

RESEARCH NOTE

The Political Ideologies of New Zealand Trade Union Officers: the Demise of the Far Left?

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Introduction

Although the topic has been under-researched, it is taken for granted by many that the political ideologies and affiliations of New Zealand full-time trade union officers [hereinafter referred to as officers] are steadfastly and strongly left wing. Particularly pronounced is the stereotype view long held in certain quarters that foreign-born officers are even more extreme in terms of their left-wing political ideologies than those born in New Zealand. The former are perceived, more often than not, as a bunch of communist-driven "pommie stirrers".¹ In the Waihi strike in 1913, for example, a business leader pointed to "aliens and agitators who have failed on the other side and who have come here to stir up strife".² More recently, the 1975 National Party manifesto referred to "unions that are run by people who import class prejudice and industrial anarchy".

One purpose of this paper, using data drawn from recent research³, is to present the self reported political ideologies of New Zealand officers classified on the basis of far left and left through to right and far right. Such a classification has two advantages: it is

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¹ Mark Olssen, "Those Foreign-Born Agitators: Birth Places and Attitudes of New Zealand's Trade Union Officials", Discussion Paper 8802, Research Centre for Industrial Relations and Labour Studies, University of Otago, 1988, p.14.

² Paul Harris, "Mythology and Society: The Examples from New Zealand Politics and Culture", *Political Science*, 27(1 & 2) (1975), p.35.

³ John M. Howells, "The Background and Work of New Zealand Trade Union Officers Evidence and Commentary", unpublished manuscript. Department of Economics University of Otago, 1999.

commonly used by officers and is meaningful to them; it is used in overseas research and so facilitates international comparisons. The paper also considers the relationship between political ideology and some of the biographical and background characteristics of officers. Hopefully, this will show how the political views of officers may vary according to gender, age, the type of union in which they are employed, the level of education and, of course, place of birth.

Research background

The data is taken from a comprehensive questionnaire survey of the background, the work and the attitudes of New Zealand officers completed in 1999. The survey was deliberately directed at officers who were involved in a strict industrial relations role, namely, recruiting union members handling members' problems, taking grievance cases, dealing with employers and being involved in bargaining at different levels. It excluded those whose responsibilities were largely administrative and, instead, concentrated on front-line staff regarded as the most influential in shaping the opinions and responses of ordinary union members. It was - and still remains - the only full survey of officers in New Zealand that was national and not narrowly regional in scope.⁴

Responses to nearly 70 questions provide a unique dataset for reviewing the attitudes and viewpoints of that group of union employees that attracts so much media attention and public opprobrium "largely because of its alleged power and influence".⁵

In 1996, when the first questionnaires were sent out, it was still impossible to be precise on the actual number of front-line officers in New Zealand. Legislative measures since 1987 had led to a high turnover and a permanent reduction in union staff due both to organisational and financial restructuring and the fact that some unions ceased to exist and others disappeared through amalgamation. Although the 1996 Trade Union Directory, published by the New Zealand Council of Trade Unions, was useful, it was less than reliable. Experienced senior officers did suggest to the researcher that the total of officers at which the survey was specifically aimed would certainly not have exceeded 220. As shown in Table 1, there were 143 responses to the questionnaires (of which 141 were usable) covering 27 private and public sector unions. This gave a

⁴ Grant P. Michelson, "An Examination of Full-time Trade Union Officials: Backgrounds Attitudes and Careers", MCom thesis. University of Otago, 1993, covered only officers in the South Island; Mark Olssen, "Union Officials in a Small Capitalist State: A Study in the Composition and Ideology of the New Zealand Trade Union Leadership Faction", PhD thesis. University of Otago, 1983, concentrated only on union secretaries.

⁵ Ron Callus, "Employment Characteristics of Full-time Trade Union Officials in New South Wales", *Journal of Industrial Relations*, 28(3): 410, (1986).

response rate of approximately 65 percent which compares more than favourably with identical studies in the United Kingdom and Australia.⁶ Given the sample size and an excellent response rate, answers to the single question asking individuals to categorise their political views (listed as far left, left, centre left, centre right, right and far right) provide the only evidence of the prevailing political ideologies of officers in New Zealand.

