Propensity to Join and Maintain Membership of Unions amongst Casual School Teachers in NSW
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PROPENSITY TO JOIN AND MAINTAIN MEMBERSHIP OF UNIONS AMONGST CASUAL SCHOOL TEACHERS IN NSW

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Union membership in Australia has been in decline since the late 1970s. The ABS reports that in 2006, union density across all employees had dropped to 20.3 per cent, down from 31.1 per cent in 1996. Amongst casual employees union density is even lower, with only 7.4 per cent of casual employees reporting trade union membership (ABS 2006). In this environment, industries where union density continues to be high, even amongst casual employees, are rare and deserve closer examination. School education in New South Wales (NSW) is an industry sub-sector where union density remains relatively high amongst casual workers. This paper examines that sub-sector by providing a qualitative investigation of reasons given by a small group of casual teachers for joining the union and maintaining union membership. The experiences of these casual teachers may provide insight into why union membership and density remains strong amongst casual workers in this industry. The paper begins with an overview of the literature on the declining density of union membership in Australia today and the reasons given by individuals for union membership decisions. It examines available statistical data and estimates union density amongst casual school teachers in NSW before examining the qualitative experiences of a small group of casual teachers in the NSW education system.

REASONS FOR DECLINING UNION MEMBERSHIP AND DENSITY IN AUSTRALIA

Several factors have been identified as contributing to the decline in union membership and union density in Australia since the 1970s. Griffin and Svensen (1996) suggest that there are four major factors:

- structural shifts in the economy and increased privatisation, which have led to occupational and intersectoral shifts in employment, and therefore union membership
- macroeconomic factors such as changing unemployment rates, and the impact of wages and prices on workers’ decisions on whether to join a union
- institutional factors such as the role of the state, employer practices and union strategy
- individual factors such as the impact of personal characteristics on choice and decision-making.

They provide a detailed critique of many of these factors and suggest that ‘no single explanation stands out as a dominant one for the decline in the fortunes of Australian unionism. Structural, economic, political, organisational and attitudinal factors have all played a role’ (Griffin & Svensen 1996: 534). Since Griffin and Svensen put this position in 1996, there has been a significant shift in macroeconomic conditions, with a drop in unemployment and increases in wages and prices. Despite these changes there has not been any noticeable change in the rate of decline in union membership and density over this period. This highlights the complexity of identifying causal links between structural and macroeconomic factors and union density.

Similarly, Peetz suggests that declining union membership is the result of complex interactions between the economic, technological and labour markets; legal, political, social and cultural environments; the actions of employers, unions and government; microeconomic factors such as...
management/employee relations; and employees’ instrumental incentives to unionise; as well as union apathy or sympathy and individual propensity for joining unions (1998: 18).

The impact of structural, macroeconomic and institutional factors on union membership of school education workers in New South Wales (NSW) is beyond the scope of this paper. Rather the paper will focus on individual propensity for joining unions in Australia and will draw on the experiences of a small group of casual school teachers in the NSW education system. The paper will examine their reasons for joining the union and maintaining their memberships. The paper draws on a field study conducted by the author between January and December 2003 as a major component of PhD studies. The field study explored the experiences of casual school teachers in the New South Wales public education system.

REASONS FOR JOINING UNIONS AND MAINTAINING UNION MEMBERSHIP

The reasons which inform individuals’ decisions whether to join a union or to maintain union membership are highly complex. However, two studies (Bearfield: 2003; Peetz: 1998) have surveyed workers and examined the reasons given for making these decisions. This research has revealed a number of common themes in workers’ decisions. The following discussion is not an exhaustive examination of workers’ propensity to join a union but highlights a number of key issues.

Reasons for joining a union

In this era of post-compulsory unionism, Peetz identified the most common reason given for joining a union was insurance or the protection that a union provides for workers’ rights. This finding is supported by Bearfield’s study, which found that more than a quarter (26 per cent) of surveyed union members identified security and protection of rights as a reason for joining. Bearfield found a further 12 per cent of union respondents had joined for legal advice or representation and a further 9 per cent joined because unions ensure fair treatment of employees. Overall the protection or insurance rationale represented over 40 percent of all reasons given for joining a union in the survey.

A second reason for joining identified in these studies was union reach or compulsion, where employees are encouraged or expected to join a union or there is peer pressure within the workplace to join. Peetz found that 38 per cent of union members identified this as a reason for joining, while Bearfield found that 24 per cent of responses included this reason.

A third reason workers gave for joining unions was ideology or a belief in unions. Peetz found that 8 per cent of union members surveyed gave this reason. Bearfield found 13 per cent of union members identified this as a reason for joining.

A further reason identified by both researchers was the improvement in pay and conditions that unions can achieve. Peetz refers to this as union efficacy and suggests that perceptions of a union as powerful will increase the propensity of workers to join unions. Peetz found that 12 per cent of respondents identified this as a reason to join while Bearfield found 11 per cent of respondents had joined for this reason.

