**How is organising playing out? A three-country study in retail**

Amanda Pyman\*, Andreas Pekarek, Iona Byford, Samantha Lynch, Jane Parker, Robin Price & Janis Bailey

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\*Corresponding Author:

Associate Professor Amanda Pyman

Faculty of Business & Economics,

Monash University, Caulfield Vic 3145

Australia

Email: [Amanda.Pyman@monash.edu](mailto:Amanda.Pyman@monash.edu)

**Introduction**

Trade union renewal strategies have become increasingly important in the context of challenging conditions for unions worldwide (Frege & Kelly 2003). This paper examines union renewal, and in particular, how organising strategies play out in the retail industry in three countries: the United Kingdom (UK), Australia and New Zealand (NZ). The trade unions that are the focus of this study are: the Union of Shop Distributive and Allied Workers (USDAW) in the UK, the Shop Distributive and Allied Employees’ Association (SDA) in Australia and FIRST Union in NZ. Our analysis reveals both similarities and differences in how retail unions in the three countries are organising workers. In particular, our analysis identifies an empirical puzzle: the NZ union is different with respect to organising. In this paper, we seek to explain why these differences exist: namely, union leadership and risk and urgency.

The paper makes theoretical and empirical contributions. With respect to our theoretical contributions, there is a lack of extant knowledge about union leadership (Hall et al. 2011; Knowles 2007). Our findings add to the emerging body of research which highlights links between the political orientation of union leaders and union strategy (Darlington 2009). By extension, our findings and analysis shed light on questions concerning the ‘politics’ of organising (Simms & Holgate 2010; Simms 2012). Our empirical contribution lies in meeting Hyman’s (2001) call for in-depth comparative analysis of union strategy, and, in the fact that retail organising is not well studied or understood (Coulter 2013: 2). There is little research that truly evaluates union strategies across nations (Hyman 2001), and where it does so, is generally at the level of the union movement (Frege & Kelly, 2003; Baccaro, Hamann & Turner, 2003), and/or is a by-product of a comparison of international industrial relations systems (Bamber and Lansbury, 1998). Our transnational comparative approach enables a more substantive contribution to the literature than a single-country study.

**The Retail Context**

Retail is a major employer (around 10 per cent of the workforce) in most developed countries. Trade unions in the sector have higher density than most other private sectors yet the retail labour market is characterised by widespread use of contingent and low-paid labour (particularly marginalised workers such as youth and women). Retail unionism therefore provides a unique setting in which to study trade union challenges and renewal.

Differences in country size are reflected in retail industry size. Australia’s retail market is eight times larger and more geographically dispersed than NZ’s, but similar in that the largest industry subdivision is supermarkets, fresh produce and liquor (Albertson, 2010; Pech, Nelms, Yuen and Bolton, 2009). In Australia, Coles and Woolworths dominate the supermarket sector with over 75 per cent of the market (Griffith and Wright, 2009). Woolworths Australia, which operates under a range of brands in NZ, had 43 per cent of that grocery market in 2007, with the NZ firm Foodstuffs taking the rest (Speedy, 2007), making them large employers with significant market power (Baret, Lehndorff and Sparks, 2000). While some sectors of retail have suffered during the global financial crisis, supermarkets and food have continued to experience growth (Productivity Commission [Australia], 2011; Statistics NZ, 2011a). Thus, supermarket chains are key sites for union recruitment.

The labour force is gendered, youthful, part-time and, in Australia, casual. Women represent around 56 per cent of the retail workforce in both countries, and around 30 per cent of employees are aged less than 25 years (Productivity Commission, 2011; Statistics NZ, 2011b). Part-time work is common, although more so in Australia than in NZ (47 and 34 per cent respectively) (Pech *et al.,* 2009; Statistics NZ, 2006[[1]](#footnote-1)). One notable contrast is with respect to the proportion of casual workers (that is, those without employment security). In Australia, 45 per cent of retail workers are casual (Pech *et al.,* 2009), compared to NZ, where the figure is only nine per cent (Statistics NZ, 2008). Australian employers have no constraints on employing temporary (‘casual’) workers, although such workers receive a 25 per cent loading to compensate them for foregone leave benefits.

