

# **Sky Channel and the Battle for Australians' Hearts and Minds: The ACTU's use of Media in the 'Rights at Work' Campaign.**

Muir, Kathie

Gender, Work and Social Inquiry, School of Social Science, University of  
Adelaide, SA, 5005

kathie.muir@adelaide.edu.au

## **Abstract:**

The role of new media technologies in the strengthening of democratic communication, social movement and activist campaigning and mobilising is now well understood. Eric Lee's LabourStart website and Australia's own Workers Online were pioneering examples of the ways the labour movement adapted such technologies for their own purposes. The ACTU's recent 'Rights at Work' campaign against the Howard Government's industrial relations legislation, has demonstrated a highly sophisticated and dynamic use of new and traditional media technologies to create a strong sense of (virtual) community and to mobilise opposition to the legislation. This paper examines the ACTU's national day of community action, broadcast through Sky Channel, and other features of the 'Rights at Work' campaign to analyse the ways the ACTU has deployed electronic and alternative media, and discourses of fairness and nationalism, for mobilising the opposition of Australian community to the erosion of workers' rights. It also examines whether new media technologies have been successfully combined with traditional labour culture and history to update the profile of unionism for C21 audiences.

**Keywords:** activist media, campaigns, labour

## **Introduction:**

The impact of the internet and other new Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) on, and their use by, social movements has been widely discussed by scholars from the fields of media and communications, sociology and politics. Many of these writers focus primarily on new social movements such as those associated with the Global Justice (or 'anti-globalisation') cause that came to prominence in the mass demonstrations against the World Trade Organisation in Seattle in 1998 and that are credited with giving rise to Indymedia (Meikle, 2002; Morris, 2004). Other groups that have featured in such writing include those engaged in cyber-activism, culture jamming and other creative endeavours such as Adbusters (Lasn, 1999); high-profile campaigns against specific events such as the infamous McDonald's 'McLibel' case against two British activists, that gave rise to the McSpotlight website (Meikle, 2002); and anti-sweatshop activists involved in the on-going campaigns over the exploitation of garment workers by Nike and other multinational apparel companies (Ross, 1997). Some of the more traditional social movements, such as the labour movement, as well as established and newly emerging political parties are also actively exploring the potential for developments in ICTs to enable them to mobilise support more effectively, to develop and enhance their movement identity, and to communicate their concerns to a wider audience (Lee, 1996; Martinez Lucio, 2003).

Social movement organisations (SMO) such as these, together with established political parties, increasingly appreciate that they are operating in a context of highly mediated politics (Bennett and Entmann, 2001). They realise that no matter how just their argument, skilful use of media is crucial to convincing the public, as well as opinion leaders. Increasing resources are

being devoted to the employment of media professionals and to expensive, high-profile advertising campaigns, and to maintaining a professional and up-to-date on-line presence (Corner and Pels, 2003; Young, 2004). John Corner and Dick Pels have argued that the combined effects of 'consumerism, celebrity and cynicism' have placed great emphasis on political style (2003:7). The presentational strategies of all political organisations—from mainstream parties to temporary event-based alliances of social movements—are critical to their success in this mediated environment. Intrinsicly linked to the issue of personal performance and presentational strategies adopted by the leaders, spokespeople and movement members themselves, is the matter of their use of ICTs in mobilising support and communicating their concerns.

My focus in this paper is a discussion of the ways in which the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) presented its concerns about the Government's Work Choices Legislation to the public, the media and their own members via the network of public meetings and rallies on November 15 2005, and in particular through the Sky Channel broadcast and the 'Rights at work' website ([www.rightsatwork.com.au](http://www.rightsatwork.com.au)).

