Back to grass roots: Peak union councils and community campaigning

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Abstract

Peak union bodies in Australia have a long and influential history, and most recently have developed an approach to union revitalisation based on community-based campaigning strategies. In responding to labour market changes, declining union membership and hostile governments and employers, peak union bodies have developed new ways to strengthen the collective ability of their affiliated unions to successfully represent members at the workplace level. They have embraced local-level strategies that tap into community concerns and are aimed at capacity building across the labour movement. The resulting grass-roots organisations have the potential to shape both the workplace and the public domain. We explore one example of this approach: the establishment of Local Union Community Councils by Unions NSW. We argue that although peak bodies are well placed to spearhead community campaigning, the grass-roots councils being created will need to progress through several stages of development, if they are to become self-sustaining organisations, contributing effectively over the long term to community mobilisation and stronger, more coordinated union campaigns.

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Introduction

The 2007 Australian federal election demonstrated the ability of peak union bodies to influence electoral outcomes and thus the workplace rights and conditions of their affiliates' members. Peak union bodies such as the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) and its New South Wales (NSW) equivalent, Unions NSW, spearheaded the Your Rights at Work (YR@W) campaign. This campaign was effective in publicising and personalising the negative impacts on workers and their families of the conservative Liberal–National Party coalition government's anti-union *WorkChoices* industrial relations regime and ultimately played a central role in that government's defeat. But, with the possible exception of this campaign, the strategies of peak union bodies have attracted rather limited academic attention, at least in recent years in Australia. This article seeks to develop and clarify our understanding of these strategies, their origins, scope and outcomes. It explores an important strategic initiative through which Unions NSW provides unionised workers in that state with a voice and campaigning structure that sits outside their workplace – Local Union Community Councils (LUCCs).

The study has three objectives. The first is to identify what is new and different about LUCCs and how they differ from other union–community coalitions and alliances. The second is to explore the expectations that Unions NSW has of LUCCs. The third is to examine the factors that may facilitate or impede the ability of LUCCs to meet those expectations.

LUCCs are groups of unionists and union-friendly people in particular localities who come together to campaign for what, in Australia, would be considered a broadly 'progressive' agenda. Several LUCCs began as one of the YR@W groups of 2005–2007, while others have been established by Unions NSW since early 2012. Members of LUCCs organise and participate in community events, campaign on local and broader issues and mobilise for future struggles in their local areas. As noted by Unions NSW (2014c), '[w]hile different campaigns may come and go, the LUCCs have provided a foundation for links between union activists at the community level under the maxim that organisation leads to power and change' (p. 23). LUCCs are premised on the belief that individual unions and union members need to reach beyond the workplace and engage and connect with unionists from other industries as well as with community members in order to work and campaign around a common agenda.

LUCCs can be situated within the growing phenomenon of community unionism. This study explores why at a particular point in its history, Unions NSW sets out to establish LUCCs, the challenges associated with their development and the subsequent potential contributions of this form of organising to union campaigns. In important ways, LUCCs differ from the well-studied category of joint union–community campaigns, where unions seek to build alliances with diverse community groups, in order to garner support for a specific union campaign (Holgate, 2015b; Milkman, 2010). LUCCs, in contrast, are groups that may initially comprise union organisers and rank-and-file members, but their aim is to work with a community in order to advance the interests of working people in their communities. Unlike the focus of union–community alliances, the primary purpose of the LUCCs is to build permanent semi-autonomous groups of rank-and-file union members who are able to campaign around local and broader issues that affect workers both as employees and as members of the community. An example would

be a campaign against cuts to services that threatened jobs or worker or union rights as well as the provision of public services. As a tactic, LUCCs may from time to time seek allies among other community groups, but this is not a defining feature. The intention is not to direct resources into alliance-construction but rather to focus on building a LUCC to the point where it is able to act semi-autonomously. In this sense, a LUCC resembles a micro-version of a central labor council (CLC) rather than a coalition of union and non-union interests. Unions NSW has embraced local-level, grass-roots strategies in order to build capacity power across its affiliates and the labour movement generally.

Most LUCCs are in the embryonic stages of growth, making it difficult and potentially misleading to develop a typology that could be applied to other union–community arrangements and renewal strategies. Instead, existing typologies of union–community alliance are used to highlight the unique features of LUCCs that distinguish them from other community–union groupings. The absence of a typology does not necessarily detract from the value of the research, given that Unions NSW, at a time when it is subject to many pressures, considers LUCCs a programme worth resourcing. An analysis of the factors facilitating or impeding their success is therefore both timely and relevant. Moreover, the preparedness of a peak union body to embark upon a new organisational approach gives lie to any suggestion that unions are hidebound captives of their past and resistant to change.

