

RESEARCH NOTE

Why do people join unions? A case study of the New Zealand Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union

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We conducted a survey of 2,000 members of the New Zealand Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union to determine why they joined the union and how they were recruited. We found that most joined because they had had a problem at work (33.5 percent) or because they believed in unions (23.6 percent). Most people were recruited via their delegate (38.1 percent) or made first contact themselves (22.8 percent). These results are somewhat comparable to studies of British union members, but with some important differences.

Introduction

The Employment Contracts Act 1991 introduced an entirely new industrial relations regime to New Zealand. It outlawed all forms of compulsory unionism and union preference and abolished the registration system which had provided unions with exclusive representation rights for almost a century. In the absence of such state support for union membership, the number of members dropped dramatically from more than 600,000 in May, 1991 to fewer than 330,000 in December, 1997 (Crawford, Harbridge, and Hince, 1998). If unions are to survive under the new regime, they must assume primary responsibility for actively recruiting potential members and persuading them to join. As a result, understanding why members join and how they are recruited have become critical to the recovery of unions in New Zealand.

Literature Review

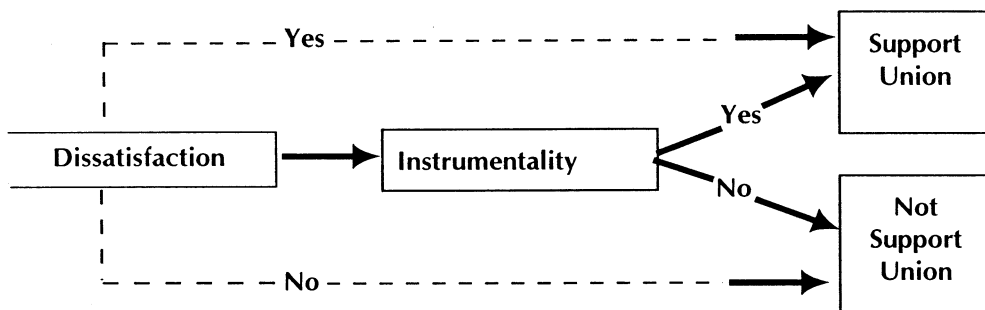
Much of the research on union recruitment focuses on three essential explanations for why people join unions. The first of these proposes that workers join unions to seek

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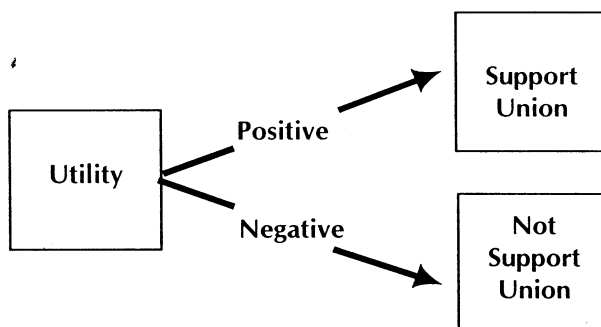
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Table 1: Models of the Decision to Support a Union

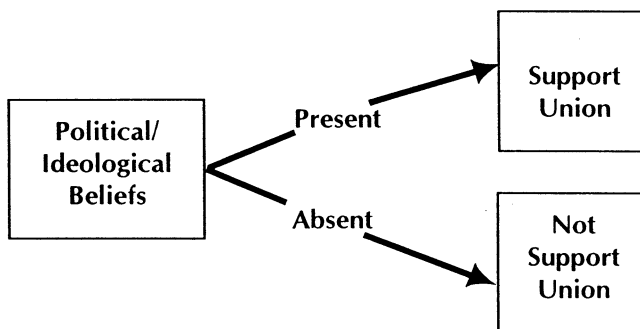
Model 1



Model 2



Model 3



(Source: Wheeler and McClenden, 1991: 51)

improvements in an unsatisfying employment situation. The second claims that workers are economically rational and so join unions solely because the benefits outweigh the costs. The third argues that the decision to join is based on political and ideological beliefs rather than on a rational economic calculation. These three explanations have been termed the instrumental, utilitarian, and ideological models (Wheeler and McClenden, 1990; see Table 1).