The tendency of mainstream news media to report trade unions and unionists as hostile to the interests of 'us', their presumed audience is well-documented (GUMG, 1976; Ward, 1995). Many unions around the world have become adept users of alternative media to mobilise membership and community support and to call for action (Lee, 1996; Shostak, 1999; Diamond and Freeman, 2002). The Labourstart website run by Eric Lee is probably the most familiar example as it covers international issues and news ([www.labourstart.org](http://www.labourstart.org)). It is best known for its alerting service through which individual unions can all upon subscribers to take action in the form of boycotts or emails in support of unionists who have been victimised by employers or governments.

In Australia the most significant example in recent years of the impact of a successful media strategy by a trade union was the Maritime Union of Australia's (MUA) use of its website during the 1998 Waterfront Dispute. The website contained historical material about the union and the role it had played in winning key conditions (such as superannuation), it contained interviews with members and their families about how the sackings were affecting them personally, and information about the contemporary conditions of work on the docks. Most compelling were the daily bulletins from ports around the country, including photos of the community pickets and accounts of what was happening in the dispute. The MUA created its own news dossier of the dispute, complete with participant accounts, that proved an important and influential record of one of the most critical political attacks on the labour movement in recent Australian history. It was widely accessed by members of the public as well as union members, and also by mainstream news journalists (McConville, 2000). The MUA and ACTU constructed their campaign extremely carefully, focussing on the need to win public sympathy as well as the legal action. They stressed the importance of supporters and activists maintaining strong discipline at the community pickets in order to avoid providing negative imagery of hostile union-police clashes. Officials were given media training by members of the journalists' union to assist them to deal with media attention. These strategies were highly successful and resulted in the unions winning the battle for public opinion and acceptance of their case that their members had been unlawfully sacked and should be reinstated (McConville, 2000). Another influential feature of the campaign was a

television advertisement featuring Hazel Hawke (the popular ex-wife of former Prime Minister and ACTU president Bob Hawke) declaring the event to be a 'disgrace' and 'unAustralian'. Versions of national identity and national values were positioned as central to the unions' campaign over the waterfront sackings. In 2005 national values were again positioned as central to the ACTU's campaign against the Federal Government's radical new industrial relations legislation, the 'Work Choices' Bill. The campaign during the Waterfront dispute was conducted through a combination of legal, political, organising and communicative strategies, each of which was critical to its success. In this regard it is also akin to the current ACTU campaign. A key difference in the current, on-going campaign, however, is that the ACTU has invested an unprecedented amount of money in television advertising and is likely to run a further, similarly expensive, series of advertisements in the lead-up to the next federal election (due before the end of 2007).

### **Values, Security and Democratic Rights: The ACTU's Promotion of 'Rights at Work'**

'We must not be the first generation of Australians who leaves our kids with fewer rights at work than we inherited. And we won't be. Today we are standing up for the values that shape the way we care about each other. The way we care about time for our families and care about a nation that balances prosperity with our great way of life.' (Burrow, 2005).

These themes of nationalism, family life, fairness, caring and rights were placed in the centre of the ACTU's campaign, invoking the cultural and industrial history of Australia as a nation that—if not actually a workers' paradise—is a fair and decent country that enables ordinary people to 'make a go of it,' to look after their families and to 'get ahead' without fear of exploitation or of being left without protection in times of hardship. Two of the television ads (which were also played during the November 15 event and can be replayed via the Rights at work website) feature a male and a female worker with their children directly expressing their concerns about what would happen to their children if their bosses could change their working hours and conditions without notice, or consideration of the impact upon their lives. The ACTU's campaign positions the highly charged issue of work/family balance at the centre of their arguments, claiming that it will be placed at further risk by the legislation. This pitch creates an image of unions as caring for wider concerns than just those within the workplace, expanding to include quality of contemporary life and the broader social fabric, and it lies at the heart of their pitch for broad community support.

The November 15 Day of Community Protest 'meeting' held in all major Australian cities and many regional centres featured a live broadcast via Sky Channel of ACTU leaders and guests appearing at the Melbourne rally together with pre-recorded footage. This footage included testimonies from workers about the likely impact of the legislation on their family lives, their personal experiences with 'bad bosses', the historical struggles of retired unionists to improve conditions, safety and pay, and the concerns of prominent Australians, church leaders and welfare organisations about the effects of the legislation on the community and on families in particular.