Australia and NZ had similar IR legislation for much of the twentieth century. However, the path to neo-liberalism in NZ commenced earlier and was more radical, contributing to the two countries’ now quite different contemporary IR systems (Barry and Wailes, 2004). NZ’s minimum wage is $NZ540.00 for a 40 hour week or $NZ13.50 per hour, while Australia’s is $AU606.40 for a 38 hour week or $AU15.96 per hour.[[2]](#footnote-2) NZ now has no underpinning system similar to Australia’s industry-focussed ‘modern awards’ which are of particular significance for the low-paid (and their unions). For instance, Australia’s minimum wage in *retail* and the floor for collective bargaining in the industry, set out in the General Retail Award, is currently $AU666.10 – around 10 per cent above the minimum wage. Further, Australia’s compulsory arbitration system continues (although somewhat attenuated) and, following reforms under the *Fair Work Act 2009*, now explicitly fosters (single-employer) collective bargaining (Creighton, 2011), thus providing a more solid process for collective bargaining than in NZ. However, unlike NZ, there has been no capacity for multi-employer bargaining for 20 years. In NZ, the trajectory is the reverse; 2011 amendments to the *Employment Relations Act 2000* included limitation of the rights of unions to workplace access. Collective bargaining coverage is therefore much higher in Australia than NZ. In Australia, collective agreements apply to 43 per cent of the whole workforce, and 37 per cent of retail, while in NZ, overall collective bargaining coverage is only 13 per cent, and a mere five per cent in retail (Blumenfeld, Ryall and Kiely, 2011). However, industrial action in Australia remains highly constrained (McCrystal, 2009), more so than in NZ where a decade-long run of falling industrial action figures appears to have come to an end (Department of Labour [NZ], 2011).

Both countries’ labour movements have suffered membership declines in the past generation. Union membership in NZ was decimated under the highly neoliberal *Employment Contracts Act 1991*, falling from over 40 per cent in 1985 to 17.4 per cent in 2011 (Department of Labour [NZ], 2011a). Unionism in Australia has suffered a similar decline; overall density is currently 18 per cent, having fallen from 43 per cent in 1992 (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2012). The union movement in both countries, like others in Anglophone countries (Gall and Fiorito, 2012), is highly concerned about this decline, and has been focussing on a range of revitalisation strategies, including more effective organising and alliance-building (Price, Bailey & Pyman 2012).

Given these contextual factors, and the differences in country size, the two unions not surprisingly present some sharp contrasts. The SDA’s national membership exceeds 200,000 (SDA, 2011a; SDA, 2011b). It is a quintessential ‘industry union’, focused almost entirely on retail, not needing to amalgamate partly because of its sheer size (it is currently Australia’s largest union). At 16 per cent, it has one of the highest levels of union density in the private sector in Australia (ABS, 2011b). FIRST Union is a general union of around 25,000 members, only 10,000 of whom are in retail (Department of Labour [NZ], 2011a; FIRST Union, 2012). FIRST Union covers not only retail, but also transport and logistics, wood, textiles/clothing/laundry/baking and since 2011, banking, insurance and finance. In contrast with the SDA, FIRST Union has the strategic advantage of coverage rights for workers across the entire supply chain: distribution centres, retailers and transport providers, potentially providing the union with enhanced bargaining power (see Behrens *et al.,* 2004). Both unions’ membership strongholds are in food retailing (ABS, 2011b; FIRST Union, 2011). Hence, supermarkets are a key focus for both unions’ organising efforts, although other large non-food retail chains are also important.