Most studies suggest that only a fifth of union members join because of political or ideological beliefs and, in particular, because of a belief in trade unions. Much of the evidence supports instrumental and utilitarian explanations for membership, although the two are rarely differentiated. However, some studies of the utilitarian reasons for joining distinguish between the collective and individual benefits of membership. Collective benefits are those that depend upon collective organisation and include mutual support and improved pay and conditions. Individual benefits include training and education, professional services, free legal advice, and financial services (Waddington and Whitson, 1997). Some scholars have argued that society has become more individualistic and consumerist and that workers now join unions mainly for the individual rather than the collective benefits (Phelps Brown, 1990). To adapt, unions are urged to develop customer-driven organising strategies, based on competitive reductions in dues and mass advertising campaigns engineered through head office (Cave, 1994). In the United States, unions have been encouraged to offer individual benefits in return for dues to associate members who neither need nor want unions to perform any representation functions (Jarley and Fiorito, 1990; Hecksher, 1988). Nevertheless, recent research suggests that workers continue to join unions mainly because of the collective rather than individual benefits they provide. In addition, most members are recruited after they have contacted the union themselves or been approached by a shop steward or delegate. In contrast, more modern recruitment techniques, involving advertising or publicity campaigns, have had little effect on members' decisions to join. These findings generally differ little across occupations, industries, genders, and age groups.

Deery and De Cieri (1991: 63) examined differences between unorganised and organised workers in terms of demographic, social, and attitudinal characteristics, using data from a 1987 Australian election study of 2,900 voters. Their results showed that demographic characteristics such as age, gender, education and marital status had virtually no effect on the probability of union membership, that industry and occupational characteristics contributed significantly to unionisation, and that union membership was more likely if the respondent held left-wing political viewpoints or if the respondent's spouse had previously joined a union (Deery and De Cieri, 1991: 70-71). In particular, Deery and De Cieri (1991: 62) emphasised that "workers who are ideologically predisposed towards the Labour movement may . . . join regardless of the instrumentality reasons for union membership . . . A sense of duty or a commitment to the principle of unionism may be the principal motivation." They also stressed that the union's approach to recruitment and its ability to supply and maintain services affect union membership opportunities substantially.

Kerr (1992) surveyed 1,249 organised and unorganised workers in the British Health Service and local government to determine why they had chosen to join or not join the National Union of Public Employees (NUPE). He found that union instrumentality in either negotiating pay and conditions or representing workers in disciplinary and grievance matters was a key factor in influencing the desire to join. In contrast, the union's role in providing financial or other services was the least frequently mentioned reason for joining. Moreover, organised and unorganised workers were little different in their attitudes to unions. Instead, failure to join reflected a lack of contact with union officials and organisers.

Peeetz (1997) looked at why people join unions, why they remain as members, and how perceptions of the union, the job and management affect union membership. He surveyed 942 employees across 35 Sydney workplaces, two thirds of whom were union members. Almost half the respondents explained their membership in terms of the protection, advice and representation that unions offer. Sympathy for unions was also a strong influence in decisions to join. Employees were more likely to be sympathetic in workplaces where they had observed the union protecting members, responding to members' wishes, co-operating with management, and resolving internal conflicts (Peeetz, 1991: 22-25).

Cregan, Johnston and Bartram (1998) also examined workers' reasons for joining or not joining unions in a sample of 3,000 people from the electoral rolls in Victoria, Australia. They found that 94 percent of members joined to protect their employment and employment rights; 25 percent joined for legal and moral support; 26 percent for wages and conditions negotiations; and 21 percent for solidarity. Only seven percent had always been a member of a trade union. Human resource management practices were unimportant in the decision to join and remain a member.

Waddington and Whitston (1997) conducted a study of why workers join unions and how unions recruit, collecting data from nearly 12,000 respondents in 12 unions. They discovered that members joined mainly for support if they had a problem at work (72.1 percent) and to obtain improved pay and conditions (36.4 percent). Fewer respondents joined because they either believed in trade unions (16.2 percent) or wanted free legal advice (15.1 percent). Men and women were little different in their reasons for joining, but more women than men indicated that they had joined for support (76.0 percent vs. 68.4 percent) and fewer indicated that they had joined to obtain improved pay and conditions (30.7 percent vs. 41.8 percent). Waddington and Whitston (1997) also found that there were two main methods of membership recruitment. Most employees made contact with the union themselves (30.9 percent) or were recruited by a shop steward (29.7 percent). However, men were more likely than women to be recruited through a shop steward (37.6 percent vs. 21.3 percent) and less likely to make contact themselves (26.6 percent vs. 35.5 percent).

Waddington and Whitston (1997: 537) concluded that collective reasons for joining a union remain more important than individual ones and that this varied little by occupation or industry. As a result, they claimed that union joining is less common in high growth industries and occupations because of insufficient recruitment efforts rather than any greater support for individualistic values or rejection of collectivist ones.

Our research has two main aims. The first is to determine why people join unions in New Zealand. The second is to determine how employees are recruited as union members. We compare our results to those of Waddington and Whitston's study to determine whether or not the models of the decision to support a union apply to New Zealand and apply, in particular, to New Zealand's largest union, the New Zealand Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (NZEPMU).

Methods

Sample

The sample was comprised of 2,000 of the 55,000 members of the New Zealand Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (NZEPMU). Union members are distributed across three regions: the region north of Taupo, the Wellington region, and the South Island region. Approximately 50 percent of members reside in the first and 25 percent in each of the latter two. We therefore randomly selected 1,000 members from the Auckland membership list, 500 from the Wellington list, and 500 from the South Island list.