Research design and methodology

The researchers compared theoretical constructs and empirical evidence from several sources in order to facilitate the development of a comprehensive and robust understanding of the emerging shape and roles of LUCCS and the aims and expectations of Unions NSW in fostering their establishment. Interviews included six with full-time officials and elected officers of Unions NSW and three with union officers from other peak bodies. In addition, interview evidence was gathered from four key local group activists, one union activist who is no longer engaged with the LUCC, one communications officer and a media officer. Primary documentary sources were analysed, including Unions NSW annual reports and training documents circulated to LUCC members. The research was also informed by the authors' participation in training days, LUCC launches and other events associated with the LUCCs. One of the researchers is an active member of a local group whose fellow members are aware of the research project but are not the subjects of the research. While the researchers acknowledge the risk associated with this form of immersed involvement, such as the potential compromise to objectivity, their experiences have allowed them to critically consider interviews and to generate a more nuanced understanding of the functions and purpose of LUCCs. Interviews were transcribed and coded to identify themes. This thematic analysis, cross-referenced to the secondary literature on union and community organising, informed the development of an understanding of the opportunities and challenges the LUCCs face.

Literature review: Union–community alliances and union revitalisation

Declining union density in countries such as Australia, coupled with the rise of neo-liberalism and labour market changes, has created a very difficult environment for unions

and working people more generally. Those interested in how unions might effectively confront these challenges, renew their membership base and increase their political and industrial leverage have increasingly argued that unions need to draw on a broader range of strategies and tactics than those traditionally associated with the business, servicing and organising models of unionism (Jerrard, et al., 2009: 100; Turner and Hurd, 2001; Wills and Simms, 2004). The literature on union revitalisation is broad. Recent research includes work on workplace organising (Brigden and Kaine, 2013; Simms et al., 2013); 'inter-union collaboration' (Brigden and Kaine, 2013); community–union coalitions, partnerships and alliances (Holgate, 2015a; Jerrard et al., 2009; Patmore, 1997; Tattersall, 2010; Wills, 2001); and community-based organising and advocacy (Milkman, 2010).

Union–community alliances have attracted much attention of late and some have argued they provide unions with a means to 'reinvent themselves' (Tattersall, 2010: 2) and with 'another weapon … for reversing decline' (Wills and Simms, 2004: 59). A number of writers argue that the interest in union–community alliances reflects awareness that unions are unable to rebuild single-handedly (Holgate, 2015a). Academics have also been interested in how 'new actors' such as these alliances and/or community/civil society organisations may influence the employment relationship (Holgate, 2015a, 2015b) by forming effective coalitions (Tattersall, 2010).

Wills (2001), however, observes that there is a 'danger in overstating the originality of new efforts to establish' union–community relations and notes that 'trade unions have always had connections with the communities of which they are a part' (p. 481). Indeed, in Australia and elsewhere, there is a long history of linkages between the union movement and local communities (Holgate, 2015b; Tattersall, 2010; Wills and Simms, 2004). Patmore (1997) has explored the workings of labour and community coalitions at the Lithgow small arms factory between 1918 and 1932. Thornthwaite (1997: 262) has demonstrated their effectiveness in 'conservative rural communities because, by comparison with traditional industrial tactics, they are relatively non-confrontational'. As Tufts (1998) notes, '[d]iscussion of an emerging community unionism does not inherently suggest that unionism has ever been historically divorced from working-class political cultures' (p. 231).

Union–community alliances provide both unions and communities with opportunities for 'mutual co-operation and collective action' that may enhance 'survival' (Tufts, 1998: 232). They provide unions with the opportunity to confront challenges and 'to increase the[ir] public and political profile' (Wills and Simms, 2004: 66). They help build power within workplaces and within the broader community by demonstrating a union's relevance and by allowing it to reach beyond its traditional constituents to groups such as migrant or ethnic communities (Cranford and Ladd, 2003: 48, Holgate, 2015a: 460). Alliances can assist unions to organise groups that are traditionally difficult to reach such as contingent workers and to 'increase the pressure brought to bear on any intransigent employer who is resisting union recognition, wage increases or the provision of safe working conditions' (Wills, 2001: 466).

In doing so, unions can be seen to be seeking to improve economic justice, provide services and advance broader societal concerns (Wills, 2001). Coalitions have not focused exclusively on traditional industrial issues but, on occasion, have arisen in response to social justice and environmental issues or other concerns less explicitly

focused on the workplace. In Australia, perhaps the most famous example of this kind of alliance was that between the NSW Builders Laborers' Federation and community groups in the preservation of historically and environmentally significant areas of Sydney such as Hunters Hill and The Rocks, given expression in the 1970s Green Bans (Burgmann and Burgmann, 2011).