The unions’ politics are in stark contrast. The SDA, with its origins in Australia’s strong Irish, working-class history, is aligned to the right wing of the Australian Labor Party (ALP) (McCann, 1994; Warhurst, 2008). That influence remains today in the union and in politics. The SDA was aligned with the Catholic ‘Groupers’ of the 1950s, who sought to rid unions of communist influence and were the origin of the union’s conservative social ideology. For example, the SDA lobbies parliamentarians to adopt conservative positions on conscience votes regarding issues such as abortion and gay marriage (Warhurst, 2008). The SDA exerts political influence in various ways: as a large voting *bloc* within both the ALP and union peak bodies such as the ACTU; and via ex-SDA officials who are now members of parliament; noting that the ALP has held office federally since 2007. As part of this *bloc*, the SDA has exerted influence over IR reforms put in place by the ALP government, particularly the *Fair Work Act 2009*. In short, the SDA has long been known for its moderate ‘business unionism’ approach (McCann, 1994; Game and Pringle, 1983), which relies on assumptions about the conservative, non-militant nature of the membership and, prior to 1996 when the laws changed, resulted in closed shop agreements with major retailers (Mortimer, 2001).

In contrast, FIRST Union leaders’ political affiliations tend to the socialist Left, with a few ex-officials having in the past held parliamentary positions and exerted significant influence over the public policy agenda. Moreover, the union’s campaigning history, discussed in the findings, indicates that it is willing to ‘upset’ employers, as evidenced by a recent community campaign for more pay at the Levin New World supermarket (NDU, 2011). However, NZ has had a conservative government since 2008, re-elected for a second term in 2011.

**Method**

Answering Hyman’s (2001) call for in-depth, qualitative and comparative analysis of union strategy, we seek to build a dynamic and contextualised understanding of organising strategies across the three countries, based upon semi-structured interviews with trade union officials and organisers across disparate geographical regions in all three countries. In total, 36 interviews were undertaken across the three countries between 2009 and 2012. All interviews and focus groups were digitally recorded and transcribed. The data was analysed using NVivo software, based on key themes that emerged from the data and the extant literature. Union policy documents were also used to validate the empirical data. With six interviewers from six institutions working in different combinations and drawing on different research backgrounds, including management strategy in retail and union organising and effectiveness, the research approach enabled a diversity of insights and understandings to be brought to this project.

Typically, retail unions have been seen as personifying ‘business unionism’, but the approach taken in this paper unpacks their approaches and situates them in the broader context of the challenges and opportunities that each union confronts. The ‘outlier’ in terms of approach is NZ’s FIRST Union, which adopts a more militant approach than either of the other unions, with strong evidence of a militant approach, neither of which is typical of USDAW or the SDA. The latter unions adopt more collaborative approaches with management, identifying a main union constraint as the ‘nature of the membership’. However, the approaches within all three unions are not totalising; there are debates and new strategies emerging, which, within the context of the more-or-less democratic frameworks governing union operation in each of the three countries, could foreshadow strategy changes in the future.

**Results**

All three unions share a **policy emphasis** on growth through member recruitment and organising. In all three unions, the shift to an organising strategy has been linked to a modernisation agenda. As one national official in USDAW explained:

*‘………The potential for this union is significant but of course potential – I mean anybody can say that. The problem is that strategy underpinning it and that’s why we went for this whole modernisation of the union. In other words, we put in a business model…If we’re ambitious about the membership, we’ve got to increase the membership and therefore have the right campaigns and right strategy’ (USDAW National Official 2012).*

In FIRST union, union modernisation involved a merger with the finance sector union in 2011.

In each of the three unions, recruitment targets are set centrally and then cascaded down to the lower organisational tiers. However, the three unions differ in the scope of their recruitment efforts. In particular, the SDA in Australia and the USDAW in the UK focus largely on infill recruitment in large retailers with existing collective agreements. By contrast, FIRST union in NZ pursues a more diversified organising strategy, placing an emphasis on growth in unorganised firms alongside infill recruitment at its established sites. One senior FIRST official explained that the union conducts ‘campaigns’ for membership and collective agreements at one or two unorganised companies each year. For example, in 2011 FIRST targeted what it described as two moderately sized retail chains, ‘Rebel Sport’ and ‘Briscoes’. In addition, the union has an ongoing campaign to organise individual franchises belonging to the large ‘Pak’n’Save’ retail chain. Given Pak’n’Save’s franchise model, and its hostility to the union, this campaign has been resource-intensive and its effectiveness has varied across regions. As one organiser from Auckland explained:

*‘Organising those ten Pak’n’Save supermarkets was a great achievement and they’re big supermarkets; the largest one in West Auckland employs more than four hundred people. I still think that we have a problem because we haven’t organised Foodstuffs supermarkets [parent company of Pak’n’Save], except for in Auckland. I think that’s something the union needs to resource. It’s just very, very, very difficult work because it’s franchised’ (FIRST Regional Official 2012).*

FIRST union also devoted resources to organising ‘Bunnings’, another major franchise-based retailer, further illustrating its willingness to engage in what might be termed ‘house-to-house’ organising. In contrast, the SDA and USDAW have not systematically targeted individual franchises, rather focusing on securing national agreements with entire retail chains. In part, FIRST’s aggressive attempts to expand its retail membership reflect the strategic emphasis placed on the sector by the union’s changed leadership since the mid-2000s (National Official 2012).

Our analysis also found similarities and differences in the **methods** the three unions used to recruit and organise retail workers. All three unions stressed the role of good relationships with employers as conducive to organising. Essentially, this meant that the employer accepted the unions as legitimate and thus supported them in recruiting and representing workers. Where these ‘partnership’ arrangements were in place, union officials typically enjoyed strong and amicable personal relationships with store managers as well as corporate HR managers. The strength of these relationships facilitated information exchange and the informal resolution of individual grievances. Aspects of these partnership arrangements were formally expressed in collective agreements, which typically provided the union with a range of supportive provisions such as access to new staff inductions and paid time off for workplace delegates to attend training and represent workers. Not surprisingly, all three unions reported a strong reliance on these supportive arrangements in organising workers.

However, our data indicate that FIRST is more reserved in its embrace of a partnership philosophy than the SDA and USDAW. This reflects the struggle involved in securing partnership arrangements with previously hostile employers, as well as ongoing hostility to the union from other key employers. In particular, it was only as a result of a major industrial dispute in 2006 that FIRST was able to develop a very good relationship with ‘Progressive Enterprises’, parent company of the major supermarket chain ‘Countdown’. In this dispute the company responded to a strike of workers in its distribution centres by locking them out for almost a month. The dispute was eventually settled in FIRST’s favour, prompting a much more conciliatory approach to industrial relations by the company. However, as the following quote illustrates, the dispute was still fresh in the union’s collective memory; a sentiment expressed by several interviewees in FIRST union:

*‘We went to war with Woolworths Australia when they locked our stores workers out in 2006. And it's fair to say, since then that we've actually built up a relationship with Progressive where they have, and Woolworths Australia, where they've decided that at this point anyway in our history, it's easier for them to cooperate rather than to be antagonistic. But as we know things come and they go, so we don't take that for granted or expect that it's always going to be that way’ (FIRST Regional Organiser, 2012).*

Indeed, our data suggest that FIRST union had a comparatively militant orientation and made frequent use of industrial and protest tactics in the retail sector as well as in other areas of its coverage. For example, in 2008 retail workers from ‘Farmers’ department stores walked of the job in Auckland and rallied to progress stalled pay negotiations (FIRST, 2008). Similarly, in 2009, FIRST took industrial action during negotiations with the retail chain ‘The Warehouse’ (NBR, 2009). In other areas of its coverage, the union struck in the transport sector in 2009 and in the recycling industry in 2010 (FIRST, 2009; 2010). As one senior official explained: ‘every so often…you need a battle’ (FIRST National Official 2012). In contrast, the SDA is averse to industrial action and USDAW rarely and reluctantly use industrial tactics against retailers.