The Sky Channel broadcast commenced with a 'preface' that acknowledged the sponsorship of the Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU), Miners' Division and reflected the traditional cultural image of unions as predominantly male, blue-collar workers. It was redolent with romanticised imagery and rhetoric of the heroic (male) worker and trade

unionist. It was followed by a rendition of *Waltzing Matilda* accompanied by a full-screen close-up of the Australian flag with title National Day of Community Protest. From the flag the focus moved to contemporary images of a highly culturally diverse workforce, with an (over)emphasis on the caring professions (nurses, child-care workers, aged-care and teachers). Other workers included machinists, crane drivers, telephonists, kitchen-hands, a priest and some footage of picket lines and other industrial protests. Nearly all the participants were *smiling* broadly directly at the camera. Clearly these images are intended to establish a bond with the viewers ‘we are you’ they say, ‘we are good people’, ‘we are ordinary Australians’. Likewise, they could be seen to represent democracy, we are the *people* of Australia, we are voters, we matter.

Viewers of the broadcast (also distributed free as a DVD and available to be viewed in-part on-line) were invited to identify themselves with the *people* on screen rather than with the idea or institution of unionism. The images and the rhetoric deployed by almost all the speakers firmly established the inclusive nature of the event and invited identification and participation. Whilst the ACTU and the CFMEU organised the event and it was clearly and unmistakably a union-managed affair, the identities of ‘unionist’ and even the term ‘worker’ were actively downplayed. The terms ‘working Australians’ or ‘Australian working families’ were preferred by almost all speakers. The pitch for the viewers’ hearts and minds involved a careful repositioning of the idea of unions and identity of unionists away from the traditional imagery featured in the CFMEU’s preface. Viewers and participants were called upon to feel anxiety and fear as to the impact of the changes on their lives and those of their families now and in the future, and to feel outrage at the unfairness they represented by favouring the interests of employers so strongly over those of employees. Also, and in particular, to associate themselves with the view that the legislation overturned key values and characteristics that have come to be regarded as quintessential elements of Australian society: fairness, equity and respect for ordinary working people. The early message on screen—“I didn’t vote for an attack on my rights at work.” Send John Howard a message: fill in the postcard.’—stresses the undemocratic nature of the legislation and appeals to people to register their presence, their opposition to the changes, their association with the campaign and their plea to politicians to not pass the legislation. As the broadcast continued viewers were asked to do more than just fill in the postcard.

Thus the event was framed as a democratic expression of concern about, or outrage at, the Government’s abuse of power by introducing unjustified and extreme legislation, without consultation. Furthermore, and most importantly, for which it had not received a mandate at the federal election held less than a year previously, but was pursuing for ideological reasons. The implementation of the laws was portrayed as representing the loss of intrinsic values that lie at the heart of the Australian way of life and ‘our’ pride in ‘our’ country and our values.

ACTU President Sharan Burrow defined the contest in this way:

‘Today we are standing up for the values that shape the way we care about each other. The way we care about time for our families and care about a nation that balances prosperity with our great way of life. In every corner of Australia people are standing together to oppose the Government’s Industrial Relations laws and the attack that they represent

on our living standards and our community and family life' (Burrow, 2005).