By working with the community, unions may also increase their voice within political parties (Wills and Simms, 2004: 66), thus potentially enhancing opportunities for worker representation. Union–community alliances may contribute to the building of common cause among people who might otherwise be divided by gender, sexuality, religion or dis/ability. They can then link struggles for redistribution with those for recognition, potentially fostering 'unity on the left' (Wills, 2001: 469). Voss and Sherman (2000, cited in Heery et al., 2012: 147) suggest that working with civil society organisations facilitates renewal by providing opportunities for the transfer or acquisition of campaigning techniques and increased exposure to new activists.

Despite the associated benefits of 'community-driven' campaigns, some academics (e.g. Wills, 2001) suggest that conventional union hierarchies and structures inhibit the potential of community unionism to revitalise the labour movement. Clawson (2003, cited in Jerrard et al., 2009) notes that top-down campaigns have a tendency to be effective only in the short-term and are 'anti-democratic' because workers have neither control nor responsibility. A case study by Jerrard et al. (2009) of several Australian unions found such campaigns 'lack the political change necessary to stimulate union renewal and are just an extension of a narrow organising approach' (p. 102). Tattersall (2005) maintains that '[d]eep coalitions require unions to commit to shared decision making and sharing power with community partners' (p. 109). Community alliances may also be treated with suspicion by parts of the labour movement because the organisations they are working with may be competitors (Martinez Lucio and Stuart, 2009: 34) or because they seek to build relationships with employers or governments that may not have a pro-union agenda or fail to engage with unions on an equal footing (Holgate, 2015b). Sadler (2004) notes that coalition building and the manner in which class intersects with other forms of inequality may challenge 'established union hierarchies' (p. 37). Holgate cites Fine's argument that 'unions often fall back on old "understanding of the industrial order and their place in it, and rely upon antiquated organisational ideologies, cultures, strategies and structures to carry out their work"' (Fine, 2007, cited in Holgate, 2015a: 462).

Ross (2007) contends that a proliferation of titles such as 'union–community coalition' or 'social unionism' across the union renewal literature has muddied our understanding and our ability to 'assess the relative effectiveness of the different forms it takes in practice'. As Jerrard et al. (2009) note, 'All approaches stress the need for unions to move beyond traditional practices and methods, and develop a community-oriented approach, but there is no consensus around the form and character of these relationships' (p. 100).

Much of the literature tends to focus on fusing organising with community and on building alliances (Wills, 2004, cited in Martinez Lucio and Stuart, 2009: 34). The emphasis has largely been on alliances between unions and community groups, but 'community may also refer to the broader public or the formation of independent organisations' (Jerrard et al., 2009: 100) or non-governmental organisations (Sadler, 2004: 35).

Indeed, the concept of community both has changed and is contested (Wills and Simms, 2004: 61; Delanty, cited in Holgate, 2015b: 436). Martinez Lucio and Perrett (2009) suggest that there is a 'need to understand the variety of community initiatives' (p. 694).

Tattersall (2008: 417–419) usefully suggests that there are three common themes associated with community. These are community as organisation, community as common interest or identity and community as place. Building on this classification, Tattersall (2008) outlines three different types of community unionism, each representing different organising strategies: (1) unions and community organisations working in coalition; (2) a union strategy of organising workers 'on the basis of common non-workplace identities, interests or place'; and (3) 'place-based organising strategies' which 'seek to increase a union's impact at any particular scale' (pp. 417–418). Tattersall's definitions accurately capture the different elements of community and community unionism highlighted in the literature. However, as will be seen, the LUCCs do not sit neatly within any of these themes, but reflect facets of each.

Several authors have developed typologies of union–community coalitions. One of the most commonly cited is that developed by Frege et al. (2003) who differentiate three types of union coalitions based on 'the extent to which unions seek coalition on the basis of their own interests or objectives or accept it on the basis of the interests or objectives of nonlabor organizations' (pp. 124–125). However, these authors' definition of a union coalition explicitly 'excludes joint action between unions themselves'; their typology, therefore, does not adequately capture the nature of the LUCCs. Tattersall (2005) also provides a typology of union–community coalitions – ad hoc, support, mutual support and deep coalitions – although again LUCCs do not fit any one category but draw on elements of each.

A difficulty in situating LUCCs in current typologies of community unionism is that they are a hybrid form of inter-union/union–community arrangements. Just as LUCCs draw on elements of community unions, they also draw on elements of the inter-union alliances of peak unions, in particular Trades and Labor Councils. Peak union bodies are premised on cooperation among diverse unions (Tattersall, 2010: 7). They may be defined as 'permanent inter-union organisations directed at furthering defined or assumed common interests or objectives by means of jointly determined strategies' (Ellem and Shields, 1996: 377). Drawing on both Tattersall's definition of community unionism and Ellem and Shields' definition of peak union bodies, we define the LUCCs in our study as emerging groups of rank-and-file union members, operating under the auspices of Unions NSW, who engage with the communities in which members live and work to further commonly held objectives. At this stage, their permanency, their autonomy and their agency vary across the groups.