Reasons for not joining a union

The studies also examined the reasons for not joining a union given by workers who were not union members. The list of reasons given bears a converse relation to the reasons for joining a union. In both the studies undertaken by Peetz and Bearfield the major reason for not joining a union was union ineffectiveness or lack of efficacy. Peetz found that 29 per cent of non-union members felt that there was no advantage to joining a union; similarly Bearfield found that 28 per cent of responses suggested that there was no need or it was not worth joining a union.

Peetz also identified that a lack of union reach can be a major reason for workers not joining a union. He suggested that responses such as
‘haven’t been asked’, ‘haven’t got around to it’, ‘this is not a union company/job’ are indicative of this reason and identified that 16 to 31 per cent of employees gave these reasons. Bearfield found a high proportion of non-union members identified these types of reasons, such as ‘don’t know/no reason’ (23 per cent), ‘no union available’ (20 per cent), and ‘never been asked/haven’t got round to it’ (13 per cent). This reason could also be characterised as a level of union apathy, where employees do not have any driving reason not to join, but have not actively sought out union membership.

Ideology also plays a role in the reasons why workers do not join unions. Peetz found that 11 per cent of non-union members do not believe in unions, which is comparable to Bearfield’s results of 11 per cent. Bearfield also found that 5 per cent of non-union members actively stated that they had become disillusioned with unions. This reason could also be characterised as union aversion.

A further reason identified in the studies was employer opposition to union membership. Peetz argued that this is an aspect of the lack of union reach. However, there are two forces at work here, the lack of union presence and overt opposition to union membership by the employer. Overall the proportion of workers citing this as a reason is low, one per cent in the Peetz survey and 2 per cent in the Bearfield survey.

Reasons for leaving a union

Peetz identified that the key reason given by employees for leaving a union was disillusionment with unions. That is, employees who had left a union expressed dissatisfaction with union efficacy or with the actions of unions. Peetz found that 27 per cent of workers who had left a union gave reasons such as ‘they don’t act in my interests’ or ‘leaders are self-interested’. Peetz also found that a high proportion of workers who had left a union had done so as a result of changing jobs, either moving into a management position within the same organisation or changing employer. This suggests that a lack of union reach is also a major reason for leaving a union.

Bearfield did not distinguish between union non-members who had left a union and those who had never been in a union, so a direct comparison is not possible.

DECLINING UNION MEMBERSHIP AND DENSITY

Union membership in Australia has been in decline since the late 1970s. In 1976, union density was reported as 51 per cent in ABS survey data (Griffin, 2002, 158). This dropped to 45.6 per cent in 1986 and has been in steady decline since then, as shown in Table 1 below. By 2006, union density had fallen to 20.3 per cent across all employee categories.

Casual employees, starting from a lower base of 21.0 per cent union density in 1986, have had a similarly steep decline in union membership, reaching a density of only 7.4 per cent in 2006. Over a roughly similar period (1988–2006), casual employment has increased rapidly from 1.153 million to 2.002 million, representing a 73 per cent increase (ABS 1999: 2008). That is, the number of casual employees who are union members has fallen by 14 per cent, while the number of casual employees in the workforce has grown by at least 73 per cent, resulting in a decline in union density from one in five to less than one in ten.

Traditionally, union membership and density has been lower for women than men (Curtin 1999; Pocock 1997). In 1990, union density for men was 45.0 per cent, while for women it was 34.6 per cent. However, the rate of decline in union density has been lower for women than for men. Between 1990 and 2006 there was a 40 per cent decline in union membership amongst men, and a 19 per cent decline in union membership for women. As a result, union density for men and women was broadly comparable by 2006, with levels of 21.3 per cent for men and 19.3 per cent for women (ABS 2007b).
Table 1: Employment and Union Density – ‘Permanent’ and ‘Casual’ Employees, 1986–2006

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>‘Permanent’ employees</th>
<th>‘Casual’ employees</th>
<th>All employees</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Union members (‘000)</td>
<td>Union density (%)</td>
<td>Union members (‘000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1986</td>
<td>2388.4</td>
<td>50.8</td>
<td>205.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td>2308.4</td>
<td>46.6</td>
<td>227.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>2420.5</td>
<td>45.7</td>
<td>239.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>2265.1</td>
<td>46.0</td>
<td>243.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>2056.2</td>
<td>41.3</td>
<td>227.2</td>
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<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>1953.5</td>
<td>37.4</td>
<td>240.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>1811.5</td>
<td>34.2</td>
<td>226.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>1715.9</td>
<td>30.6</td>
<td>185.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>1646.3</td>
<td>28.5</td>
<td>187.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>1673.9</td>
<td>28.5</td>
<td>192.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>1652.3</td>
<td>28.2</td>
<td>189.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>1724.4</td>
<td>27.6</td>
<td>187.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>1610.5</td>
<td>25.1</td>
<td>175.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

‘Permanent’ employees were those entitled to annual leave or sick leave in their main job; ‘casual’ employees were ‘employees who were not entitled to either annual leave or sick leave in their main job’. From August 2000, the terms ‘permanent’ and ‘casual’ were replaced in ABS publications with new terms: ‘with leave entitlements’ and ‘without leave entitlements’ respectively (see ABS, Employee Earnings, Benefits and Trade Union Membership, August 2000, Cat. No. 6310.0: 48).