Data Collection

Data were collected using a questionnaire based on Waddington and Whitston's (1997) survey. In order to simplify the data processing, we sought one response to each question rather than Waddington and Whitston's more complicated method of asking respondents to rank their responses to each question.

The questionnaire provides ten possible reasons for joining and nine possible methods of recruitment. Both questions included "Other" as an option, with space for a written explanation. We excluded two possible responses, "branch secretary" and "at a training course", from the recruitment question in Waddington and Whitston's (1997) questionnaire. We felt that these responses were inappropriate to the NZEPMU. We have also customised the questionnaire to reflect New Zealand terminology. For example, we use the New Zealand term delegate rather than the British term shop steward.

Additional questions were asked about the respondent's gender, industry of employment, and present occupation.

Of the 2,000 questionnaires mailed out, 456 were returned for a 22.8 percent response rate.

Results

334 (74 percent) of the respondents were male and 117 (24 percent) were female.

There were 10 categories of industries and/or sectors identified in the questionnaires and these corresponded with the main industry and sector groupings within the NZEPMU. The largest number of respondents, 96 (21.3 percent), were from the last category, "Other". The second largest category was "Mixed Manufacturing," with 56 respondents (12.4 percent), followed by "Postal Services" with 55 respondents (12.2 percent), "Primary Metals" with 10.9 percent, "Communications" with 9.53 percent and "Aviation" with 9.9 percent.

The questionnaire identified six core occupational groups plus a category for "Other". The largest number of respondents were "tradespersons", who totalled 137 of the respondents (30.18 percent), followed by "Other" at 98 respondents (21.59 percent). Fewer than 15 percent of the respondents were in each of the five other occupational groups, including: "process workers" (13 percent), "machine operators" (10.8 percent), "postal workers" (9.3 percent), "technicians" (8.2 percent) and "clerical" (7.1 percent).

Most of the respondents belonged to two age groups, those aged 41 to 50 years (30.2 percent) and those aged 31 and 40 years (29.52 percent). Fifty-two respondents (11.45 percent) were aged 26 to 30 years.

The questionnaire included 10 possible responses to the question "Why did you join the Union?" from which the respondents were asked to select their most important reason for joining. The biggest single reason for joining was "Support if I had a problem at work", with 129 respondents (33.5 percent). "Because I believe in trade unions" was the second most important reason with 91 respondents (23.6 percent), followed by "Industrial benefits, e.g. collective contract" with 55 respondents (14.3 percent), and "Improved pay and conditions" with 49 respondents (12.7 percent). Few people indicated any of the other reasons, particularly those relating to professional services such as legal advice and financial services. Twenty-four respondents indicated "Other" reasons for joining and in their written comments suggested that they had joined because membership had originally been compulsory under a closed shop provision.

Men and women joined the union for different reasons. Men joined primarily because they needed the "Support if I had a problem at work" (87 respondents or 30 percent), closely followed by "Because I believe in trade unions" (74 respondents or 25.5 percent). In contrast, almost half (44.09 percent) of the women joined for "Support if I had a problem at work" whereas a much smaller proportion joined "Because I believe in trade unions" (18.3 percent). The third most common reason for men joining the union was "Industrial benefits, e.g. collective contracts" (15.5 percent), followed by "Improved pay and conditions" (11.7 percent). The same two reasons ranked third and fourth for women but in reverse order - "Improved pay and conditions" (15.5 percent) and "Industrial benefits, e.g. collective contracts" (10.8 percent). Other reasons for joining were similar in relative importance for men and women, but each received less than 10 percent of responses.

Respondents were asked to indicate "How they joined the Union?" from a range of nine responses including "Other". The largest number of respondents, 168 (38.1 percent), were recruited by a shop steward or delegate. The second largest group, 96 respondents (21.8 percent), had "Made contact myself". The other reasons were of much less importance and included: "Recommended by management" (11.1 percent), "Other" (7.3 percent), "The organiser" (6.8 percent) "Direct approach from union office" (6.6 percent) and "Through a friend" (5.7 percent). Of the 32 respondents who indicated "Other", 21 stated that they had no choice but to join. A number of people who indicated "Other" nevertheless admitted that they had been recruited by the shop steward/delegate and were therefore classified as such.

Men and women were recruited in different ways. Men were more likely to indicate that they had been recruited "By the shop steward or delegate" (41.9 percent). One in five men "Made contact myself" (19.4 percent). Other methods each accounted for less than 10 percent of the members recruited.

