

RESEARCH NOTE

The Backgrounds and Careers of South Island Union Officials

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This note profiles the backgrounds and careers of one particular group of people who work in industrial relations: full-time trade union officials. Personal characteristics, motivations for becoming involved in a union career, and union work histories are all documented. The data suggest that the labour market for union officials is in a state of considerable flux and in part this is attributed to the process of union restructuring.

Introduction

The Employment Contracts Act has attracted much interest in New Zealand industrial relations research. A review of recent issues of this Journal would lend support to this proposition. Naturally, this interest has been warranted given the sweeping changes introduced by the new Act. Studies which have monitored the industrial relations environment following the implementation of the Act have been necessary to determine just how the legislation is operating in practice. One such study has examined how trade unions have been faring under the Act (Boxall & Haynes, 1992). Notwithstanding the important insights that have already been gained through studies such as these, research opportunities still remain insofar as what is known about those who derive their living from working in industrial relations. One such occupational group is the full-time trade union official.

While earlier work in New Zealand has investigated the education (Olssen, 1982) and ethnic origins (Ó Brosnacháin, 1987) of top-level trade union officials, other aspects about the full-time union official remain to be documented. For example, what do the men and women who make up the industrial staff of New Zealand trade unions look like? What type of backgrounds have they come from? How long have they been involved in union work and why were they motivated to become union officials? These questions are explored by referring to a recent study of 91 union officials.

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Research methodology and setting

An interview survey of full-time trade union officials based in the South Island of New Zealand was conducted between February and May 1992. Tape-recorded interviews were conducted with 91 officials which represented a response rate of 73 percent of those from traditional unions who worked in the South Island. Specialist portfolios such as education, research, and legal officers were ruled out of the population as were "non-union bargaining agents". The research sample was drawn from 27 different unions ranging in size from 1,100 to 60,500 members and representing a wide range of industries and occupations. Officials from different levels of their unions (for example, organisers, secretaries) were included in the sample. Fifty-seven of those surveyed were employed by national unions, while 34 respondents worked for organisations with a more limited coverage, that is, regional or district unions. Generally, the sample reflected a broad cross-section of the union movement.

Before documenting some of the findings from the research, a brief note about the structural setting or backdrop to the study is necessary.

The union movement in New Zealand has undergone significant structural change in recent years. One catalyst for change was the advent of the minimum membership requirement in the Labour Relations Act 1987 (Brosnan, et al., 1990). Further rationalisation of union structures has been given impetus by the Employment Contracts Act 1991. This process of structural change was expected to affect union officials career opportunities. Twenty of the unions represented by those surveyed and employing some 74 of the sample had recently been involved in an amalgamation with other unions. Prospects for amalgamation in the immediate future are also reported here. Sixty-three respondents based in 21 of the unions indicated that their organisations were currently involved in the amalgamation process, either by way of having recently concluded an agreement to amalgamate with one or more other unions, or by having on-going discussions with this objective in mind.

Personal characteristics

In terms of a collective profile the "typical" union official in the sample could be summarised as being a New Zealand born and bred male, between 31 and 50 years of age, married, and with dependents living at home. He was likely to hold academic and/or technical-professional qualifications of some kind. He was unlikely to belong to a political party. The types of social origins or backgrounds and previous occupations from which officials came were more diverse. This generalised profile is developed in the sections below.

Sex

There were 65 men and 26 women among those sampled. The numerical dominance of men in this study is consistent with work conducted elsewhere where, similarly, men have been shown to outnumber women in paid union structures (for example, Cupper, 1983; Olssen, 1982).

Age

The ages of the research sample ranged from 25 to 58 years with an overall average of 42 years. Seventy-four respondents were between 31 and 50 years of age; 34 of these were between 31 and 40 years while 40 officials were between 41 and 50 years of age. There were only seven and 10 officials who were 30 or less, or over 50 years of age, respectively.

Marital status and children

Seventy-three of the 91 officials were married (*de jure* or *de facto*), with 64 of these having dependents living with them at home. The high incidence of dependents was not surprising given the relatively young average age of the sample.

Country of origin and childhood

Most of those surveyed were born and raised in New Zealand, with the United Kingdom accounting for the origins of most of the remaining few (see Table 1). They were, therefore, predominantly New Zealand-oriented in terms of their values, culture, and early life experiences. While public opinion may maintain a tenet concerning "foreign agitators" in the union movement, this survey did not empirically support this belief. Moreover, the proportion of South Island union officials born in New Zealand closely reflected the proportion of the New Zealand-born resident population (84.1%) (Department of Statistics, 1992), thereby further undermining the "foreign agitator" thesis.