Although there is a plethora of studies exploring union renewal and union–community alliances, there is less recent research exploring how peak union bodies and CLCs may seek to advance the aims of their affiliates and the labour movement more broadly by engaging with 'community'. Peak union bodies have been influential in Australian industrial relations (see Hagan, 1981 on the ACTU's political, institutional and organising roles). Recent studies have adopted perspectives based on gender (Brigden, 2005; Webb, 2004), power (Rathmell, 2007) and organising (Cooper, 2003). Brigden and Kaine (2013) note that inter-union alliances such as peak union bodies have a long history and

can operate at 'different geographical scales, including the local, industry, national and international' (p. 2). The following discussion of LUCCs aims to further our understanding of how peak bodies have sought to engage with the community at a local level (or scale) and the hurdles that must be overcome if this particular model is to succeed.

Unions NSW and LUCCs

Unions NSW, formely Sydney Trades and Labor Council, was established in 1871. This makes it 'one of the oldest peak councils in the world' (Markey, 1994: 3). Through its affiliates across the state, it 'represents over 600,000' union members (Unions NSW, 2014a). There are seven smaller Regional Trades and Labor Councils located in NSW that are affiliated to Unions NSW. It has traditionally campaigned on issues such as wages and working conditions, working hours and occupational health and safety. More recently, it has broadened its campaign agenda beyond industrial issues.

Affiliates of Unions NSW have faced much tribulation over recent decades. There is no sign that this will abate. As a result, Unions NSW is exploring a number of responses to neo-liberal governments and the challenges that generally confront unions. Savage (2006) poses the question, 'At what scales do … [unions] need to structure themselves in order to face the enormous challenges posed by an ever-changing global economy?' (p. 651). One response is to campaign at a community rather than a workplace, industry, national or international level. Unions NSW is arguably well placed to campaign at the community level. Unlike individual unions, which may be caught up in their members' day-to-day issues and in their own specific campaigns, peak bodies are in a position to promote cross-pollination, inter-union cooperation and support among affiliates at the local level.

Coupled with the rise of the neo-liberal agenda has been the changing geographical and industrial landscape. While some regions such as Wollongong and Newcastle still have strong and active Trades and Labor Councils, there has been a general decline in the number, strength and influence of regional councils. While the LUCCs are loosely based on traditional Trades and Labor Councils, as Unions NSW Secretary Mark Lennon notes, regional councils 'were based very much on the industrial interests of the area and the unions in a particular area and unions working together on particular industrial campaigns usually in those areas'. He continues, 'I think unions have learnt over the last 30 years that we have to take the message of working people to the broader community, because it is the message of the community at large'. The LUCCs reflect the influence of regional Trades and Labor Councils and are also informed by developments in community organising elsewhere such as the Union Cities initiative in the United States (Unions NSW Officer A). An important precursor to the LUCCs was the establishment of YR@W groups as part of a larger campaign in the lead up to the 2007 Australian federal election.

At the 2007 federal election, the coalition lost government to Labor and the then Prime Minister John Howard lost his seat. In the 2 years prior to the election, the ACTU and other peak bodies such as Unions NSW had been campaigning to repeal the deeply anti-union *WorkChoices* legislation and bring about this change of government (Barnes, 2006, 2007; Muir, 2008, 2010; Wilson and Spies-Butcher, 2011). The YR@W campaign

involved a range of tactics, such as TV ads, large rallies and a bright orange bus that travelled around NSW (see Barnes, 2006, 2007; Ellem, 2013). One of the key means of raising community awareness was the establishment of local YR@W groups, 46 of which were formed in NSW (Doughty, 2009). The groups were made up of volunteers who received assistance from full-time campaign coordinators. They arranged street and market stalls, collected signatures on petitions, letter-boxed, sold raffle tickets, organised meetings and handed out YR@W how-to-vote cards on election day (Doughty, 2009). A coordinator who worked on the campaign suggested that the groups were most effective when they were relatively informal and relied on person-to-person contact to maintain their 'dynamism and activity' (Doughty, 2009: 14). Commenting on the YR@W campaign, former Secretary of Unions NSW John Robertson (2007) said the campaign 'showed that success can be achieved by engaging with the community on a number of levels about an issue' (p. 6).

Despite Muir's (2008) assertion (p. 201) that one of the legacies of the campaign was the union movement's learning 'how to work effectively with and within communities', a lost opportunity of the YR@W campaign was that many of the groups were allowed to wither in the aftermath of the election. While the YR@W campaign continued via its website and some lobbying of the new Labor government, the 2007 election marked an end point for many of the local group activities (Unions NSW Officer E). As an ACTU officer noted, at the end of the YR@W campaign,

> … we had tens of thousands of trained volunteers and we gave them nothing to do. Not only were many local activists suffering from campaign fatigue, the coordinating role of Unions NSW was withdrawn as the focus shifted to other campaigns. (Unions NSW Officer E)

The hibernation lasted until 2012 when Unions NSW, using the framework of the pre-existing YR@W groups, began a process of 'local geographic organising' (Unions NSW, 2012). This involved working with existing bodies such as regional trades and labour councils, reinvigorating some YR@W groups and establishing new groups. While the groups are known generically as LUCCs, each has a name that reflects it geography.