Younger people (aged under than 30) are only half as likely (13 per cent) as older people (aged 45–59) to be union members (28 per cent) (ABS 2007b). There is also evidence that the size of a workplace has a significant impact on union membership, and that workers from smaller workplaces are much less likely to be union members (Campbell 1996).

1. No observations in survey.
Table 3: Union Density — Selected Occupations, August 2006

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation (ASCO sub-major group)</th>
<th>Highest levels of union density (%)</th>
<th>Occupation (ASCO sub-major group)</th>
<th>Lowest levels of union density (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Health and welfare associate professionals</td>
<td>51.8</td>
<td>Farmers</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education professionals</td>
<td>48.6</td>
<td>Secretaries and personal assistants</td>
<td>7.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other associate professionals</td>
<td>43.7</td>
<td>Business admin professionals</td>
<td>8.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intermediate plant operators</td>
<td>43.0</td>
<td>Sales and service managers</td>
<td>8.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health and welfare professionals</td>
<td>37.9</td>
<td>Generalist managers</td>
<td>9.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electrical tradespersons</td>
<td>36.8</td>
<td>Intermediate sales workers</td>
<td>10.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other intermediate plant and transport operators</td>
<td>34.5</td>
<td>Business admin associate professionals</td>
<td>10.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intermediate machine operators</td>
<td>34.1</td>
<td>Science and engineering professionals</td>
<td>11.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factory labourers</td>
<td>31.9</td>
<td>Specialist managers</td>
<td>13.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elementary clerks</td>
<td>30.4</td>
<td>Other advanced clerical and service workers</td>
<td>14.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


This data gives us the following snapshot of union density in 2006. Unionisation is:

- equally likely amongst men and women
- more likely amongst permanent full-time workers than casual or part-time workers
- more likely for people aged over 45 than under 30
- more likely in larger workplaces than in smaller workplaces
- more likely in the public sector, particularly in government administration, education, health, electricity and gas supply or emergency services
- within the private sector, more likely to be found in mining and transport services.
- more likely amongst health and education professionals or paraprofessionals, or electrical trades and transport workers.
- least likely amongst farmers, secretaries or personal assistants, and in industries such as commercial fishing, private households, services to finance and services to mining.

Many of these characteristics reinforce the lack of union membership amongst casual employees. For example, 51 per cent of casuals are aged under 30; a high proportion (40 per cent) work in the retail and hospitality industries which are not highly unionised industries, and are also industries where workplace size is frequently small; and a high proportion of casual employees are employed as intermediate and elementary sales and service workers, and as labourers and production workers, which are not highly unionised occupational groups (ABS 2007a).

For casual school teachers, these characteristics are reversed. Census data shows that the median age for those working in the education sector is 43 (ABS 2003). The NSW Department of Education and Training identifies that at the secondary school level, 57 per cent of teachers are aged over 45 years (NSW DET 2007a). The NSW Department of Education and Training is also one of the largest single employers in Australia, with approximately 95,767 full-time equivalent staff as at June 2007 (NSW DET 2007b). The education industry is one of the most highly unionised industries, and educational professionals are one of the most highly unionised occupations. Casual school
teachers operate in an environment that is highly sympathetic to union membership. These structural factors go some way to explaining the propensity of casual teachers to be union members, but it is also important to examine the individual and personal reasons that casual teachers give for belonging to a union. These reasons are examined in further detail below.

TYPES OF CASUAL EMPLOYMENT IN SCHOOL EDUCATION IN NSW

Casual teachers in NSW must hold a formal teaching qualification. They are assessed for personal suitability through an interview with a senior departmental officer. Further, they must undertake a criminal record check and for those trained in non-English speaking countries, an English language proficiency test is necessary. These processes are the same as those required of applicants for permanent teaching positions (NSW DET 2008a).

In 2008 the Department identified that:

- Casual teachers are engaged to fill teaching vacancies full time for less than four weeks or part time for less than two terms. If vacancies exceed these parameters a temporary teacher must be engaged. As a casual teacher you could be employed on a day-to-day or block basis providing release for permanent teachers who are absent or participating in other activities (NSW DET 2008b).

From the evidence of the interviewees, these positions were the most susceptible to funding cuts during the 1990s. Supply casual positions were looked upon quite favourably by most teachers as enabling them to develop long-term relationships with students and other teachers, and to be part of the school community, whilst not requiring them to take on the responsibility of program design, marking or other administrative duties.

A second form of casual teaching was referred to as ‘casual relief teaching’ or ‘day relief casual’. This is perhaps the best-recognised form of casual teaching. It was usually initiated by a request to fill in for a full-time teacher for one to three days in a single week. It was seen as short-term relief and usually involved very short notice — teachers were informed before 8:00 am on the day they were needed — but it could lead to more regular employment. Although this form of casual teaching provides no real stability in employment, a number of interviewees identified that they had developed an ongoing relationship with the school community through regular day relief. These teachers felt they had the satisfaction of interaction with staff and students and were not required to take on the ongoing responsibilities of programming, marking or other administrative duties.