And later in the broadcast former ACTU President and ALP Prime Minister, Bob Hawke claimed:

*'[I]t is a fight to preserve what is at the very heart of what we have always liked to believe is the very essence of the Australian character. That is that this is the nation of the fair go. This is a fight which you cannot lose, which you must not lose. We must win it if Australia is to remain the country we think it is.'*

The ACTU's day of community protest aimed to build recognition that the Work Choices legislation comprised an unprecedented threat to democracy and Australian values and to exhort people to identify with this need for action to achieve change. The recommended actions included: voting for the ALP ahead of the Liberal-National coalition at the next federal election; signing an on-line pledge; donating money or time to the campaign; advocating against the legislation and its effects within one's own community; and becoming active both within one's union and community. To this extent the event was far more than just a mass demonstration but also comprised a strong mobilizing element. The ACTU sought to interpellate those watching and listening to the broadcast as caring, committed individuals prepared to take additional actions towards political change and in defence of a particular set of Australian values. They invited people to see themselves as potential actors in this movement for change.

Combet defined this clearly in his speech when he said:

The second thing we must do is win the support of the wider community. We must invite Australians to join a movement for change - not just a movement to achieve rights at work, but a movement for fairness and justice, a movement for democratic rights. We must build a broad coalition of people committed to a better future. Be part of it. Contribute in practical ways.' (Combet 2005)

As during the MUA dispute, the appeal for the support of viewers/voters revolved around competing definitions of values and national identity. Nationalism was embedded into the broadcast visually and aurally. As well as the afore-mentioned inclusion of *Waltzing Matilda*, Deborah Conway sang a powerful, unaccompanied rendition of the national anthem, *Advance Australia Fair*. These two opening songs, together with images of the flag and the community of workers, firmly established the patriotic and nationalistic nature of the day. These signifiers were used very much as they are in much political advertising, to associate the emotional and patriotic symbolic values of nationalism with the unions' cause. They challenged the Howard Government's ongoing ideological efforts to redefine national values and terms such as 'battler' (formerly securely associated with a labour identity) with neo-liberal values and policies (Greenfield and Williams, 2001; Rundle, 2001).

The framing of trade union opposition to Government legislation as being a struggle over democratic rights, over competing expressions of nationalism and values, in itself is not new. It was a key element in the 1890s industrial disputes (such as the Shearers' Strikes) and again in the Menzies Government's attempt to ban the Communist Party in the 1950s. It was the central framing of the 1996 opposition to the Howard Government's first round of Workplace Relations Laws and the ill-fated *Cavalcade to Canberra* demonstration. It was also the central motif in the 1998 community pickets on

the docks and the MUA and ACTU's campaign against Patrick's sacking of its workers through balaclava-clad security guards and guard dogs.

So what, if anything, is anything 'new' about the ACTU's Rights at work campaign? The scale of the ACTU's 2005 television advertising campaign was unprecedented. The ACTU and their affiliates' financial and resource commitment to the campaign was unprecedented. The proposed commitment to a marginal seats campaign from mid-2006 to until the 2007 federal election, resourced by full-time paid organisers, is likewise a new strategy. The decision to produce a common broadcast to be played at all the gatherings around the country was also unprecedented. It was an expensive exercise and one that was devised after UnionsNSW used Sky Channel to broadcast a similar event in July 2005 from Sydney across regional NSW.<sup>1</sup> The November 2005 Sky Channel broadcast enabled a sophisticated political campaign presentation to be delivered to all major Australian cities and to smaller groups of workers in over 300 regional and isolated communities.<sup>2</sup> The aim was to create a strong sense of unity and solidarity for both participants and the media. The risk was that workers in some locations would resent the imposition of a Melbourne message. The success of the strategy is discussed further below. Satellite events had been undertaken in several previous campaigns; however, linking them via Sky Channel to the Melbourne rally was a new development and one that attracted substantial positive local media interest. Even communities with no industrial base such as Victor Harbor in SA, a seaside town largely comprised of retirees, sea-changers, alternative lifestylers and young families, held a small rally and screened the Sky Channel broadcast at a local hotel. The rally made the front page of the local paper, the *Victor Times* and the issues generated several letters to the editor. It received unusually detailed coverage for an industrial issue in that community and this experience was replicated in many regional communities around the country.

