lot of industrial action to put a lot of pressure on the company. We would have a rally outside the call center on a Friday or Saturday night. The call centre workers would come out and take part. Workers could stay for as long as they liked. Some would only stay out for half an hour, some would decide to go home for the rest of the night. The net effect was to back up calls for hours."

The union mobilized unions, workers and cultural performers to support its fight. It organized several big events in Auckland in early 2006 to galvanize support, including a rally on February 12 that filled the Auckland Town Hall followed the next month by a march and rally through central Auckland that drew 1,500 participants.

The union's fast food campaign adopted the popular slogan, "Supersize My Pay." It scored some victories in 2006. Restaurant Brands signed a collective agreement that increased wages, moved youth rates from 80% to 90% of the adult rate, and contained a clause that protected the work hours of existing staff before new staff would be hired.

This agreement was followed by others at McDonalds, Burger King and Wendy's with conditions similar to those at Restaurant Brands.

During 2007, the government was obliged to respond to pressure to abolish youth rates. It decided that youth rates could only last for 3 months or 200 hours. With that change, McDonalds did a joint announcement with Unite that they would get rid of youth rates altogether. Other big employers are now expected to follow suit.

The government has also increased the minimum wage by degree and it is expected to reach \$12 an hour in March, 2008. The union movement is now raising the bar to get a minimum wage of \$15 an hour. This would be equal to two-thirds of the average national wage, which is the standard set by the International Labor Organization.

"This campaign was a big victory for a radical, campaigning unionism," Treen concluded. "It proved young people would join unions in their thousands if asked and, if inspired to do so by a union, be willing to fight. Not only did it bring notoriously anti-union employers like McDonald's to the negotiating table, it also forced them to sign a collective agreement and make real concessions."

Unite's story is an inspiring one. If you want to see it in action, you can get a DVD of the campaign called "SupersizeMyPay.Com." It's well worth a look.

P.S.

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