Table 1: Distribution of respondents by unions

Union (abbreviated)	Responses	Union (abbreviated)	Responses
Assoc. of University Staff	4	Manuf & Construction Workers Un.	1
Amalg. Workers Un.	5	NZ Engineering Un.	11
Combined Apparel Un.	1	NZ Meat Workers & Rel. Trades Un.	2
Assoc. of Staff in Tertiary Educ.	4	NZ Nurses Org.	11
Cantab. Hotel, Hosp. & Restaurant Un.	2	NZ Police Assoc.	2
Dairy Workers Un.	5	NZ Tramways Emp. Un.	1
NZ Furniture & Allied Ind. Un.	1	Professional Firefighters Un.	1
Finance Sector Un.	7	Post Primary Teachers Assoc.	7
Meat & Rel Trades Workers Un.	2	NZ Public Service Assoc.	20
National Distribution Un.	17	Rail & Maritime Transport Un.	2
Nl. Clothing & Allied Workers Un.	1	Service Workers Un.	11
NZ Building Trades Un.	1	United Food, Bev. & Gen. Workers Un.	5
NZ Educational Inst.	14	NZ Waterfront Workers Un.	3
		Wood Industries Un.	2
		Total	143

Political ideology: an overview

Taking the total of 141 respondents - ignoring individual background characteristics - the obvious conclusion to be drawn from the information included in Table 2 is that the

⁶ Edmund Heery and John Kelly, "A Cracking Job for a Woman: A Profile of Women Trade Union Officers", *Industrial Relations Journal*, 20(3) (1989); John Kelly and Edmund Heery, *Working for the Union: British Trade Union Officers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Les Cupper, "A Profile of White-collar Union Officials", in Bill Ford and David Plowman (eds), *Australian Trade Unions* (Sydney: Macmillan, 1983).

political allegiances of New Zealand officers are clearly to the left of the political spectrum. To put this into perspective, however, there are three points worth noting. First, the degree of support for the political far left from less than six percent of officers would seem to be remarkably lukewarm. In sharp contrast, and to highlight the meagre support for the far left, nearly 60 percent consider themselves to be left rather than far left. There are, in fact, more than ten times as many officers in the category left than there are in the category far left. Secondly, close to one-third of the 141 officers consider themselves as politically centre left. This means that there are almost six times as many officers who regard themselves as middle-of-the-road and centrist in their political ideology than those who are radical and far left. Thirdly, left wing sympathies may dominate but do not entirely monopolise the political loyalties of front-line officers. Indeed, just over two percent of them report their political views to be centre right or even right.

Table 2: Political ideologies by gender, age and the type of union

Political ideologies												
Background Characteristics	Far left		Left		Centre left		Centre right		Right		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Female	1	2.0	36	73.5	12	24.5	-	-	-	-	49	100.0
Male	7	7.6	48	52.2	34	37.0	2	2.2	1	1.1	92	100.0
Age (years):												
Under 30	1	12.5	3	37.5	3	37.5	1	12.5	-	-	8	100.0
30-39	1	3.1	24	75.0	6	18.8	1	3.1	-	-	32	100.0
40-49	6	9.4	37	57.8	20	31.3	-	-	1	1.6	64	100.0
50-59	-	-	18	54.5	15	45.5	-	-	-	-	33	100.0
60 or over	-	-	2	50.0	2	50.0	-	-	-	-	4	100.0
Manual	4	5.4	47	63.5	23	31.1	-	-	-	-	74	100.0
Non-manual	4	6.0	37	55.2	23	34.3	2	3.0	1	1.5	67	100.0
Total	8	5.7	84	59.6	46	32.6	2	1.4	1	0.7	141	100.0

Note: The row totals for each set of background characteristics are identical and, therefore, only one row of totals has been included. There were no responses in the far right category and this has been excluded

Given that this is the only country-wide study of New Zealand officers, its uniqueness is a handicap. Unlike a number of overseas studies, particularly in the United Kingdom, it has no other point of reference and no other source of comparison. It is impossible, for

example, to show how the views of officers have altered and attitudes have been modified over time. Unfortunately, the questionnaire survey is period-specific and offers only benchmark information relevant to the time that the research was undertaken. With this reservation in mind, but given the obvious plurality in ideology revealed in Table 2, it seems unlikely that earlier criticisms of union leaders as communist agitators hell bent on conflict, strife and industrial anarchy still apply to full-time union employees in the late-1990s. As a measure of the present low level of support inside New Zealand unions for the far left, it should be pointed out that the far left attracts only a handful more officers than the centre right and right.