The ACTU's day of community protest and Sky Channel broadcast was a hybrid event, combining traditional capital city demonstrations, with local and regional satellite events, workplace actions, a very strong web presence and a wide range of associated traditional campaigning techniques. These included: television ads, petitions, lobbying of government members and independents, and legal appeals. Community based campaign activities included: workplace meetings, stalls at local fairs, fundraisers and the production of promotional t-shirts, postcards, posters etc. Current and retired union members participated in community and media discussions to raise awareness of the effects of the proposed new laws on ordinary families. The ACTU and affiliates made sample letters, ads and information sheets available to members through workplace meetings and websites. Indeed, the efforts made to encourage participation in the November 15 day was an integral part of the campaign itself. It was a key strategy to mobilize union members and other workers to express their opposition to, and concerns about the legislation. All the promotional material encouraged people to access the Rights at work website for more information and ways to participate in the campaign. The web site was promoted more heavily than in any previous ACTU campaign. As Greene et al. have observed, solidarity can be facilitated by a strong media campaign and by a dynamic web presence, it is, therefore, no longer so reliant on

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<sup>1</sup> Whilst the use of Sky Channel was new to Australia, unions in other countries have used the web and video-conferencing to link geographically dispersed protests, meetings and celebrations for several years (Diamond and Freeman, 2002).

<sup>2</sup> For a list of participating venues and estimated attendances see [[http://www.actu.asn.au/work\\_rights/get\\_involved/hookup\\_venues.html](http://www.actu.asn.au/work_rights/get_involved/hookup_venues.html)] Accessed 1 February 2006.

physical or even real-time proximity (Greene et al. 2003:287). The website received a huge number of hits in the few months it was operational, signing up over 100,000 subscribers to e-news bulletins in the first two months (Combet 2006), and collecting over 22,000 online pledges of support in the first three months.

One new and highly effective element of the campaign was the invitation to workers to 'name and shame' bad employers as a way of demonstrating exploitative work practices that would become legal under the new laws. These pre-recorded testimonies were one of the most powerful elements of the Sky Channel broadcast, reducing many at the rallies to tears. Several of the testimonies also received media coverage independently of the day of action as the ACTU and relevant unions held 'name and shame' media conferences in local areas relevant to the situation of each worker who testified. The experience of Andreia Veigas and her children, whose husband and father died as the result of a workplace accident, was particularly chilling. Likewise the testimony of the Asbestos Diseases Foundation's Bernie Banton, who has fought James Hardie for years for compensation for mesothelioma sufferers and their families whilst himself suffering from the deadly disease. These people were re-cast through the broadcast as the truly courageous and heroic Australians, the real 'battlers' who are fighting for justice and for the rights of others in the future (Burrow, 2005). This framing of the laws as undemocratic, draconian and the technique of putting a face to the ordinary people who (the unions claimed) will suffer as a result of them, was the most effective element of the broadcast.

These elements directly appealed to people to become active opponents of the legislation and the threat it posed to democracy even if they were not currently union members. Together with the images of hundreds of thousands of other Australians gathered in Melbourne and (briefly) Sydney, they created a strong and dynamic image of contemporary union identity and solidarity.

### **The Sky Channel Broadcast: an unqualified success?**

Despite the impressively crafted nature of the ACTU's broadcast and its technological sophistication, not all unionists were happy with the nature of the event. Some saw the imposition of a message from headquarters in Melbourne as undemocratic and felt that it did not allow for expressions of unionism and militancy that were relevant to their specific experiences or to their own cultural and industrial histories. Indeed, in some places minor factional rivalries led to the staging of separate rallies that others felt were unfortunate as they fragmented the effect of the mass turn-out. For participants, the experience of attending the rallies seemed to vary across different locations depending upon the time of day the rally was held, its location, who was organising it, how close to or far from a screen you were and personal experiences and expectations of effective and pleasurable industrial action. Unionists in Perth rallied at 12 noon on a very hot day and anecdotal evidence is that almost half the large crowd had left within 20 minutes of the start of the event (Mike Gillan pers. comm.). They found passive listening to speeches from Melbourne that were, then, over 5 hours old to be a depowering experience.