The third type of casual employment identified by respondents was ‘block relief’. In this form, casual teachers were brought in to replace another teacher for a block of a couple of weeks, a month, a term or a whole year. Sometimes this could be on a part-time basis — two or three days per week — while in other cases it was full-time. Often the permanent teachers were on sick leave, maternity leave or study leave, although there were examples where a teacher had been dismissed or left suddenly and a casual was called in until a replacement permanent teacher could be found. A number of casuals had been employed for a block only to be replaced by a permanent teacher part-way through the period of employment. In 2001 the NSW Teachers’ Federation won a concession from the Department of Education and Training allowing teachers on block relief to become temporary contract teachers (Patterson 2005). This status gives block relief teachers access to leave entitlements during their period of temporary teaching. However, Junor,
O’Brien and O’Brien (2004) suggest that there are some difficulties associated with movement between temporary and casual status for long-term casual teachers.

UNION MEMBERSHIP IN PUBLIC SCHOOL EDUCATION IN NSW

Given the level of aggregation in ABS data on union density, it is difficult to find detailed statistics for union participation amongst school teachers within the NSW public school education system. The following analysis draws on figures provided by the NSW Department of Education and Training and the NSW Teachers’ Federation in their annual reports and on their websites. While there is not a perfect match between the sets of figures for employees and union members, they provide an initial basis for estimating union density in the sector.

The NSW Department of Education and Training reported that at 30 June 2006, they employed 61,676 permanent full-time staff and 10,369 permanent part-time staff, a total of 72,045 (NSW DET 2006). However, this figure includes both teaching staff and non-teaching staff in bureaucratic and administrative roles. The Department reports that 68,443 staff (95 per cent) provide frontline services — that is, services provided directly to the public through schools (NSW DET 2007b), but this figure still includes non-teaching staff within schools. The Department does provide a figure for the full-time equivalent number of teachers in schools (59,225 as at June 2007) (NSW DET 2008c), but this figure underestimates the number of teachers by treating part-time teachers as a proportion of a person. An estimation of 64,000, which is a rounded average of the number of frontline service providers and the number of full-time equivalent teachers, gives an approximate indication of permanent, full-time and part-time staff who are currently employed as teachers, and therefore eligible to become members of the NSW Teachers’ Federation.

Numbers of casual teachers are similarly difficult to obtain, with the Department reporting a total of 46,269 casual employees across the whole organisation (NSW DET 2006), but only 23,500 (as at June 2007) registered with Casual.Direct, the online booking service that matches casual teachers with schools (NSW DET 2007b).

The NSW Teachers’ Federation reported that their membership included 42,424 permanent full-time and part-time teachers in 2007 (NSW Teachers’ Federation, 2007). Out of the approximate figure of 64,000 permanent full-time staff, this represents a union density of approximately 66 per cent — significantly higher than in any other aggregated occupational group and comparable with union density in the rail transport and coal mining industry sectors. The Teachers’ Federation reported that their membership includes ‘5,625 casual members’ (NSW Teachers’ Federation 2007). Out of the number of teachers registered with Casual.Direct (23,500), this represents a union density of 23 per cent — a figure significantly higher than union density amongst casual employees in all occupations and at least as high as the population generally.

These approximations probably over-estimate union density amongst teachers in the NSW public education system. Teachers who are members of the Teachers’ Federation may be working within the private or Catholic school systems, although the Independent Teachers’ Association tends to have jurisdiction over these schools. Significant numbers of Federation members outside the public school system would inflate the calculation of union density. The figures provided by both organisations do not distinguish between high school or primary school teachers. However, as discussed below, the field study focused on the experiences of high school teachers.

While there are shortcomings with the figures they are the only ones publicly available. In any event, they demonstrate a significant level of...
union membership amongst teachers in the NSW public school system and highlight the difference in union density between permanent and casual teachers. A more detailed review of the annual reports of both organisations in the future may provide details of union membership rates over time. Without this analysis it difficult to know whether union density is falling, increasing or stable within the NSW education system at this point in time.

THE FIELD STUDY

Twenty interviews were conducted with teachers who were working in New South Wales public sector schools in a casual capacity at the time, in both urban and rural areas. Interviewees were recruited by snowball method. It was initially intended to recruit regional participants from a number of centres but, the snowball method generated sufficient volunteers in one major regional centre, and a number of these participants had worked in smaller and more isolated rural locations.

As an objective of the study was to include both male and female teachers, the recruitment process focused on secondary schools, which employ more men than primary schools. To limit the complexity, the study focused on public sector schools.

It became apparent that the familiar distinctions of public/private, primary/secondary and rural/urban had little to do with the way that participants viewed their career and life history. The participants had generally worked across a range of educational institutions, from primary schools through to universities, and in public, Catholic systemic and private schools. There were also a number of teachers who had worked in urban, regional and rural schools. A number of participants had trained as primary teachers, but had worked mostly in high schools, while others had trained and previously worked in high schools, but were currently employed in the primary sector.