Table 1: Birthplaces and Country that Officials Grew Up In (n = 91)

Country	Birthplace	Country that Grew Up In
New Zealand	79	81
United Kingdom	9	6
Australia	2	4
United States	1	0

Educational qualifications

For analytical purposes, the educational qualifications that officials held were divided into two categories: academic and technical-professional. Thirty-four of the sample had not received formal academic qualifications of any kind, while 33 respondents had earned high school qualifications of some type. Twenty-four officials had received university-level education, of whom 10 had completed degrees. Fourteen officials had attended university at some stage, but had either not yet completed their degrees, or had enrolled in short term (one year) diploma courses only.

Seventeen officials held technical qualifications such as an apprenticeship or trades certificate, while 19 had earned professional qualifications. Nursing and teaching diplomas were the most common among the latter. While the majority of officials did have academic and/or technical-professional qualifications, 24 respondents did not hold qualifications of either type.

Political affiliations

Political party membership was not widespread among the research sample, with only 26 officials belonging to a political party. This was somewhat surprising in view of the historical links between trade unions and the Labour Party in particular. Most of these 26 respondents were affiliated to the Labour Party, with a smaller number associated with the New Labour or Socialist Unity Parties. The New Labour Party is a relative newcomer on the political scene. It was founded on traditional working class values which, it believed, had been largely ignored by the Labour Party when most recently in Government (1984 - 1990). The Socialist Unity Party (S.U.P.) is, as its name suggests, located on the far left of the political spectrum.

Of those who did not belong to a political party, 34 officials indicated they had previously been members. Thirty-one of the sample had not joined a political party at any stage. The latter finding is worthy of note given the preceding discussion about traditional union involvement in the political sphere.

For those officials who had previously belonged to a political party, the Labour Party, as would be expected, dominated in accounting for the single largest group of previous party affiliations. Disenchantment with the Labour Government (1984 - 1990) was a principal reason for party disaffiliation. The following comments drawn directly from the taped interviews summarised these feelings: "The Labour Government took no notice of the Labour Party"; and "The Labour Party had forgotten where they really come from".

A second, less virulent explanation for disaffiliation, was simply the general loss of interest in party politics. Some typical remarks included: "I just haven't got round to paying my subs"; and "I don't have the time or energy". For those who had severed personal links with the political system, the evidence pointed to a mood of disillusionment with the political process itself. This impression was supported by the small reverse trend away from even the alternative minor Parties such as New Labour, S.U.P., and the Communist Party.

Social origins and family activism in unions

Generalisations concerning the early backgrounds of union officials abound. These often assume that a shared working class identity or heritage is the pattern for those who are employed within the union movement. To help determine whether this was the case the sample were asked to recall whether their parents (or any other immediate family member) had ever been union activists. Similar to Solomon *et al.* (1986), active involvement in the union movement was recognised if individuals had formally held any elected or appointed union position. For 24 officials, at least one other member of their family - usually a parent - had been active, and without exception these relatives had served at the voluntary or unpaid level only (for example, union delegate). There was therefore no family history of union

activism for the majority of sampled officials.

If respondents had not been directly exposed to unionism in an early period of their lives, the types of backgrounds they had experienced were sought. Thirty-four officials mentioned that they had come from "labour" or "working class" origins, while 21 had not. The answer was unclear for 12 others. Thus, the overall pattern that emerged among the sample concerning their social origins was one of diversity rather than uniformity: a quarter had come from families where members had themselves once participated in union structures; slightly over a third had been less directly introduced to unionism, but yet had experienced a labour or working class background; a further quarter did not have backgrounds which suggested union activism as a career.

Previous occupations

A further variable which provides some insight into the backgrounds of the officials sampled, is the main occupation held prior to becoming a full-time union official. The New Zealand Standard Classification of Occupations (N.Z.S.C.O.) was used to categorise the sample by occupational background. Table 2 shows the distribution of officials by previous occupation type. It reveals considerable diversity in the nature of previous work. Two categories, however, did tend to dominate. Fifty-three officials had previously been employed in either the production and related areas, or had worked in professional-technical occupations. Included among the former category were freezing workers, truck drivers, and those in various trades groups. Nursing and teaching were common previous occupations listed in the professional and related workers category.

Table 2: Previous Occupations (n = 91)

Professional, technical & related workers	18
Administrative and managerial workers	3
Clerical & related workers	10
Sales workers	5
Service workers	11
Agricultural, animal husbandry, fishermen and forestry workers etc.	4
Production & related workers, tspt. equipment operators, labourers etc.	35
No main occupation*	5

* These officials had previously been either university students or home-makers.

The following section examines the extent of union activity of officials in the sample while working in their previous occupations.