However, in cities such as Adelaide, where the rally was held simultaneously with the Sky Channel telecast and local activities and content were incorporated into the event, the response of attendees was more favourable. Anecdotal evidence is that most felt the centralised address

worked well, the inclusion of ordinary workers' stories was a highlight and that Greg Combet's speech, in particular, was an example of inspirational leadership. There was a clear feeling, however, that the broadcast extended too long, and that more local reference needed to be included where possible. Specific suggestions included that the broadcast should incorporate live coverage from the rallies in other states (it did briefly cut to Martin Place in Sydney) but organisers say that the cost of this is prohibitive (Janet Giles, SAUnions pers. comm.). Without the benefits of advertising revenue or lucrative television rights, the union movement cannot command the same resources as Australian Rules football audiences now take for granted, even for one day!

Miguel Martinez Lucio (2003), writing about Spanish unions' use of ICTs in campaigning, argues it is important in considering the success or otherwise of a strategy—such as the ACTU's use of Sky Channel and the web to mobilise opposition to the legislation—to take account of the context of such use of ICTs and campaigning strategies. He argues that the political nature, identity and history of individual unions and peak councils, together with their organisational culture needs to be considered. The ACTU's Rights at work campaign and specifically its day of community protest, are the product of a *peak council*, not a single union, or group of unions in one industry. They have therefore, a diverse constituency with different identities and modes of expression, different cultural histories and different agendas. As Sandra Cockfield (2005) points out different unions may have distinctly different identities and may use both ICTs and traditional means of industrial action to express their members' views, their experiences and their opposition to specific IR laws or policies. In some such scenarios ICTs may be seen as facilitating democratic expression, particularly through the use of chat rooms to encourage policy debate. However, 'technology [also] offers the potential to ... suppress [these identities] to a dominant identity' (Cockfield, 2005: 98).

The ACTU, as Australia's single peak union body, is operating within a particular political, historical and cultural context that invests the desirability of control of the unions' campaign messages with particular importance. Previous conflicts between unionists and police (such as that occurring during the Cavalcade to Canberra in 1996) and unionists and others (such as that which occurred during the 'run through' at Johnson Tiles in Victoria in 2001) have led to a slew of negative headlines and widespread political and media condemnation of unions as 'bullies' and unionists as irrelevant. Subsequently, all state labor councils and the ACTU have been particularly careful in planning and managing demonstrations, demanding that affiliates control the minority of their members who prefer to express their identities as unionists through physical confrontation and abuse. There are, therefore, specific political and communication imperatives for the ACTU that create high stakes in the planning and implementation of high profile national protests. The ACTU cannot afford impromptu performances of unstrategic, individualistic or hot-headed militancy. Secretary Combet made his position on the need for discipline extremely clear in his speech when he pledged that he and other leaders would fight but at the same time warned that: 'We must be disciplined and responsible. There is no place for foolhardy or reckless behaviour' (Combet, 2005). He has reinforced this at every ACTU executive and campaign coordinating committee meeting. With union membership levels at a historic low and the evidence of recent years indicating that any major disruption or violence is a public relations disaster for the union movement,

calls for 'collective strike action' (Bramble, 2005: 265) fail to recognise the realities of public opinion and the operations of news values. The ACTU's decision to broadcast one message all over Australia via Sky Channel not only increased the sense of virtual solidarity and ensured a consistent level of professionalism, it ensured that all rallies were 'on-song'. This minimised the risk of alternate expressions of militant, muscular unionism detracting from the message. In suppressing divergent union and workers' identities it did, however, lead to some dissatisfaction on the part of some groups of workers.