The final list of participants included ten from a regional location in New South Wales which will be referred to as Regional Centre, and ten from various suburbs across the Sydney metropolitan region. Eleven women and nine men ranging in age from 26 to 61 (mean 43.8) participated. Pseudonyms are used for all of the participants.

Interviews were conducted in the respondents’ homes or in neutral spaces such as a public library or a cafe. The interviews ranged from 45 minutes to an hour and a half. Topics covered in the interviews included:

- demographic data including age, sex and marital status
- career data, including years employed as teacher, modes of employment over time, promotions and levels attained, union membership
- life-cycle issues, for example whether the interviewee was young, of child-bearing or raising age, or approaching retirement
- reasons for working on a part-time, temporary or casual basis
- impact of decisions to work on a part-time, temporary or casual basis on career opportunities and gender relations in the workplace and the home
- experiences of school management practices
- experiences of local gender relations and discrimination in the workplace.

In almost all cases, the interviews were recorded digitally and stored on compact disc. Two interviews were conducted by telephone and hence could not be recorded — for those interviews, detailed notes were taken during the interview and written up immediately afterward. In a third interview the respondent asked not to be recorded; again detailed notes were taken during the interview and written up immediately afterwards.
Recorded interviews were subsequently transcribed, and all transcriptions and notes were indexed using NVivo software, against the major research questions. The indexing framework was not static, as it was influenced by the issues raised by the interviewees. For example, the issues of child protection and discipline were not part of the interview schedule, but were raised by many of the participants and so were incorporated into the framework. In this way the knowledge was generated through ‘an interplay between the concepts of a broad conceptual framework and analysis of the substantive subject matter’ (Glucksmann 2000: 15).

UNION MEMBERSHIP AMONGST PARTICIPANTS

Amongst the casual teachers interviewed union membership was higher than the overall estimate for union density amongst casual teachers. Eleven of the twenty respondents were current members of the union (55 per cent of sample, compared to 23 per cent of casual teachers as estimated above). Of the interviewees who were not union members, two (Ann, Rachel) had been union members when they were full-time teachers but had not rejoined since they had started working casually. Glynis had been a member of the higher education union for most of her working career but had not joined the Teachers’ Federation since she had started working as a casual school teacher. Peter, a Canadian, who had not yet sorted out his working visa, had not joined the union but was intending to once he was able to gain a visa. Darren similarly had not joined but expressed an intention to join in the future. Maureen had not joined and had regretted not joining whilst teaching casually for a year. She was currently undertaking further studies and subsequently had not joined. Roger expressed an anti-union attitude and said he would not join a union. The remaining two interviewees may or may not have been union members, but due to a shortened interview the issue was not canvassed.

The reason for the high level of union membership amongst the participants is not immediately obvious. However, it may be related to the snowball method of recruitment. An initial union member may have recommended other casual teachers who were also members. Or it may be that casual teachers who were union members were more willing to participate in the research process. Unfortunately it is not possible to identify the union membership status of those casual teachers who were approached but declined to participate in the project.

Table 4: Summary of Participants’ Attitudes to Unions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher’s pseudonym</th>
<th>Activist</th>
<th>Member Committed to unionism</th>
<th>Would join union if not casual</th>
<th>Would not join</th>
<th>Attitude to unions not known</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Penny</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guy</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dagma</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
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<td>Michael</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<td>Peter</td>
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<td>Val</td>
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<td>Roger</td>
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<tr>
<td>Carmen</td>
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<td>Ann</td>
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<td>Doug</td>
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<td>Bill</td>
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The sample of participants is not statistically representative of all casual teachers; however, the discussion of union membership in the context of their life histories and experiences of casual teaching may reveal some of the reasons why casual teachers are more highly unionised than other casual workers and why casual teachers are significantly less unionised than other school teachers.

The interviewees demonstrated a range of attitudes towards union membership, from high commitment and activism through participation and continuing membership; support and commitment without current membership to non-membership and even rejection of union membership. That is, despite the small, and somewhat biased, sample of teachers a full spectrum of commitment to unionism could be observed amongst the interviewees. Table 4 below shows the range of commitment amongst the interviewees — the categories in this table are not mutually exclusive.

REASONS FOR JOINING THE UNION
The participants in the field study identified a number of reasons for joining and maintaining membership in unions. Many of these mirror the reasons identified in the broad scale surveys undertaken by Peetz and Bearfield, but other factors also arose. The pathways taken into casual teaching work had a significant impact on the propensity of these casual teachers to join the union. Other relevant factors identified by the interviewees included the protection or insurance provided by the union, the isolating and alienating nature of casual work and a sense of professional identity which contributed to their joining behaviour. Union aversion was not common amongst the participants, but where it did occur, it is worthy of note.