Political ideology by biographical and background characteristics

Although support from officers for the broad left in New Zealand politics is unequivocal, actual differences in the level of support across specific categories of far left, left and centre left definitely show this support to be heterogeneous rather than homogeneous. To try to explain this, it would be useful to view reported political ideologies in conjunction with some of the biographical and background characteristics of the sample of officers. The characteristics considered most likely to influence or determine political attitudes – gender, age, the type of union in which officers are employed and completed level of education – are included in Tables 2 and 3. Others (for example, years as a union member and years worked for the union) are excluded because it was difficult to disentangle the precise effect of these additional characteristics from the more fundamental determinants. Given the problem of separating the real impact of, say, years as a union member on political ideology from age, the decision was made to concentrate on the biographical and background characteristics assumed to be the most important.

Table 3: Political ideologies by completed level of education

Political ideologies												
Education completed at:	Far Left		Left		Centre left		Centre right		Right		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
High School	3	4.1	43	58.1	26	35.1	1	1.4	1	1.4	74	100.0
Polytechnic or teachers college	-	-	15	78.9	4	21.1	-	-	-	-	19	100.0
University	5	10.4	26	54.2	16	33.3	1	2.1	-	-	48	100.0
Total	8	5.7	84	59.6	46	32.6	2	1.4	1	0.7	141	100.0

Gender

The political left, taken here as the far left and left, attracts much more support from females than males. Although there are 7.6 percent of males compared with only two percent of females in the far left category, the combination of the two categories covers 75.5 percent of female officers but just under 60 percent of male officers. Again, and perhaps even more surprising, Table 2 shows that close to 40 percent of males but only 24.5 percent of females report their political allegiances to be centre left, centre right or right. By the end of the 1990s, female officers have emerged as a major component of that support for the political left that has characterised the growth and development of trade unions in New Zealand. To underline this solid pro-left stance by females, it is worth noting that it is accompanied by a significant increase in the number of females in fulltime union employment. That they now constitute over one-third of the total of front-line staff signals an important change over the last two decades. In the 1970s, it was obvious that females were blatantly under-represented in leadership positions inside unions. At that time, the prevailing mood (captured by a male secretary) seemed to be that "we may be wrong, chauvinistic, old fashioned, you name it, we are probably it, but we feel all the decisions must be made by men".⁷ Although not unique to New Zealand, females were "assigned the status of a minority".⁸ This has changed and with it the impact of gender on political ideology sees three times as many male officers who are centrist or right than their female counterparts.

Age

There is no obvious and consistent relationship between political ideology and the age of officers. Nevertheless, the level of political support associated with each of the age cohorts in Table 2 does show that the age factor and the political views of officers are not entirely unrelated. One conclusion to be drawn from the data is that much the strongest support for the political left (again taken as the far left and left) comes from that group of officers whose ages range from 30 to 49 years. Nearly 71 percent of them are to the left of the political spectrum and numerically they account for seven of the eight respondents who consider themselves to be far left in their political affiliation. Despite this level of left-wing support, the fact remains that in this particular age group there is a hard core of officers who are centre left and included also are two of the three in the total sample who regard themselves as centre right or right. In the case of officers who are 50 years of age or older, there is much less diversity in political ideology: there are

⁷ A.J. Geare, J.J. Herd and J.M. Howells, *Women in Trade Unions* (Victoria University of Wellington: Industrial Relations Research Monograph no.6, 1979), p.16.

⁸ Alice Cook quoted in Geare, Herd and Howells, *Women in Trade Unions*, p.15

20 who categorise themselves as left and the other 17 as centre left. In fact, this older group has a significantly larger percentage of officers in the centre left category than any other age cohort.