The ACTU's strategic choices in the construction and framing of their campaign as an inclusive community protest attempted to honour both traditional blue-collar unionists and the growing number of casual and contingent service sector workers (who have less well-defined identities as workers and are less often unionised). Their decision to frame the protest as a 'community' campaign attempted to reach *all* workers, not only current unionists, and necessitated a high level of centralised control. Their choices did reduce the democratic expression on the day to some extent and likewise the mobilizing of activists (as open public debate about varied responses to the legislation, including the taking of direct action, was not facilitated through the website or within the day of action). However, in the context of the ACTU's specific strategic requirements and their cultural and industrial identity, their decision to broadcast one message across Australia was tactically understandable.

### **The Effectiveness of media Strategies in the Rights at work campaign**

Shaun Wilson's analysis of polling undertaken by AC Nielsen and Roy Morgan Research in 2005 shows a very high level of public opposition to the proposed reforms throughout the second half of 2005 with very little growth of support achieved through the Government's very expensive 'Work Choices' advertising campaign (Wilson 2005). People (especially those in the 35-49 year age bracket) appear to be particularly concerned that the changes will 'make them worse off' with 42% of them believing the changes will be bad for them (Wilson, 2005:293). Wilson argues that the success of the labour movement's campaigning (both through mass media and grassroots actions) has re-established the labour movement as 'a dynamic in Australian politics' and 'the most effective opponent to the Howard government' (Wilson, 2005:294). He notes that whilst the opposition to the Government's reforms was first stimulated through the ACTU's advertising campaign, it may have been bolstered by some people's opposition to the extent of public revenue used by the government on (what many considered to be) ideological advertising. Unpublished ACTU polling data supports Wilson's analysis, indicating significantly increased numbers of respondents believe that Industrial Relations is a 'very important' issue, up by almost 20%. Likewise support for the right to join and be active in a trade union had also significantly increased (Janet Giles, SAUnions, pers. comm.).

The ACTU and its affiliated unions cannot overcome the legislation on their own. They cannot successfully prevent employers from exploiting the opportunities offered by the new legislation through intimidatory actions. Alliances with the ALP and minor parties are essential if this legislation is to be overturned. So too, are alliances with the reasonable employers, those who do treat workers fairly and pay them well, but who may be forced through the conditions of market competition to reduce such conditions over time under the new legislation. Their voices, together with those of the churches and

social welfare organisations, are necessary to win over the Australian community, and especially those young workers who opinion polls show are more likely to believe they will be *advantaged* by the new legislation (Wilson 2005). Neale Towart credits much of the campaign's success to the ACTU's strategy of framing the issues at stake in the context of the family and of community/collective good. He points out that this is in direct contrast to the predictions of the Business Council of Australia which forecast that the next twenty years will see an abandoning of care for community and collective identities in favour of a dramatic rise in individualism (Towart, 2005:270). In this context the campaign becomes one with a far broader social relevance.

The strategy of holding a rally to listen to a message from Melbourne 'headquarters' has had mixed reception. It undoubtedly was a public relations success. Press coverage of the following day placed the rally as front-page news on most capital city daily papers and the reporting included discussion of both campaign strategies and the ACTU's concerns about the legislation. The event was amongst the lead stories on most commercial television news broadcasts (certainly it led on all SA stations). The coverage was largely favourable with key segments of the leaders' speeches together with those by church spokespeople and the testimonies of workers, being replayed on most stations, thus the ACTU's message was clearly projected into Australian living-rooms. The main criticisms aired by opponents seemed to be challenges to estimates of the crowd numbers attending. This is a traditional way to try to discredit the legitimacy of public concern regarding an issue but in the context of the footage it seemed lame. Given the distributed nature of the satellite events accurate crowd numbers were hard to assess, but most press and police reports agreed that the attendance was particularly large in Melbourne and Adelaide was also said to have an historic attendance.