Pathways into casual work and union membership
The literature suggests that across the working population generally, older workers are more likely to be union members than younger workers. However, such a simplistic dichotomy is not apparent amongst the sample of casual school teachers interviewed. The participants' attitudes towards unionism were not directly related to age — Scott, Michael and Rachel, all 35 years and under, were or had been union members, while Peter, 32, and Maureen, 26, both expressed a commitment to unionism. The participant with the strongest anti-union sentiment was Roger, aged 56. Patterns did, however, emerge between participants' pathways into casual work and their union membership.

The participants in the study had taken many different routes into casual work. More than half of the participants had been employed as permanent full-time teachers, had taken a career break for a range of reasons including family responsibilities, illness or recuperation or travel, and had returned to work on a casual basis (Rachel, Michael, Penny, Dagma, Guy, Susan, John, Marika, Carmen, Ann, Bridget and Doug). Many of these teachers intended to return to permanent status at some point in the future if possible.

Four participants (Darren, Maureen, Peter and Roger) had only recently entered the teaching profession and had only been able to access casual employment. They had all originally intended to work as permanent full-time teachers, although Maureen and Roger had subsequently reviewed their options and were no longer seeking permanent full-time positions.

One participant (Val) had been a casual teacher for the entire length of her approximately 15 year career and did not intend to seek a permanent full-time position. Three further participants (Scott, Glynis and Bill) saw casual teaching as a supplementary job or one of a suite of casual jobs such as university tutoring, research work or sessional professional work. They had never worked as permanent full-time teachers and did not intend to seek permanent positions.

Of those who had previously been permanent teachers, only two out of the eleven whose union preferences and membership were known were not current members of the union. Both of these participants suggested
that they would renew their union memberships if they secured regular and ongoing work. That is, the teachers who had been permanent employees at some point demonstrated strong commitment to the union and a high level of active membership.

Of the four participants who had only recently begun teaching and who had only had access to casual employment, none were currently union members. Darren and Peter were in their first year out of university and both spoke of joining the union in the future — for Peter, when he had gained a working visa, and Darren when he finished travelling and settled into a permanent position. However, neither of these reasons are serious impediments to union membership. The Teachers’ Federation recognises the intermittent nature of casual employment by including a casual joining fee in their membership structure. These two casual teachers were at risk of not joining the union through what Peetz refers to as union apathy or a ‘disinterest in union matters and a consequent lack of opinion on union-related issues’ (Peetz 1998: 12). Peetz suggests that union apathy is a particular problem amongst casual employees and amongst younger employees with less experience of work.

Maureen and Roger were also fairly recent graduates and both had originally intended to find permanent teaching positions. However Maureen had decided to return to further studies while Roger had decided to pursue other projects and hobbies such as photography and invention. Neither was planning to seek permanent teaching work. Maureen’s experience of casual teaching began with an example of union apathy. She explained this in the following terms:

> At the start of the year one of the teachers ... he asked me at the start of the year if I wanted to join and he gave me the membership forms. And stupidly — I took the forms and then I thought oh I’m only here for a year, what could go wrong in one year — and that was not a very wise decision.

Maureen explained that within that year she had significant difficulties in disciplining the boys she was teaching and that she felt she had very little support from within the faculty or from the headmaster. Asked if she would join a union in the future she said:

> Yeah, I mean a day here and there is not significant, but if I went back for like a few terms or normal then I would join.

Roger, who had always been ambivalent about unions, stated that he had become union averse as a casual teacher. This is discussed in more detail under union aversion below.

Val’s position was unique amongst the participants: she had worked casually for almost 15 years and did not have much hope of being allocated a permanent position in Regional Centre. As discussed in more detail below, she joined the union in order to feel part of the community of teachers and to express solidarity in times of industrial action.

For those workers who saw casual teaching as one of a suite of casual jobs, union membership could be dependent on which job they saw as primary. Scott was a committed member of the Teachers’ Federation and appeared to see his primary occupation as a school teacher rather than a researcher or university tutor. Bill also had a number of casual jobs, including tutoring in mathematics at university and casual relief teaching. The issue of union membership was not explicitly canvassed in Bill’s interview, but his responses implied that was that he was not a member of any union and that he did not feel a particular attachment to any of his workplaces. Glynis, on the other hand, had a strong identification with her university career and her professional role in the health industry. She did not strongly identify as a teacher and had only taken up casual teaching to lessen the impact of retirement. As noted above she had always been a member of the National Tertiary Education Union and had not sought to become a member of the Teachers’ Federation. However, she indicated that she might join the Teachers’ Federation if she found regular and ongoing work in the sector. There appear to be some links between pathways into casual teaching and perceptions of professional identity amongst casual teachers. However,
more research is needed to establish whether there is a consistent pattern between pathways and professional identity.

Risk and insurance
Most of the interviewees thought it was important to be in the union in order to ‘have someone on your side in case anything happened’ (Guy, Susan, Bridget, Carmen, Darren, Scott, Penny). Penny summed this up most clearly:

I just think it is the sort of job that if you don’t have someone on your side if something goes wrong you really can’t risk it you know, it is just, I mean most of us go through our entire career without a single legal hassle but you see in your teaching career, you occasionally see someone’s career totally demoralised and their whole life ruined by something that is not their fault, and in those circumstances I would like to have someone backing me up thank you very much, and I wouldn’t trust the Education Department to back me up so …

Issues for which teachers needed protection or the support of the union included situations that could apply to all teachers, such as being accused by a student of ‘inappropriate actions’. Guy noted:

… especially in the schools that I was in, you know, like they had a lot of well troubled kids that would have a go at you or you know, I mean not … it wasn’t violent but I mean they could accuse you of things or whatever so you just had to have that insurance.