While FIRST was more prone to industrial militancy than its UK and Australian counterparts, both FIRST and USDAW drew on institutional supports for organising and collective bargaining. Specifically, FIRST aggressively used statutory rights to gain access to hostile employers’ workplaces, most notably in its campaign to organise Pak’n’Save stores:

*‘…so we would show up at a supermarket, ask to speak to the manager and say under the Employment Relations Act we are here to access all the workers in the shop right now. We want to walk around and talk to everyone while they are working. Where do we sign, and are there any specific health and safety rules that you want us to follow. Here is a copy of the Act. And they would absolutely freak out and they’d be like you can’t do that, you can’t do that; and so we’d go ok well is the store owner here we’re happy to talk to him first. So we would talk to the store owner. So the whole intention was to have the conversation with the store owner, not to go in and be really disruptive; but we were able to play that card and then we would say to the store owner, either we can talk to people while they are working which could be very disruptive because we will need to talk to your check out operators which is going to disrupt business; and so, what has worked in other supermarkets, is for people to be rostered off for five to ten minutes out of the way of customers, which is what they were very concerned about. So once the first shop agreed to that, every other Pak’n’Save agreed to the same’ (FIRST Regional Organiser 2012).*

Notwithstanding the success in Pak’n’Save, in 2011, amendments to the *Employment Relations Act (NZ)* constrained unions’ workplace access, making it harder for FIRST to rely on these provisions as a launching pad for organising. Similarly, USDAW successfully used the UK’s statutory procedures to compel the Irish betting retailer Ladbrokes into recognizing the union for collective bargaining (USDAW, 2009). By contrast, the SDA in Australia has not used the union recognition provisions of the *Fair Work Act (Cth.)* to organise anti-union employers such as Aldi.

In all three unions, bargaining is seen as central to both organising and recruitment. A particular example in FIRST union is the negotiation of union ‘preference clauses’. However, FIRST stands out as different to the SDA and USDAW, in that the union is both militant and innovative, and yet, uses traditional or conservative servicing tactics. Where FIRST has agreements in place, services and conditions are used as a drawcard for recruitment. So whilst FIRST recruits around bargaining, as do the SDA and USDAW, their traditional methods are underpinned by a militant rather than moderate orientation.

An increased emphasis on membership growth in all three unions has had implications for the **roles** of union leaders, organisers, and activists. One common development has been an increased reliance on performance management techniques to monitor and guide the work of organisers and activists. As one senior USDAW official explained, better planning and performance management were crucial for the union to capitalize on its potential for growth:

*‘…where we’re now coming to is how do we manage performance, expectations, are the managers upskilled enough to be able to manage performance, and that’s not in a kind of a hard fisted way of “you’re not performing”, this is about “how do we support you”…’ (USDAW National Official 2011).*

Whilst still a ‘work in progress’, senior USDAW officials credited the introduction of measures such as personal development plans and regular performance reviews with improving the performance of organisers.

Performance management techniques were also evident in the SDA, at both national and state levels. At the national level:

*‘…the National executive of the union usually meets twice a year and then the National Council once a year…at each of those meetings there is a focus on union membership recruitment…now that might take a whole day…all the time it really needs…we report and we discuss the reports and then we see well is there anything arising from these reports that should be done by us as a group or by the National Office, can we fix up a problem that a branch has encountered here or three, or whatever, can we improve things, there is a whole discussion around that, so it is given the focus at the National Level. So the branch secretary knows that in preparing for a National Exec they are expected to give a written report on recruitment, all the other branch secretaries will also be doing that, so there is an element of competition of course, to what they can show about their performance, so they do go to quite a great extent to produce a comprehensive membership report’ (SDA National Official 2012).*

At the state level within the SDA, performance management techniques were focused on recruitment and membership growth:

*‘it’s appropriate and necessary for the organisation to place an emphasis on growth. I don’t think we should be doing that necessarily at the expense of service delivery, but you can’t do service delivery unless you actually have a membership base to service. So we place a massive emphasis on growth, so we put resources in towards that. We make sure we have a culture within the organisation that is orientated towards making sure that we’re going about the business of signing up new members’ (SDA State Official 2011).*