'Constructing a powerful collective identity is crucial not only in expressing protest to external targets' (Taylor and van Dyke, 2004:270) but also to build the movement's internal strength and vitality. As social movements depend heavily upon the success of their communicative strategies, largely because they are frequently employing indirect forms of political persuasion, they need media to cover their activities and, as much as possible, to give some favourable attention to their concerns (whilst recognising that mainstream commercial media remain largely hostile to social movements). A web site such as the 'Rights at work' site can assist in this but it is limited by its capacity to reach only those already motivated to look for the information. Mass media reporting of an event such as the day of action, however, reaches many people who are as yet, uncertain of their views on the issue. The inclusion of sound-bites and footage from the Sky Channel broadcast, on all television news reports, ensured that the ACTU got their message across in their own words, around the nation.

The potential positive outcomes of public protest are enhanced by displays 'that tap into prevailing beliefs about democratic practices' (Taylor and van Dyke, 2004:279). In this process the framing of the actions and issues is vital. If the organisers can frame an issue in a way that links it into existing mainstream discourses of fairness, democracy, and/or of widely accepted social values their chances of success are enhanced. The ACTU's Rights at work campaign combined the historical struggle for workers' rights, through testimonies of individuals involved in those earlier campaigns, with contemporary arguments. It also featured endorsements from well known Australian figures from the arts and entertainment industries, church and

welfare representatives. Burrow called those who featured on the Sky Channel broadcast 'courageous working Australians standing up for their families and their communities', thus redefining again the nature of the struggle, union identity and the terrain on which the campaign is being conducted. In the post 9/11 era of official intimidation of those who protest, the era of sedition laws and the threat of imprisonment of those who might be inciting protest or terrorist acts, speaking out for your own and your colleagues' rights can be seen as a courageous act and necessary to preserve and strengthen democracy. This was one of the fundamental points of the ACTU's broadcast. They argued democracy in Australia, and the very essence of its social fabric, is threatened on several fronts by a government driven by an ideological compulsion to change, rather than a demonstrated need to implement such change.

### **Conclusion**

The ACTU's use of Sky Channel to broadcast the day of protest to over 300 locations across Australia and subsequently via the net, did represent significant innovation and changes to traditional union campaign tactics. It adopted a sophisticated political advertising strategy that combined historical images of labour struggle, nationalistic expressions, values based rhetoric, snapshots of diverse twenty-first century work experiences with the contemporary challenges of achieving work and family balance. The package, though its live, televised and web-based forms, successfully creates a strong sense of community, even if some union members, used to more robust expressions of their political views, found the broadcast and rally disempowering. Such unionists have other opportunities to actively participate in the on-going campaign and in actions through their individual unions. The ACTU presented this package across the country in a way that ensured maximum positive mass media coverage and minimised opportunities for individual expressions of outrage or violence. It used the opportunity presented by publicising the day of protest to invite all workers (unionist or not) to engage with the website and to consider the possibility of becoming active in the campaign. The campaign has not, as yet, developed a highly participative discussion profile on the website although the fundraising and identifying as a supporter functions of the website appear to have been successful. These elements of the campaign may develop further throughout 2006 to 2007.

This paper has considered the unprecedented reliance on television advertising and the Sky Channel broadcast to communicate opposition to the Work Choices legislation and to project a reinvigorated image of family-friendly contemporary community unionism. It recognises that such a strategy cannot please all the diverse constituencies of the ACTU. Many of the strands of the broadcast comprise traditional appeals to constructions of Australian identity, fairness, and democracy that are familiar to us from previous union campaigns but they have been given a new twist and, due to the nature of the current political context, have an acute saliency. Most striking is the construction of a hybrid campaign that worked on a number of levels simultaneously to create a strong sense of community and a reinvigorated sense of identity. This identity, whilst not specifically labelled as 'union', clearly invited identification with trade union values and goals, and with active participation in the movement for change. The preliminary indications are that it was successful both in attracting a high level of attention to industrial relations as a key issue of concern to voters and in attracting higher levels of support to trade unionism

than for many years previously. It remains to be seen just how successful this campaign will be in the longer term.

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