Additional data from questionnaire responses reveals that 28 of the sample of 143 officers are union secretaries and of these 24 are 40 years of age or older. More pertinently, 13 are 50 years or older and two are over 60 years.⁹ This is not entirely unexpected. The normal rate of turnover for those who work as organisers or field officers, especially in recent years, means that there will always be a crop of new, young entrants to some of these jobs. Secretaries, on the other hand, are likely to have a lower turnover rate and the position itself normally requires a combination of experience and a record of union activism which comes with age and seniority. On this point, the popular "socialization hypothesis" suggests that union officers become more conservative in their outlook over time and that seniority inside the union has a greater influence on political ideology than actual age.¹⁰ This might help to explain to some extent why the level of support for the left in politics is stronger from officers under 50 years than their colleagues who are 50 years or older. It is likely that this additional data goes some way to explaining why the oldest group of officers has a larger percentage who are conservatively centre left than any other age group.¹¹

The type of union in which they are employed

The 27 unions in the survey capture important differences in membership size, institutional longevity, militancy, industrial and occupational spread and private and public sector coverage. To extend the basis for comparing the views of officers and to widen the scope for crossclassification, these unions were divided into two groups, namely, manual and non-manual. This was not an easy task. The spate of amalgamations since the mid-1980s often combined workers with different job contours which blurred the essential basis for polarising the two types of unions. After advice from experienced officials, it was possible to determine a reasonably coherent grouping

⁹ Howells, "The Background and Work of New Zealand Trade Union Officers", pp.40-41.

¹⁰ Kelly and Heery, *Working for the Union*, p.139.

¹¹ The Council of Trade Unions was severely criticised in some quarters for failing to marshal an effective opposition to the Employment Contracts Act in 1991. This was an Act that many considered was set to change the nature of trade unionism and the special character of labour-management relations in New Zealand and yet the Council's response was perceived to be timid. It is tempting, but possibly unfair, to suggest that this response reflected a certain conservatism on the part of senior national officials. See John M. Howells, "Industrial Relations Transformation: New Zealand's Response to Economic Crisis" Economics Discussion Paper No. 9802, University of Otago, 1998, pp.16-18.

of manual and non-manual unions. As one might expect, Table 2 shows that the leftwing orientation of officers in manual unions is marginally more marked than those in non-manual unions. About 69 percent of manual union staff compared with 61.2 percent in non-manual unions report themselves to be far left or left. With slightly fewer officers in non-manual unions, there are more of them in the categories of centre left, centre right and right than is the case for manual unions. Although left-wing support is somewhat stronger from staff in manual unions, it is obvious that differences between the two sets of officers are not particularly pronounced. This evidence might be taken to confirm that the conventional view of officers in non-manual unions as less radical and much more politically moderate and conservative than their counterparts in manual unions no longer holds.

Level of education

The evidence in Table 3 that over one-third of officers have a university background, and close to 48 percent completed their education at the tertiary level, does suggest a major change in the attitudes of the various parties towards union employment. There has been a definite shift away from the customary rule held by many unions in most countries that "a proven record of lay activism is a requirement for appointment to an officer post".¹² In fact, not only is there a willingness by those who are well qualified and young to contemplate union work as a career but also a willingness by unions to employ them.¹³ Perhaps New Zealand unions have developed the same degree of pragmatism as Australian unions. In that country, "a union official who is successful in achieving what the members want will be forgiven almost anything, including a tertiary education".¹⁴ One possible effect of an increase in tertiary-level recruitment on political ideology, from British experience, is that highly educated officers are "much more likely to describe their politics as left-wing, rather than centre-left or centre-right".¹⁵

The results do show that the British experience is repeated in New Zealand: of the eight officers whose political attachment is to the far left, five have a university background. Furthermore, nearly 69 percent of officers with some form of tertiary training consider themselves to be far left or left and only 29.8 percent to be centre left. This is different

¹² Kelly and Heery, *Working for the Union*, p.61.

¹³ N.F. Dufty, "The Characteristics and Attitudes of Full-Time Union Officials in Western Australia", *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 17(2), 1979; Cupper, "A Profile of White-collar Union Officials"; Wilfred Brown and Margaret Lawson, "The Training of Trade Union Officers", *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 11(3), 1973.

¹⁴ Dufty, "The Characteristics and Attitudes of Full-Time Union Officials", p.174.

