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Review of: Unions in a contrary world - the future of the Australian trade union movement, by David Peetz

**Book Review (Accepted version)
(Unrefereed)**

Original citation:

Gollan, Paul J. (2004) Unions in a contrary world: The future of the Australian trade union movement by David Peetz [Book Review]. [Australian studies](#), 19.

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Unions in a Contrary World: The Future of the Australian Trade Union Movement

By David Peetz (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999), 243 pages,
Paperback £15.95 (US\$25.95) ISBN 0 521 63950 6/Hardback £45 (US\$64.95) ISBN
0 521 63055 X.

Can we resuscitate trade unionism? Or are unions going the way of the dinosaur - big, powerful and threatening but now extinct. David Peetz addresses these issues through the microscope of rigorous analysis and comprehensive review of qualitative and quantitative research. This is a thoroughly well-written and informed book about the past, present and future of trade unionism in Australia and presents a significant contribution of the role of trade unions and the context in which they operate. This book is timely given the challenges that trade unions in Australia and elsewhere due to lower membership levels, reduced collective bargaining coverage, increase levels of part-time employment, legislative reforms encouraging direct employee-employer contractual relations, management strategies to suppress and avoid workplace trade unionism and more sophisticated human resource approaches emphasising more direct forms of employee participation and involvement. Moreover, there have also been increasing calls for new alternative forms of employee representation to fill the representation gap developing in many workplaces in Australia (Gollan, Markey and Ross, 2002). This new agenda has been highlighted by increasing demands from a more educated workforce for increase employee voice at the workplace.

The structure of the book is as follows. After presenting a comprehensive review of the patterns and issues involved in union decline Peetz outlines current survey data to explore employee attitudes towards trade unions, in particular why people join and why they leave unions. In the following chapter he looks at a term call 'union sympathy' which defines as 'ideological views about unions held by employees, and 'union instrumentality' to describe the extent to which employees consider they will benefit or have benefited from union membership' (p.56).

The following chapters examine the rationale for the decline of union membership. In the face of lower levels of union membership and presence, Peetz concludes that three main factors can be identified that are responsible for the halving of union membership from 51 per cent in 1976 to its current level of only 25 per cent. These factors he identifies as: the structural change in the labour market as the most influential in the 1980s (casualisation, decline of the public sector, decline in workplace size, growth in the 'new' economy); in the 1990s he sees the 'institutional break' associated with employer and government approaches and negative attitudes to the close shop and compulsory membership and reduced role for unions in society as the most important factor; and unions lack of effective response to these challenges at the workplace that have contributed to their downfall.

Given these economic, institutional and social changes, one factor which could have been explored more fully is the future role of trade unions and if union identity will radically change from the past. Along these lines, perhaps a issue that could have been further explored is the issue of workplace union-employer partnership (Gollan and Patmore, 2003). Given developments in the UK and the rest of Europe, partnership is

based on a series of general principles which emphasise joint commitment to the success of the enterprise and building trust and mutual recognition of the legitimate role of employer and employee representatives. As such partnership is said to replace an environment of adversarial bargaining and reactive conflict for consultation and co-operation. This based on models developed in Germany and Scandinavian countries where the partnerships can cohabit with conflictual models of industrial relations. It is argued that partnership does not erode potential conflict which may exist between employers and employees over wages and conditions mediated through collective bargaining. Rather, partnership may offer a new direction and place for unions in new participation arrangements by engaging in new cooperative work arrangements.

Another issue not really discussed in the book is the role of human resource management and its influence on trade union behaviour and attitudes towards unions. In particular, Peetz seems to see the HRM agenda as a solely an anti-union approach. While some human resource management approaches have some sympathy with this view, many such approaches may in fact be inclusive, presenting opportunities for trade unions rather than a purely seen as a negative.

At times the book also seems overly loaded with an array of statistical output and dense conceptual frameworks. For example, the diagram titled 'the union membership in a change-response framework' (figure 1.4, p.18) presents at first, a complex and confusing picture of trade unions at the workplace. While latter reading clarifies and focuses this framework perhaps a clearer introduction to the issues could have been made at the start. This maybe required for a PhD thesis with a specialist readership but not as useful for a general audience wishing to know more about the context of trade union behaviour.

Notwithstanding these minor issues, this book will be essential reading for those interested in industrial relations in general and the issue of employee representation in particular. Those students studying employment relations on undergraduate and postgraduate degree courses and trade union officers, employment relations managers and those interested in labour law will also find this book very informative and worthwhile.

Overall this book is thoroughly research and makes a significant contribution to the current debates of the need and role of trade unions and importance of employee voice at the workplace.

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