FIRST union was still in the early phase of performance management, a process linked closely to its use of recruitment targets. The union’s retail leadership drew on recruitment targets to plan its operating budget, manage seasonal fluctuations in staff requirements, and monitor organisers’ performance. However, during interviews with organisers, it emerged that targets were not strictly enforced. Indeed, the union’s retail leadership lamented that the inconsistent use of targets throughout the union limited their value for managing organisers’ performance:

*‘Organisers traditionally in this union have had an awful lot of leeway to be totally planning their day; compared to what it used to be like, it’s way more structured than what it was but it still is in the process of change. The problem for me is that if people don’t meet their individual weekly or monthly growth targets, there isn’t a consequence. And I want to put in consequences, but that’s what I mean about I can’t put in consequences for my lot unless it’s union wide’ (FIRST National Official 2012).*

The above comment suggests that different industry sections of FIRST varied in their approach to the enforcement of recruitment targets, raising questions about the consistent implementation of policy across different parts of the union.

In a marked difference to USDAW and the SDA, FIRST employed a mixture of cross-sector organisers, particularly in more regional areas. This tactic reflected FIRST’s more diverse industry coverage as well as its limited resources. The significance of this observation is that cross-sector organisers were effectively accountable to multiple union leaders. However, the FIRST also had organisers working exclusively in retail, meaning they had a clearer focus on developing membership and activists in that area. Indeed, strong membership growth has allowed FIRST to employ new organisers in retail. Notably, FIRST hired a number of young organisers from the militant service sector union UNITE, thus importing expertise in aggressive campaigning and organising.

Our analysis also identified that workplace delegates were pivotal to the organising strategy of all three retail unions. Interviewees from each of the unions explained that they relied heavily on delegates to recruit members, and thus emphasized supporting and training delegates to assist them to perform their roles. The following quotes across the three unions are illustrative:

*‘We do place an emphasis on looking for new reps who have got good potential and then obviously developing from there. We have 1100 plus shop stewards in our [regional] division and without them we couldn’t do the job that we do and we couldn’t represent the members in the way that we do and provide a first class service to our members in the division and also obviously build our membership and deliver on the organising agenda. I guess we try also to recognise the hard work that the reps put in’* (USDAW Divisional Officer 2011).

*‘…in the end delegates are our lifeblood and if we haven’t got them involved, then you’re trying to be all things to all people as an organiser, and trying to do everything that comes across your desk and you’re in control and you’re doing everything, and you can’t do everything, and you just get burned out and you know and disaster comes when you go on holiday or something and there’s no delegate who’s competent enough to take your place or fill in’* (FIRST Regional Organiser 2012).

*‘forming a relationship...is the key to organising and proving your worth in sites… and delegates…loyal [delegates] and [clear communication with them]’ (SDA State Organiser 2011).*

Given the centrality of delegates to recruitment, all three unions sought to secure employer support for delegate activities. An approach common to the three unions was to negotiate agreement clauses allowing delegates to promote the union at inductions for new staff, as well as provisions giving delegates paid time off to attend training and perform union duties. In NZ, FIRST had negotiated an innovative arrangement at Progressive known as the ‘delegate hours bank’, whereby the company funded delegates to recruit for the union outside of their scheduled work hours. Initially contained in a memorandum of understanding, the ‘hours bank’ is now formally enshrined in FIRST’s collective agreement with Progressive. This arrangement was consistently highlighted by interviewees within FIRST as contributing significantly to the union’s recruitment efforts, as illustrated by the following quote:

*‘What I think has been the most interesting work in retail has been, again at Progressive we negotiated two years ago a thing called an hours bank which is like a bank of hours that union delegates can use to do union work outside the contracted hours. So especially with a lot of part time workers, it’s a way they can pick up hours, but doing union work. So we’ve got a number of people around the country, members in Progressive who will go out to visit other shops, on days off or after work, and talk to people about the union. Progressive pays them. We had 2,700 hours that we could use across a two year period. We only used about 500, it was really embarrassing, but it has resulted ... over two years we increased our density in this national chain by ten per cent and that was largely done through our hours bank and delegates. (…) It’s just the difference of some of these delegates ... they went into the Bay of Plenty area where I’ve been a number of times, and I just can’t get people to join but they have increased their density in shops from less than ten per cent up to about forty or fifty per cent; and that’s just worker talking to worker and wearing the uniform and being able to say hey it’s ok to join the union, Progressive are actually paying me to talk to you about joining the union’ (FIRST Regional Organiser 2012).*

As the above quotation shows, FIRST used delegate recruiters as a way to supplement its full-time organising staff. However, the data indicate regional variation in the extent to which the union drew on the ‘hours bank’, and enlisted the help of delegates more generally:

*‘Before we’ve even rolled the hours bank out, for example, we’ve discovered that the out of town organisers just don’t get it, they just don’t get what a gift it is and that it’s actually worthwhile finding really good delegates, especially ones that have got good recruitment on their jobs and then training them up. So what we are trialling here now too are students, we are actually targeting students and sometimes we are finding those students in other areas that might not even necessarily be employed, and we’re saying go and get yourself a job at Progressive do one or two shifts, then you can work for the union. Young activists; and then you can actually work for the union two nights, and we can time your work based around your studies, so you can do nights when we need them or weekends; but in order to do that you need to have at least one or two shifts at the supermarket. They are quite excited about that so we’re trialling that with Ben and a couple of others and while we can get programs to pay for that if it’s in Progressive supermarket, I’m quite happy to pay for it for any other brands if it’s going to work’ (FIRST National Official 2012).*

Like FIRST, USDAW had negotiated provisions for delegate release time and used this mechanism to involve delegates in member recruitment. In the SDA, significant resources are dedicated to training delegates, in terms of education and upskilling, given the pivotal role that they play in recruitment and organising.

**Analysis**

The results highlighted some notable similarities and differences in the organising strategies of the three retail unions. Most importantly, FIRST is more prone to industrial militancy, and proactively seeks to expand its sectoral influence by organising hostile, often franchise-based employers. Yet our findings also suggest that FIRST shared, with its Australian and UK counterparts, a willingness to enter into ‘partnership’ style arrangements, essentially using employer support and relationships to grow the union. Moreover, the three unions were similar in their adoption of key organising techniques, notwithstanding differences in their specific application. For example, all three unions had introduced recruitment targets and performance management for organisers, and emphasized the training and development of delegates for recruitment purposes.

We argue that the differences between FIRST union and the SDA and USDAW are primarily accounted for by two factors: the first is FIRST’s leadership and its broad strategic vision; the second is the institutional context of industrial relations in NZ. We elaborate on these two influences and discuss how they shaped FIRST’s organising strategy in contrast to the SDA in Australia and USDAW in the UK.

In examining the leadership of FIRST, two features stand out. Firstly, the union’s leadership changed in 2005, when Laila Harre replaced Mike Jackson as the general secretary in a bitterly contested election (Cumming, 2006). While Harre had prior experience working with other unions (nurses), she had not previously worked for then NDU. During her 4 year leadership, Harre implemented a number of significant reform measures, largely intended to elevate and promote organising as the overarching strategy for the union. Key examples included: the introduction of strategic plans and recruitment targets, the use of dedicated ‘growth’ organisers, and the creation of a call-centre to address members’ servicing needs and thereby free up resources for organising. Harre recognized the union’s potential for growth in the retail sector, and recruited new staff to focus on expanding the then NDU’s membership and influence in retail. She was also keen to consolidate union influence in the retail and wider service sector through mergers with other unions. While merger discussions with UNITE and the Service and Food Workers Union were ultimately unsuccessful, Harre’s exploration of this option illustrates her strategic vision for union growth. Indeed, the NDU subsequently merged with FinSec in 2011 to form FIRST UNION. In an indication of strategic continuity, the union’s current secretary, Robert Reid, was perceived by interviewees as ‘bedding down’ the reforms begun by Harre. In contrast, SDA’s national leadership has remained constant for over 30 years, whilst USDAW’s leadership has remained constant for 10 years.