Or for professional indemnity as identified by Ann:

having someone take your cause if something went wrong while you were on duty, if there was an accident and you seemed to be liable.

However, there were also factors that impacted more on casual teachers than on full-time teachers, such as support against other teachers or faculty as John noted:

Yeah, you need them [the union], they’re the only call back that teachers have got against bullies — people respond badly to bullies, you need to have someone on your side in that situation.

Workload issues for casual employees were also identified:

Yeah. Yeah. Well, there’s some variation in every school — some will try and work you to the bone — you have to call on the union to come in and check whether they’re giving you the right load you know? But mostly there’s some give and take.

None of those who took this ‘in case’ approach had ever had any need to call upon the union, but they felt that the future was uncertain and that the union offered an insurance policy. Many were able to offer examples of co-workers who had called upon the union and had received appropriate support.

The insurance policy approach to union membership is not unique to teachers. As noted above, Bearfield found that ‘nearly 40 per cent of all reasons given for union membership point to unions being a “safety net” in case something goes wrong’ (Bearfield 2003: 12).

Peetz (1998: 11) suggests that the insurance approach will affect an employee’s propensity to join a union, but it is union instrumentality, ‘the extent to which employees consider that they have benefited from union membership’, that will ensure that employees will not leave a union once they have joined. It seems that the casual teachers interviewed had a strong perception of their union’s instrumentality, although none of the interviewees explicitly identified union efficacy as a reason for joining.
The isolation of casual work

The casual teachers interviewed were highly aware of the tenuous nature of their employment relationships. They were aware that their ongoing employment with a particular school may depend on the whim of one individual. Val summed this up most comprehensively:

As a casual you feel very insecure I suppose. The principal at M, probably eight months after I was there, he said, ‘Well, what do you think do you like the school? Do you feel at home?’ And I said: ‘Well I feel as comfortable as I think a casual can feel … knowing that I am as disposable as the next tissue that comes out of the box.’ So, you know, say the wrong thing to a student and you may not be in tomorrow, whereas a permanent would say: ‘Get real, this is ridiculous,’ and turn around and walk away and still be employed tomorrow, so you have that living on the edge …

In many of the narratives there was a sense that risk was a significant feature of the nature of their work as casual teachers. There was risk of losing their jobs through the actions of other staff, students or parents, or through other factors outside their control.

Many of the participants also spoke of the isolating nature of casual employment, describing how there was very little encouragement, support or inclusive behaviour towards new casual teachers when they arrived at a school. Susan described the isolation and alienation as:

I suppose there are times, I don’t know if it is discrimination but there are times when you feel as though you don’t really fit, you know, you are not part of this place, you don’t sort of belong …

Similarly, Carmen told a story of being treated as a ‘non-person’ as a casual teacher. She had been employed to teach one day per week for a whole term, only to turn up one day half-way through the term to find a new teacher in the classroom. The school had employed a new full-time, permanent teacher and had not informed Carmen. When she went to the Principal to discuss the issue, she says that he looked at her blankly and asked, ‘Who are you?’

Val noted that other teachers did not take much notice of what she said, as if, being a casual, she didn’t count.

In the respect that they’re not really interested in my opinion, at say a staff meeting or faculty meeting. Or I can say what I like but nobody seems to listen … whether it is because they know that I won’t be there after this date or it is the ‘How would you know’ … even with having worked there all year last year and the head teacher was great and [I] couldn’t have asked for more support, he couldn’t have given any more support it was still … I still felt I was a casual.

In response to the alienation or peripheralisation of casual teaching, a number of the respondents had developed strategies of resistance. Some attempted to work mainly in one or two schools in order to get to know the students, other teachers, and the systems in place in those schools. This helped to make their experiences of casual employment less problematic. Others saw union membership as a way of addressing this problem. Val noted that she had initially not been a union member and that this had added to her sense of exclusion or ‘otherness’ in the workplace. She felt that it was important as a casual not to be seen as a ‘scab’ by other teachers:

When I was at M and I sort of … I wasn’t in the union and I didn’t know whether I should, when they were having a strike, whether I should turn up for work or whether I shouldn’t turn up for work and it was like, ‘Oh no, this is too undefined,’ and my husband kept going crook at me get in the union so I thought ‘Well, if I am in the union then …’. The teachers look at you as strange if they see your signature on the book and they’ve been at a strike meeting or something and they see the time you signed in …
While joining the union did not completely solve the issue of alienation, Val felt a greater level of acceptance from her co-workers once she joined.