¹⁵ Kelly and Heery, *Working for the Union*, p.58.

from the reported political affiliations of officers who completed their education at high school: 62.2 percent are far left or left and just over 35 percent are centre left. This latter group, also, has two of the three officers reported to be centre right or right. Nevertheless, the extent to which the differences in political ideology in Table 3 solely reflect differences in levels of education is a moot point. Wider evidence shows that 60 percent of female officers, compared with 42 percent of males, completed their education at the tertiary level. It is also the case that over one-half of the total sample did not progress beyond high school and 73 percent of them are males and, coincidentally, 73 percent of these are 40 years or older.¹⁶ The political ideology of those with tertiary education, therefore, may be determined to some extent by the robust political left stance of females. The ideology of officers whose education did not progress beyond high school may be dominated in part by the conservatism of older males, particularly those in senior positions.

Place of birth

There are 21 officers who were born overseas of whom 16 are males. There are 19 who came from the United Kingdom and two from Australia or the Pacific Islands. Not one has been in New Zealand for less than 10 years; 18 have been resident in New Zealand for more than 20 years and 11 for more than 30 years. In most respects, their background characteristics are fairly similar to officers born in New Zealand.¹⁷ In terms of their political ideologies, in Table 4, officers born overseas fit neatly into two categories: two-thirds are left and one-third are centre left. In percentage terms, their level of support for the left is marginally stronger than New Zealand-born officers. However, given the long-standing assumption of a causal relationship between born overseas and radical extremism, it is worth noting that not one from this group is reported to be in the category of far left. A critical element in the stereotype of overseas-born officials has been that they hold very different political beliefs compared with officials born in New Zealand and, by implication, that they "harbour ideologies of "class warfare". ... they are more left wing.¹⁸ There is nothing from the data in Table 4 to suggest that this view is still justified. Far from being a dominant radical force in union politics, overseas-born officers are not represented at all on the extreme left of the political spectrum.

¹⁶ Howells, "The Background and Work of New Zealand Trade Union Officers", pp.8-11

¹⁷ Howells, The Background and Work of New Zealand Trade Union Officers' pp.15-16

¹⁸ Olssen, "Those Foreign-Born Agitators" p.14.

Table 4: Political ideologies by place of birth

Political ideologies												
Place of birth	Far left		Left		Centre left		Centre right		Right		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
New Zealand	8	6.7	70	58.3	39	32.5	2	1.7	1	0.8	120	100.0
Overseas	-	-	14	66.7	7	33.3	-	-	-	-	21	100.0
Total	8	5.7	84	59.6	46	32.6	2	1.4	1	0.7	101	100.0

Conclusion

When it was decided to ask officers to conceptualise their own political views in left-right terms, it was assumed that the vast majority would consider themselves to be far left or left. This is not the case. The data shows nearly six times as many officers to be centre left than far left and the combined grouping of left and centre left includes over 92 percent of New Zealand officers. Clearly, the left and centre left dominate and the far left is almost an irrelevancy. As one might expect (except for three males all in non-manual unions), any allegiance to the right of the political spectrum is virtually non-existent. Even though the evidence shows the political ideologies of New Zealand officers to be much more centrist than extreme, the stereotype view of foreign-born officers as more radical in their views than those born in New Zealand might still have been true. The evidence refutes this. Indeed, it definitely confirms Australian research findings which stress that comparisons of United Kingdom-born officials with those born in Australia "revealed nothing to confirm the 'Pommy stirrer' syndrome".¹⁹ By the end of the 1990s, not a single foreign-born officer has any obvious commitment or loyalty to the political far left.

There is evidence that certain biographical and background characteristics do exert some influence on political ideology. Older officers with union experience and the concomitant of seniority emerge as decidedly more conservative than their younger colleagues. Officers who are 50 years or older represent 26 percent of the total sample but they make up 37 percent of those who consider themselves to be centre left; they are the only age group not represented in the category of far left. In sharp contrast, nearly 65 percent of officers with university training are either to the political left or far left. There are eight respondents in the category of far left and five of these completed their education at a university. Similarly, there is a larger percentage of females than

¹⁹ Dufty, "The Characteristics and Attitudes of Full-time Union Officials", p.185.

males who support the far left or left. Although the strict relationship between various political ideologies and many of the background characteristics is often ambiguous, the traditional commitment of New Zealand unions to the left wing survives strongly in the case of the younger cadre of officers, females and the "new breed" of union staff with university training. Other background characteristics at least help to show that a deep and continuing commitment to the more extreme far left can no longer be taken for granted. Although support for the left flourishes, support for the far left seems comatosed.