In contrast, 28.5 percent of the women "Made contact myself" and only 27.3 percent were recruited via a "Shop steward or delegate". A similar proportion of women and men joined when "Recommended by Management" (12.5 percent vs. 10.5 percent), but a much greater proportion of women joined "Through a friend" (8.9 percent vs. 4.6 percent).

Responses differed little across occupations and industries and so these results are not compared.

Discussion

The results of our survey are generally consistent with the previous research. Most workers joined the NZEPMU because of the collective benefits they felt the union could provide. However, a quarter joined because they believed in unions.

Deery and De Cieri (1991) found that an ideological belief in unionism was a key motive for membership. Similarly, in our survey, a belief in unions was the second most important reason for joining and cited by 23.6 percent of respondents. Deery and De Cieri also found that the supply and maintenance of membership services provided by a delegate greatly affects recruitment. Similarly, our research shows that contact by the shop steward or delegate was the most important method of recruitment for 38.1 percent of the respondents.

Kerr (1992) found that the union role in determining pay and conditions and representation in discipline and grievance matters were key factors influencing the desire to join a trade union. Our findings are similar, although we found that the union's role in representation was more important than its role in determining pay and conditions. Kerr (1992) also found that financial services were the least frequently mentioned reason for joining. Correspondingly, not one of our respondents listed financial services as a reason for joining.

Peetz (1997) found that almost half the respondents joined the union for protection, advice and representation. Similarly, we found that a combined 48.1 percent of members had joined for these reasons.

Our findings also support some aspects of Cregan, Johnston, and Bartram's (1998) study. In particular, we found that people join as a result of workplace pressure: 8.8 percent of our respondents joined because most other people at work were already members. We also found that the employer's attitude to the union is an important reason for workers to join: 11.1 percent of our respondents joined because it was "recommended by management".

Waddington and Whitston (1997) looked at why people join unions and how they are recruited. Tables 2 and 3 compare their results with our results. Both surveys found that "Support if I had a problem at work" was the most common reason for people joining unions. However, the ranking and relative importance of the other reasons differ between the two surveys. "Because I believe in trade unions" was the second most common reason for joining in our survey, followed by "Industrial benefits" and "Improved pay and conditions". In Waddington and Whitston's (1997) study, "Improved pay and conditions" was the second most frequently cited, followed by "Because I believe in trade unions". "Industrial benefits" ranked only eighth in importance.

The three most common recruitment strategies were similar in both surveys. In our survey "Shop steward/delegate made contact" was the most common method of recruitment, followed by "Made contact myself" and "Recommended by Management". Waddington and Whitston found that the same three reasons were the most important but "Shop steward/delegate made contact" and "Made contact myself" were in reverse order.

**Table 2: Why do people join unions?
Waddington and Whitston vs. Tolich and Harcourt**

Reason for joining	Waddington and Whitston	Tolich and Harcourt
• Support if I had a problem at work	72.1	33.5
• Improved pay and conditions	36.4	12.7
• Because I believe in Trade Unions	16.2	23.6
• Most people at work are members	13.8	8.8
• Free legal advice	15.1	0.3
• Industrial benefits	4.4	14.3
• Training and education	5	0.1
• Financial services	3.5	0
• Professional services	6.2	0.5
• Other reasons	6.9	6.2

**Table 3: Methods of Union membership recruitment:
Waddington and Whitston vs. Tolich and Harcourt**

	Waddington and Whitston	Tolich and Harcourt
• Shop steward	29.7	38
• Made contact myself	30.9	21.8
• Through a friend	9.1	5.7
• Recommended by Management	8.2	11.1
• Recruitment leaflet	1.4	2.4
• Full-time officer/organiser	3.5	6.8
• Direct approach from union Head Office	0.5	6.6
• Magazine or journal	0.2	0.2
• Other	3.8	7.3

Conclusions

Most workers join unions mainly because of the benefits they can achieve through collective organisation. A significant minority join because of a strong belief in trade unionism. In contrast, relatively few join for the individual benefits.

Most workers are recruited after they have been approached by a shop steward or delegate or after they have approached the union themselves. Less personal, mass forms of promotion and contact are less effective at recruiting new members.

The main lesson of these findings is that unions cannot revive by transforming themselves into business organisations and treating their members like customers or clients. Collective and relational aspects of trade unionism remain very important to members and should therefore receive increased rather than decreased attention and emphasis in any recruitment strategy.

Recommendations for unions

1. That unions should maintain a constant profile in the workplace, principally through the shop steward or delegate who is the primary contact with new and potential members.
2. That the emphasis in shop steward and delegate education and training should be on recruiting and profiling of the union in the workplace.
3. That unions should develop a profile in local communities so that those who want to join, but have no access to shop stewards or delegates in the workplace, understand how to contact the union.
4. That unions should promote themselves as having an important, enduring, collective representation role in the workplace which is neither obsolete nor unnecessary in new industries or occupations.

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