LUCCs are composed of 'local rank and file delegates and union members, retired members along with their families and supporters in the local community' (Unions NSW, 2014b). They campaign for a broadly progressive agenda but are not tied to any political party. The LUCCs aim to provide working people with a voice or a mechanism to campaign around community and broader state and federal issues such as the closure of local services, privatisations or the erosion of worker rights. Four Unions NSW officers assist in the co-ordination of LUCC meetings and other events. Each officer is assigned a number of groups for which they are responsible. The time spent with each group varies depending upon how autonomously the group is functioning and the level of activity at the time. While Unions NSW funds the LUCCs, its long-term aim is for the LUCCs to operate semi-autonomously (see Table 1 for stages of development).

Unions NSW launched 15 LUCCs in 2012. These have worked on a range of broader campaigns and local concerns such as the employment and community impact of the proposed closure of Grafton gaol (Unions NSW, 2012). There are currently 29 LUCCs across the state at different stages of development. The groups are based on particular

Table 1. Local Union Community Councils – indicative stages of development.

	Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3	Stage 4
	Start-up	Infancy	Developing	Mature
Infrastructure	Meetings called and publicised by designated Unions NSW organiser. No or little social media presence	Meetings organised by the group and publicised by Unions NSW. Social media presence with Unions NSW assistance	Meeting notices drafted by group and circulated by Unions NSW. Social media and webpage maintained by a member of the group	Meets regularly, may fundraise and manage some finances autonomously. Regular communication between members. Active social media and web presence
People and skills	Unions NSW contacts local delegates/organisers of unions with membership in the area. Most key contacts are organisers/full-time officials	Few unions involved; significant gaps in affiliate representation. Some basic roles allocated. For example, Convenor, media spokesperson	A number of local unions represented. Key skills present among members and key roles allocated	Established and recognised leadership group (core team, organising committee or executive) comprised rank-and-file union members. Broad cross-section of unions represented. Key people trained in specialist areas
Level of autonomy	Activities and meetings initiated and generally chaired by Unions NSW organiser	Group comes up with some initiatives	Group plans activities to fit in a state-wide plan; meetings generally attended by Unions NSW organiser but chaired by group member	Groups self-directed and self-sufficient. Unions NSW provides co-ordination, strategic advice and other resources where needed
Activities	Local participation in activities organised by Unions NSW	Unions NSW facilitates meetings of the local group to organise their own events, allocating responsibilities to group members	Group's membership has ownership over their activities; Unions NSW assists in expanding reach and planning	Groups self-directed; plan and implement campaign tactics as part of an overall campaign strategy coordinated by Unions NSW

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued)

	Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3	Stage 4
	Start-up	Infancy	Developing	Mature
Networks	Unions NSW in contact with the local area officials and key delegates	Through the group, organisers and some delegates from different unions working in the local area are in irregular contact with one another	Through the group, organisers and delegates from significant number of unions connected with each other independently of Unions NSW and in regular communication	Strategic relationships developed with civil society organisations and community leaders
Local profile	Unknown beyond those directly involved	Known by circle of delegates and members; occasional local media coverage	Regular local media presence, and group is known and recognised in key workplaces	Established and recognised as the voice of workers in the local community

Source: Unions NSW.
The characteristics of the Local Union Community Council (LUCC) at each stage should be read in addition to those of the (LUCC) in preceding stages.

geographical localities, both regional and urban, and predominantly in electorally marginal seats, but have also been established in areas where the provision and quality of jobs, workplace rights and community services such as health and education are major community concerns. This framing around jobs, rights and services reflects Unions NSW's broader campaigning agenda.

Unions NSW has developed skills within the groups by holding planning and training days for LUCC members. To date, there have been two state-wide conferences and these have been attended by, on average, three members each from most LUCCs across NSW. The 2014 state conference examined key LUCC successes such as mobilisation in regional areas and state by-elections. The day involved break-out groups to develop skills in areas such as the use of social media, conducting meetings, visiting local MPs, engaging in effective conversations (at work and in the community), planning campaigns and building momentum. Unions NSW has also held training days for individual LUCCs, focused on specific activities such as power building. LUCC members seek to build the profile of their group and thus its influence by utilising traditional community-organisation tactics such as street stalls, local media engagement, seeking pledges from electoral candidates, candidates' and other forums, door knocking and electronic media outlets.