The second significant aspect of FIRST’s leadership concerns the union’s political culture and orientation. Most obviously, FIRST has no formal affiliation to any political party, unlike the SDA and the USDAW which are both affiliated with the Labor Parties in Australia and the UK. Rather, FIRST provides general support to parties across the spectrum of left-wing/progressive politics:

*‘It’s [FIRST] very political and supports Labour; probably Labour more than any other political party has enjoyed its support, and we all work our arses off. In my cases Greens and Labour Coalition and so forth; and we’ve supported the Maori Party in the past and we have a lot of members who are Maoris and we’ll be supporting Mana, so anything to the left of centre we’ll support’ (FIRST National Official 2012).*

Many FIRST officials were or had been politically active in radical left-wing and/or progressive political groups and parties. Harre for example had been an MP for the left-wing Alliance party, and a senior retail official had a communist party background. In this regard, FIRST had a more general left-wing orientation, while the SDA and USDAW were more closely aligned with the moderate politics of mainstream labor parties. In sharp contrast to the SDA and USDAW, FIRST officials invoked the language of class struggle. The following quote is exemplary of this orientation:

*‘Yeah, I mean we're not affiliated to any political party but we're a political union. I think most of us are to the left of the unions. We believe in class struggle, I guess. We have a class analysis at the leadership level and we have been quite proud, I guess, over the years, that we see ourselves as a struggle-based union’ (FIRST Regional Official 2012).*

In turn, the union’s left-wing orientation helps to account for its industrial militancy. FIRST’s political outlook also disposed it favourably to the left-wing UNITE union and its use of confrontational tactics in the fast food sector:

*‘[UNITE] does exactly the right thing that is needed. You actually have a union that has a skinny structure and that can do this low cost, in your face, in the street type stuff’ (FIRST National Official 2012).*

Indeed, FIRST and UNITE have a close, mutually supportive relationship, and FIRST provides financial support to UNITE:

*‘The [NDU] has paid money to UNITE over years, gave it start-up money, they were in the other week doing a bunch of photocopying for a campaign they were doing, use our folding machines. We’ve buddied them; and we go to their pickets, they’ll come to ours’ (FIRST National Official 2012).*

As previously mentioned, FIRST had also hired a number of organisers from UNITE, and a merger between the two unions, along with the Service and Food Workers Union, had been canvassed in recent history.

In addition to union leadership factors, the second major influence on FIRST’s organising strategy was the institutional context of industrial relations in NZ. In particular, in the 1990s the introduction of the *Employment Contracts Act 1991* had created an extremely hostile legislative framework for unions. Consequently, union membership and influence were decimated, particularly in the service sector (Charlwood and Haynes, 2008). It is estimated that union density in wholesale and retail trade dropped from 31.9 % in 1990 to 6.9 % in 1999. Although a change in government saw the introduction of more favourable industrial relations laws in 2000, by 2002 union density in wholesale and retail trade had increased marginally to 7.8 % (Charlwood and Haynes, 2008, p.91). This ‘institutional break’ stands in contrast to the experience of the SDA and USDAW. While both Australia and the UK have experienced considerable changes to industrial relations laws (both favourable and unfavourable to unions) over the past two decades, the SDA and USDAW have enjoyed relative stability in membership and influence. In this sense, FIRST had a relatively ‘clean slate’ to experiment with new organising techniques and pursue a militant organising strategy in the retail sector. The union’s comparative weakness in retail also lent some urgency its organising efforts, helping to explain its militancy. At the same time, FIRST’s limited density and coverage in retail meant the union faced less risk than the SDA and USDAW in damaging established relationships or alienating employers and political allies through militant action.

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1. The NZ Census scheduled for 2011 was postponed after the Christchurch earthquakes, so these are the most current statistics. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. As at 28 September 2012, $AUD1.00 = $NZ 1.25. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)