Union work histories

Unpaid union work

It has been established by earlier research (for example, Cupper, 1983) that voluntary or unpaid union office often precedes full-time union employment. The present survey supported this orthodoxy, with the large majority of the sample (n = 80) having previously held an elected unpaid union position. This pattern strongly suggests that unpaid office is a typical requirement prior to securing a full-time union role. Sixty officials had been former members of the union that currently employed them, and of this number, 54 had also held a voluntary position in the union (see Table 3). The table also shows that a significant proportion of those surveyed (n = 37) had not previously worked as an unpaid official for the union they currently represented. However, many of these had served their unpaid "apprenticeship" in other unions.

Table 3: Previous Unpaid Union Experience (n = 91)

Unpaid official for current union only	43
Unpaid official for both current union and other unions	11
Unpaid official for other unions only	26
Never been an unpaid official for any union	11

Although 11 respondents had not held an elected union position prior to securing full-time office, almost all of them had previously been associated with unions or union activity in some way. For instance, five had acted as "unofficial" spokespersons in their workplaces - they regularly attended union meetings and often had fellow workers seek them out to discuss various workplace issues. Two officials had worked in a clerical capacity for their unions before moving to the industrial side of the organisation, while a further two had had friends who worked as full-time union officials.

The average length of time that the sample had served in voluntary union positions prior to their becoming full-time officials was slightly over six and one-half years. While there were no significant differences in the average time spent in unpaid union office by the type of employing union (i.e., manufacturing versus servicing sector), men had more experience of voluntary union positions (average 7.52 years) than did women (average 4.29 years).

Reasons for becoming union officials

Those sampled were asked to explain the principal factors or issues which led them to become active in an unpaid union official capacity. With the assistance of previous research, responses to the open-ended question were subsequently coded, the answers providing the basis for Table 4.

Table 4: Reasons for Becoming Unpaid Union Officials (n = 78)^a

Introduce Change in the Union or Workplace	26
Passive Acceptance	18
Family Background	15
Injustices - Incurred by Self	8
Injustices - Incurred by Others	6
Challenge/Interest/Curiosity	3
Career/Job Related Prospects	2

^a Excludes 11 respondents who, as previously discussed, were not elected unpaid officials, and 2 others whose answers could not be classified.

The single most common reason for becoming an unpaid official had been the desire to initiate and manage change. Twenty-six officials explained that this was their primary reason for first becoming active within the union movement. The desired changes related to practices occurring either within their places of employment, or the unions to which they belonged. The following remarks typified the motives of this group: "It was the only chance I had to have a say in the way things actually happened . . . it meant you had a say in what colour the lunchroom was painted, basically"; and "A group of us became active through the structures to try and improve the democracy and organisation of the branch".

The second most frequently cited reason for originally becoming involved in an elected unpaid position could best be described as a reluctant or passive acceptance of the new responsibility. Simply stated, officials said their involvement was "accidental", or "no-one else wanted to do it, so I put my hand up". There were occasions when, unknowingly, respondents had found themselves assuming an official role within the union. One person commented that his involvement had started because he had been "off sick the day they had the delegate elections".

The type of family background referred to earlier was a third factor to which 15 officials attributed their initial activism in the union movement. Some had quite vivid memories of certain significant events in New Zealand's industrial history - parental involvement in the 1951 waterfront dispute being the most notable. While a few believed their "social conscience" resulted from their "Catholicism", some metaphorically quipped that they had been "fed unionism around the meal table".

More traditional ideological reasons were mentioned by 14 of those who had held unpaid union office. Some individuals had personally experienced a "raw deal" or had been "screwed and shafted by the boss", and therefore sought a union position to remedy this situation. Similarly, witnessing injustices which had been meted out to others provided the catalyst for six officials becoming union activists. They were frustrated or "sick to death of seeing fellow workers getting ripped off" and wanted to "help those who can't help themselves". Few officials reported becoming unpaid activists because they perceived union work would benefit their own careers or jobs, or would provide greater challenge or interest than their current jobs allowed.

The principal reasons given for becoming paid union officials were three: 16 of the sample cited ideological motives (for example, "improve the lot of workers" and "political activism"); 49 took up full-time union employment for instrumental or personal reasons (for example, "greater perceived job satisfaction", "new challenges", and "opportunities to better oneself"); while 23 reported some combination of ideological and instrumental motives. Three officials did not provide a clear answer.

There were more similarities than differences in the reasons for becoming active in unpaid positions, and again in the paid side of union work. That is, as an individual made the transition from part-time to full-time union work, the motivations for doing so were relatively parallel to their reasons for first securing a voluntary union position. For example, those who mentioned they became unpaid officials for passive reasons or because it was felt unpaid work would be a challenge were more likely to have become paid officials for instrumental reasons. Respondents who had not previously worked in unpaid union office also tended to report they became paid union officials for instrumental reasons. Similarly, those who indicated that injustices or family backgrounds had been their initial catalyst into unpaid union activism, were more likely to identify ideological motives or a combination of motives as their reasons for entering full-time union employment.