The LUCCs are similar to the YR@W groups in terms of structure and tactics, but their aims and strategies differ from those of the YR@W groups, which were explicitly focused on electoral change, especially the impact of legislation on the individual rights of workers. The focus of LUCCs is less on individual workers and more on the impact on the local community of government policies and employer actions. LUCCs also have a greater concern with longevity than their precursors. As one interviewee observed,

> … [they] are explicitly set up, where different campaigns and different issues might come and go, but the organisation stays in place. (Unions NSW Officer E)

Unions NSW does not have the structured links to individual workplaces that single unions, via delegate structures and workplace access, may have. In some ways, the LUCCs function as a tier of Unions NSW that provides it with direct access to union and community activists. This enhances the peak body's ability to service affiliates by way of an enhanced capacity to mobilise. While the LUCCs at first blush might appear to mostly resemble regional peak bodies in that they seek to mobilise industrially and politically at the local level, at this stage they have no financial independence from Unions NSW nor have they set themselves up to compete with Unions NSW. Moreover, unlike their historically powerful counterpart in Broken Hill, they are unable to act as a consistent 'industrial disciplinarian' (Ellem and Shields, 2004: 133).

The LUCCs display different features from those that the literature suggests are characteristic of community unionism (Tattersall, 2008). First, unlike coalitions such as the Industrial Areas Foundation, Citizens UK or the Sydney Alliance, they are not partnerships between unions and other groups such as religious, community or political organisations. Table 1 indicates that by the time they reach stage 4, LUCCs will have developed strategic relationships with community organisations and leaders. However, such relationships are not at the core of the LUCCs. Temporary or even long-lasting relationships with other groups may appear to be a weakness of the LUCCs, but at this stage the approach seems to

be assisting in building internal group stability while not compromising potential capacity building.

A second point of difference is that the idea that community unionism is based on a group of people with 'community-based identities rather than craft or industry' (Tattersall, 2008: 418) is only partially reflected in the LUCCs. A strength of the LUCCs is that they are made up of people 'who may work in different industries but have an inherent similarity of belief' (Unions NSW Officer A). While community identity is an important element, of more importance is the identity of LUCC members as unionists. The third theme of community as place is more reflective of the LUCCs, whose members work and/or live in the area.

The focus on community is therefore twofold: (1) building a stronger community *within* the union movement and (2) building stronger links *with* the broader community on issues important to unions but also to the local community. Through participation in their LUCC, members learn from each other the issues faced by other workers in their area and how these concerns impact that community:

> I think what we are trying to do is get unionists to work together in their local areas and campaign locally … But I think we've also been trying to get individual unions to be more supportive of each other's campaigns, to foster more solidarity between different unions and support one another. (Unions NSW Officer B)

Like more conventional union–community alliances, the LUCCs can contribute to the transfer of campaigning skills within the movement. Their presence also ensures that there is a reserve army of people ready to campaign on a range of industrial and community issues, and they add authenticity to the messages they deliver:

> It might be one thing for a group of teachers to meet with their local MP about a school issue or a school's funding issue. It's quite another thing to have not only the teacher but a local police officer, a local nurse, local fire fighter … or a member of the community who's worried about service. (Unions NSW Officer E)

LUCCs also aim to build influence within the local community. They provide an opportunity to extend union voice beyond the confines of individual workplaces and industries. In the process, they can refute sensationalist perceptions of union power or malevolence often promoted by the media. Furthermore, as a consequence of declining union density, fewer Australians have direct experience of the benefits that unions might bring. LUCCs may provide an opportunity to influence or reshape the image of unions at the grass roots in local communities. According to one of our interviewees,

> A lot of people comment that we're like the friendly face of unions, so people are always really positive to have the union's support and resources. Residents often don't know what to do and then we bring along some people and a PA and all of a sudden it's looking organised and then people have somewhere to gather and have a voice rather than just rocking up to the swimming pool and going, 'Oh my God it's closed, I didn't know that'. They know that there's a community campaign and they know the unions are involved … there's the union fighting for assets and

services for the community. So everyone's kind of happy with that. The journalists are happy because we find the good stories for them. (Unions NSW Officer D)

When asked how success could be measured, a common response among Unions NSW officials and LUCC members was that a core criterion would be the LUCC's recognition by the community and local media. As indicated by Table 1, as a LUCC develops, so too should its local profile. Local news stories about the activities of the groups have to date been generally positive, in turn presenting a positive portrayal of unions. The aim is also for people to be more publicly identified as unionists:

A lot of people who are delegates … are not just union activists, they're the joiners, they're the people who will run the sausage sizzle every weekend at the soccer club. (Unions NSW Officer E)

Community and media recognition also places the LUCC in a stronger position when lobbying over matters of importance to local workplaces and to the community.