Professional identity

Professional identity may be an important factor in the strong union density and membership in industries such as health and education, and amongst occupations such as education professionals and health and welfare associate professionals. Given that these occupational groups do not have strong professional associations outside the union movement, it may be that unions in this area provide workers with both a sense of professional identity and a level of instrumental support in the workplace. Certainly for the casual teachers in the field study, the union offered both protection and a sense of solidarity or belonging that they were not always able to gain in the workplace.

Professional identity amongst casual workers is an issue that has not been examined in great detail. A number of theorists have argued that casual workers do not have a strong attachment to the workplace, a strong commitment to, or sense of, career and that this is a major reason for their willingness to accept casual employment (Hakim 2002; Wooden & Warren 2003).

However, it is possible that casual school teachers retain a stronger connection to the workplace and to union membership than other casual employees simply because of a strong sense of professional identity. The participants in the field study identified strongly as teachers and had a strong sense of career and commitment to the workplace generally. Many teachers believed that casual employment was simply a phase of their career, and that eventually they would return to permanent work. Even amongst those who had never worked in a permanent position and did not have any strong hope of achieving permanency, there was a sense that casual teaching was still a valid career choice. Val, who had been a casual teacher for 15 years whilst waiting for a permanent position to come up in Regional Centre, expressed it as:

> It is a career because I love it, and I do it to the best of my ability and it is exactly what I want to do … I just teach because I enjoy it, it stimulates me, going to school, it makes me a better person.

Similarly, Scott who cobbled together a number of casual positions in different areas of the education industry argued that he saw the different aspects of his work as part of a career, not disparate jobs.

> I think, yeah, career is the most important thing … and whether that is in teaching or in something different, maybe in the scientific field, I can't quite see yet, but I am really working on this pretty interesting area at the university, and that is kind of good in maybe a prestigious sense I guess, and you can reach a certain level in that field as well.

The casual teachers interviewed seemed to have a strong sense of career and of professional identity, which may contribute to their propensity to join a union, and to the likelihood of remaining in a union.

Union aversion

As discussed above, Roger was not a union member. Asked if he was a union member, he described being somewhat ambivalent about unions even before a bad experience with a union representative:

> No, and one of the union people in W when I was at a school, she was two-faced or had two hats. She was, at one stage she was a very staunch unionist and at a point where I was doing marking for the HSC science, she was all of a sudden Deputy Principal when the other guy went off, and suddenly I was expected to work for nothing, to do the work, to do the web sites and mark them and I wasn't being paid for it. So, you know, it's hypocritical … Yeah, well, I've never been too mad about unions … pretty ambivalent really, but that put me off doing it in the future.
Peetz suggests that union sympathy or aversion is a critical factor in union joining. ‘The rate of union joining in open jobs was 59 per cent amongst employees with pro-union sympathy but only 5 per cent amongst those with anti-union sympathy’ (1998 59). Union aversion was not common amongst the participants of the study but where it existed it was difficult to overcome and could be easily reinforced by inconsistent actions.

CONCLUSION

Casual employment in the education industry shares many of the features of casual employment in other industries. The field study found that casuals in the education industry have less access to training than permanent teachers, very little access to decision-making processes, are peripheralised within the school system and are often dependent on the preferences of a single individual who has power over their ongoing employment. Casual work can be isolating and can create a sense of isolation and alienation.

However, casual employment in the education industry differs in many ways from casual employment in other industries. The demand for casual teachers means that it is relatively easy to find semi-regular casual employment. Casuals in the education industry are relatively highly skilled and their skills and knowledge are recognised as useful in other industries. The remuneration of casual teachers, while less generous than that of permanent teachers, is still higher than casual rates of pay in many other industries. Some of these differences may help to explain why teachers continue to work casually and why they retain higher levels of union membership than other casual workers.

Structural factors may help to explain the higher levels of union membership amongst casual school teachers than amongst other casuals. Casual school teachers are older than the workforce on the whole. The NSW Department of Education and Training is also one of the largest single employers in Australia. The education industry is one of the most highly unionised industries and educational professionals are one of the most highly unionised occupations. These factors increase the likelihood of casual teachers being union members. However, this project has provided some insight into the high level of union membership in the sector by examining the personal reasons given by teachers for joining unions.

The study shows that different pathways into casual work have an impact on union membership, with those who have been permanent teachers prior to becoming casual teachers more likely to retain membership, while those who have commenced their career as casual teachers are at risk of not joining due to union apathy. Pathways may also be linked to the issue of professional identity amongst casual school teachers. However, more research is needed to establish whether there is a consistent pattern between pathways and professional identity.

Amongst the participants, protection and insurance are key motivating reasons for union membership. The participants also saw union membership as an appropriate response to the individualising and isolating nature of casual work. They felt a greater solidarity and connection with other teachers through union membership. It seems that the participants felt that their union had a high level of instrumentality or ability to meet their needs although none identified union efficacy as a major reason for joining.

The participants had a strong sense of professional identity as teachers. This may have contributed to their ongoing union membership; however, more research is needed into the sense of professional identity amongst casual school teachers and the links between professional identity and union membership.
REFERENCES