Paid union work

This section presents information about the work histories of the research sample while specifically employed in the full-time union official occupation.

The distribution for the number of years the sampled officials had held their current positions, had been employed with their particular unions, and had been employed in total as paid union officials is set out in Table 5.

Table 5: Tenure in Position, Union, and Occupation (n = 91)

	Years in Position	Years in Union	Years in Occupation
Less than or equal 1 year	23	15	8
Over 1, ≤ 2 years	19	14	9
Over 2, ≤ 5 years	26	26	28
Over 5, ≤ 10 years	14	18	21
Over 10, ≤ 15 years	8	11	17
Over 15 years	1	7	8
	mean = 4.03 yrs	mean = 5.75 yrs	mean = 7.13 yrs

The Table suggests that a significant amount of turnover has been experienced in the full-time union official labour market in recent years. Close to half of the sample had been in their current positions for two years or less, while nearly a third of those interviewed had been with their unions for the same period of time. Union restructuring (for example, amalgamations), and the collapse of the New Zealand Clerical Workers Union with the subsequent re-

employment of some of those officials made redundant, were identified as primary factors explaining the level of staff movement.

Further analyses revealed significant differences in the average time spent working in the current position, union, and union official occupation by union type and gender. Reporting patterns for only one of the tenure measures - total time spent in the occupation - respondents employed by unions in the manufacturing sector of the economy were more likely to have been officials longer on average (8.74 years) than their colleagues in servicing sector unions (5.87 years). Additionally, men had, on average, worked almost twice as long in the full-time union official occupation (8.3 years) as had women respondents (4.22 years).

To further underscore the apparently transitory nature of the labour market for full-time union officials, follow-up telephone enquiries were made in May 1993, 12 months after the conclusion of the last interviews. Sixteen of the 91 officials (17.6%) had subsequently left the unions they previously worked for, with at least three of these now employed by different unions. The researcher was unable to determine categorically whether some of the other 13 officials had also changed unions, but what evidence there was seemed to suggest this was unlikely. While the reasons for leaving the union were unknown in a few cases, illness, redundancy, and retirement were identified by those who remained as some of the principal reasons for the departure of their colleagues.

Intra and inter-union mobility

These final paragraphs describe more fully the rate of job mobility within and between unions. Sixty-nine of the sample had not experienced a job change since taking up full-time employment with their current union. Twenty-two officials had held more than one position in their current union, with these respondents more likely to have held higher level union office and more likely to have worked for a longer period of time for their union. Overall, there did not appear to be much intra-union movement, but where it did occur, upward mobility was the most common pattern.

Officials employed by unions which had recently been involved in an amalgamation were not counted as having changed unions. Nonetheless, 21 officials (23.1%) indicated they had worked for unions other than their current one. A combination of voluntary and involuntary shifts were among the reasons given by this group for changing unions. For seven respondents, redundancy had been the cause for their change in union employer, while six others indicated they had moved due to dissatisfaction with their previous union. Four officials had sought better opportunities, with family or personal considerations being the reasons given by the remaining few.

No previous New Zealand study has collected data on the frequency of inter-union mobility among full-time officials. In Adams (1977), 19 percent of Canadian field officers were found to have come to their current positions from other unions, while in an Australian survey, Cupper (1983) found that nearly 13 percent of officials in white collar unions had previously worked for other unions. It would appear that movement between unions by the present sample is at least comparable to, if not slightly higher, than that of officials in other English speaking countries.

Conclusions

This note has described the personal characteristics, early motivations, and union work histories of a sample of South Island union officials. While the "typical" official was shown to be a relatively young New Zealand born and bred male, there was significant diversity in the types of origins - social and occupational - that respondents had come from. It was also seen that most officials had served an "apprenticeship" in unpaid activist positions before moving into full-time union employment, with the reasons for becoming active varying considerably among individuals. The nature of these initial motivations tended to remain relatively stable when officials decided to shift across to the paid structures of the union movement. The majority of officials had been appointed to their present positions within the not-too-distant past, this pattern of mobility being attributed in part to union restructuring. Additionally, nearly one in four respondents had worked for different unions implying that some may see full-time union work as a career. Together, these patterns suggest that employment within the union official occupation has been in a state of recent flux. There is no reason to believe this pattern will decelerate in the immediate future in light of further union restructuring proposals. Future amalgamations, for example, are likely to continue to have a significant impact on employment in the full-time union official labour market.

References

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