Longevity, stability and autonomy are other indicators of the LUCCs' success. A regular theme emerging from interviews with Unions NSW officers is the wish to have the LUCCs functioning without depending on Unions NSW for direction or provision of a dedicated staff member. As one officer stated,

… if they have meetings when I'm not there and they make decisions and feel comfortable that they're in control, then that's more of a sustainable thing than me sitting there and telling them what to do.(Unions NSW Officer D)

Another noted,

… it's the same approach that unions take in organising workplaces, which is that, if the union office blew up, then organisation at the workplace would remain. (Unions NSW Officer E)

We now turn to an assessment of the factors that may promote or hinder the LUCCs' ability to reach maturity and thus realise their full potential as part of the Unions NSW tactical repertoire.

The LUCCs at work

Thornthwaite (1997) poses the question, whether union–community alliances can thrive in urban areas that lack the strong local identity and community links forged by local workers and residents in rural locations. There is no doubt that smaller communities present opportunities for mobilising around local issues. As one interviewee noted,

The regional ones are always a lot easier because people identify with the town. They live and work there. Transport, everything's easier. They can park next to the venue … we just did a stall on the weekend and everyone volunteers and because they know everyone in the town, they say, 'Hey, you're a midwife. Come over and sign the petition or whatever'. (Unions NSW Officer D)

In rural or semi-rural communities, limited sources of employment may heighten and unite disparate groups around issues such as loss of jobs and community infrastructure. Indeed, another informant remarked that

> … the further you are away from the centre of Sydney, the better the LUCC … Often, they've never had a Labor local Member of Parliament and yet they're the strongest groups that we've got. (Unions NSW Officer B)

While the interviews suggest that there is a metropolitan or urban/rural divide, our preliminary findings indicate that it is not simply a case of city versus country, but rather of how closely people identify with an area. This in turn appears to be more influenced by where they live than where they work. It may help explain why the Sutherland Shire, which is not rural but is an area of Sydney with a strong local identity, is one of the more active LUCCs. Establishing and developing LUCCs in areas with transient working and residential populations can prove difficult (Unions NSW Officer D). Moreover, electorate boundaries may encompass localities that do not have a uniform identity, making political lobbying more difficult. The Greater Macarthur group, for example, incorporates a number of state electorates with distinct sub-identities based on demographic, socio-economic and geographic differences (urban, semi-rural and rural). One should not assume, however, that there is little point in establishing groups in these areas: the Greater Macarthur group was actively involved in the 2015 NSW state election campaign and focused its main efforts on one of the electoral seats.

A crisis or an event has frequently proved a stimulus to galvanising a community into action. It may unite communities regardless of size or demography, although what constitutes a crisis may be influenced by geography. In regional areas, this may be any type of job loss, but in metropolitan areas it may be the closure of public services such as hospitals, schools or even swimming pools, and the job losses may be incidental to the loss of the service. Elections have also spurred the LUCCs into action.

Although elections and crises can help to prompt people to act, a sole focus on such events jeopardises the longevity of the group. Part of the problem that the YR@W groups faced was that once electoral success had been achieved, some members felt there was little point in continuing to organise, while others were left burnt out and exhausted. Thus, according to a Unions NSW Officer (cited by Ellem, 2013: 277), 'When you have a common enemy, the commitment to fighting is … strong. Building a proactive agenda is much more difficult'. The mundane day-to-day focus on less exciting activities presents challenges for the LUCCs' longevity but is crucial for preparing for future critical events.

The LUCCs that seem to have progressed the most are driven by a core group of members. But finding key activists to lead a group and to work semi-autonomously from the peak body has been difficult. Often the people best suited to undertake these tasks are also active in the union at the workplace and thus face the challenge of balancing activism, work and family. LUCCs may, however, provide an avenue for people who are less comfortable with workplace militancy or activity. It was observed that, for some people, LUCCs

> … will actually appeal to them in terms of what makes them tick … they will really blossom and thrive in that environment. (Unions NSW Officer B)

For Unions NSW, resources are an issue. While the aim is to have the groups working semi-autonomously from the peak body, some may continue to depend on Unions NSW. As one LUCC member noted of the Unions NSW official designated to liaise with her LUCC,

> She's really the vitality, or the link, between us all and everybody likes her and knows that she's got her heart in the right place, … somebody like her keeps it going. (LUCC Member C)

LUCC members also need to hone their skills in areas such as social media, relationship building, effective conversations, campaigning, public speaking and producing campaign material. Providing this assistance requires Unions NSW to allocate resources and LUCC members their time and energies.

Conversations with activists more broadly suggest that the LUCCs have been viewed by some as a tool to elect the Labor Party, a perception that may have undermined the efforts of Union NSW and LUCC members to attract a broad range of activists. Similarly, the non-partisan nature of the LUCCs may deter involvement in LUCCs by those with strong ties to particular political parties. On the other hand, it is possible that some LUCC members may prefer to work with a non-aligned, non-partisan organisation especially when political parties are out of favour with their local communities.

LUCC members may experience conflicts with regard to their party political affiliations, particular issues or the stance of the LUCC on those issues. In one semi-rural group, for example, tensions have arisen between Labor and National Party supporters. Such tensions may be heightened during election campaigns, particularly in marginal seats, which is where the LUCCs tend to be located. As LUCCs develop through the stages, they become more self-directed, as Table 1 shows, but they are still expected to plan and implement activities as part of Unions NSW's state-wide strategies. As a result, in some circumstances such as elections, Unions NSW may develop strategies and tactics that are imposed on the local groups. Communication problems can arise, with local members not understanding why certain decisions have been made or disagreeing with the peak body's focus. In the 2015 NSW state election, for example, there were opposing views within one group as to which electorate the LUCC should focus its energy on. Individual members were also torn between supporting particular local candidates on election day and devoting time to the LUCC campaign. These issues are not unique to LUCCs and may reflect healthy debate. Alternatively, they may contribute to the groups becoming dysfunctional.

Support from unions is another important element of building capacity and resources. Unlike coalitions with community groups, collaborations like the LUCCs do not require unions, in Tattersall's (2005) words, to shift their 'frame of vision' (p. 109). Despite this common ground, LUCCs may still be viewed as 'competitors' to unions (LUCC Member B) and an unnecessary drain on their resources. As one LUCC member noted, 'union buy-in is not a one-way street', but rather has the potential to be a 'win–win':

> I think it's important for our survivability and the future that we get them [unions] on board and they actually promote the existence of our organisations to their membership. The other side to that is the payback for the unions is that if they start to actually engage with us they need to see us as a resource as well. (LUCC Member B)

Individual unions have approached the LUCCs in different ways, ranging from apathy to support. The latter involves encouraging members to attend LUCC meetings and become involved. More active support has emerged on an ad hoc basis on issues relevant to particular unions. In campaigning against the sell-off of publicly owned electricity distribution systems (or 'poles and wires'), the Electrical Trades Union, for example, worked closely with local groups in the lead up to the 2015 state election. Similarly, the United Services Union and Blacktown Community Unions (in a working-class western Sydney area) worked together to stop the closure of council-run child care centres in the area (Unions NSW Officer D). It has, however, been a struggle to get commitment from some affiliate unions which have competing demands, priorities and a focus on the immediate concerns of their members. Similarly, LUCCs are not the sole strategy pursued by Unions NSW, nor are they necessarily universally accepted as the most promising strategy. Resources devoted to the LUCCs may be better spent building strength in the workplace. As one critic of the LUCCs commented, what can unions offer the community when they are weak in the workplace (Former LUCC Member)? Moreover, a change in the leadership of Unions NSW or pressure from affiliates to change direction may threaten the longevity of the LUCCs that currently rely on the support of the peak body.

Conclusion

The suggestion that unions are unwilling, or unable, to change to meet today's challenges or that they are prepared only to campaign on traditional industrial issues is not borne out by the establishment of the LUCCs. The formation of the LUCCs demonstrates that unions are not paralysed by inertia or resistant to relatively new tactics and strategies. It is unclear, however, whether LUCCs will flourish and reach the stage where they can effectively build power beyond the factory wall or call centre car park.

Unions NSW aims to increase the number of LUCCs operating in the state. However, to fully meet the expectations of Unions NSW, current and future LUCCs need to progress through the stages of development to the point of maturity. In this respect, LUCCs face a number of obstacles. It is uncertain whether they will be successful in areas lacking a strong local identity. While some LUCCs appear to have a stable structure and a core group of members, it is also true that some may never get off the ground or may struggle to maintain momentum outside times of crisis or elections. Some unions may not support the LUCCs, and those that do face many competing demands with LUCCs not always registering highly on their list of priorities. Affiliated unions may also struggle to find members prepared to play a long-term role in LUCCs.

Some of the LUCCs' potential strengths may be difficult to measure. Do the LUCCs start conversations across communities and, if so, what impact do those conversations have? How do street stalls and presence at community events influence attitudes to unions? Do LUCCs merely preach to the converted, or do they have an impact on a broader audience? What advantages result from an increased awareness of struggles by local workers? Are the benefits too intangible to provide sufficient sustenance to ensure the commitment of resources and the on-going support of Unions NSW, its affiliates and members of LUCCs? Are LUCCs flexible enough to survive the challenges that regional Trades and Labor Councils have faced?

The YR@W groups demonstrated how effective this type of campaigning can be. The LUCCs build on the lessons learnt from this campaign, but the context in which they operate is different. It is the everyday, ordinary struggles against the erosion of 'jobs, rights and services' that point to the need for an effective response, but it is paradoxically the effort required to maintain momentum in the context of these ordinary struggles and obstacles that may prevent the realisation of that response and stifle the ability of the LUCCs to move beyond infancy.

Funding

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