

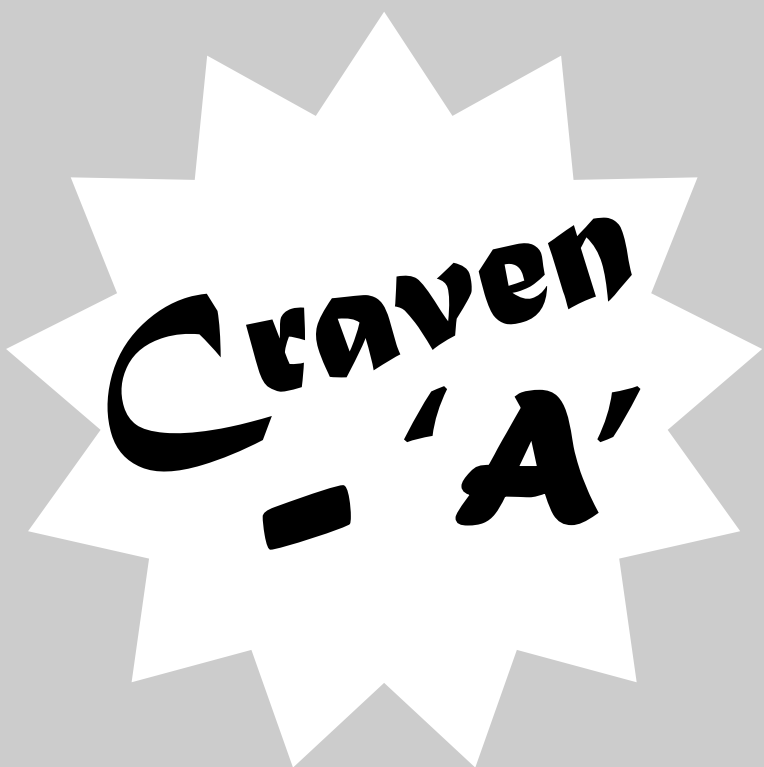
UNIONS: Are the workers reclaiming their collective mojo?



With workers from Stagecoach, Radio New Zealand, and the universities going on strike this year, it seems unions are regaining their former power. EMMA PAGE reports.

	Union membership	Number of unions	Wage and salary earners	Membership %
1991	514325	66	1196100	43.0
1992	428160	58	1203900	35.6
1993	409112	67	1241300	33.0
1994	375906	82	1314100	28.6
1995	362200	82	1357500	26.7
1996	338967	83	1409300	24.1
1997	327800	80	1424000	23.0
1998	306687	83	1399100	21.9
1999	302405	82	1435900	21.1
2000	318519	134	1477300	21.6
2001	329919	165	1524900	21.6
2002	334783	174	1566400	21.4
2003	341631	181	1598700	21.4

SOURCE: Council of Trade Unions



4 St. Paul St. (next to Subway)
Auckland, Phone (09) 377 - 3388

COME IN AND GET IT

First it was the bus drivers, then the nurses and airline attendants and now university staff around the country. Industrial action appears to be on the rise again but does it mean unions are making a comeback?

Auckland University Professor Peter Ballox isn't so sure. He says while unions are more visible and there is more strike action at present, union membership has remained fairly static.

Ballox says around 20% of the New Zealand work force belongs to a union but most workers in the private sector are not unionised.

He puts the increasing industrial action down to a strong labour market and a move in the public sector to secure higher wages before the election.

"The current Labour Government has made large settlements with workers in the public sector so workers in these sectors are making major claims while the Government is still in power."

Council for Trade Unions figures from 2003 show that 21.4 per cent of wage and salary earners belonged to a union. In 1991, 43 per cent of wage and salary earners were union members.

Union membership has dropped steadily since the introduction of the Employment Contracts Act in 1991. Numbers stabilised at around 21 per cent between 1998 and 2003.

Vice president of the Council for Trade Unions Helen Kelly says the Employment Contracts Act was an attack on unions and damaged union membership. The 2000 Employment Relations Act allowed unions back into the workplace and she believes union membership is increasing as a result.

"There has been an increase in union activity and numbers. Unions have a broader agenda now including things like health and safety. People can see that unions are worth joining."

Secretary of Unite Union Matt McCarten says union membership has not increased but he believes there is a rising interest in unions.

"The union movement is still modest in terms of numbers, but in recent months there's certainly been a resur-

gence of interest. Partly because wages have got so low and people are saying, 'if these are the good times, what will happen in the bad times?'"

McCarten believes there has been a "mood change" among New Zealanders, and that many people are shocked to learn how little some workers earn.

"There's a lot of support from middle class New Zealand for workers who earn a low wage. The Nats haven't got that. It's not that taxes are too high, it's that wages are too low."

The public's response to the Stagecoach bus drivers' strike in Auckland earlier this year seems to confirm McCarten's mood change theory.

Despite the strike hitting Auckland's public transport for six days, public support for the drivers remained high. Coverage in the *New Zealand Herald* was also fairly union-friendly. Vox pops and human interest stories got the drivers' message across and gave voice to the public's support.

Gary Froggatt, president of the Tramways Union, says media coverage of the strike was unusual.

"The press tend to print the company's side of the case and add the union's side at the end. In this particular case it covered it fairly."

McCarten agrees. "What stands out for me was the photos of people saying what they thought. That wouldn't have happened in another age — ever."

While union numbers remain static, one marked area of growth and interest is with the younger crowd.

McCarten, whose union specialises in young and casual workers, says Unite recruits four out of every five workers they come across.

In the past few months they have signed up more than 2,200 workers from Starbucks, McDonalds, KFC, Pizza Hut and picture theatres.

"There's a perception that young people are only interested in looking after number one and that's not true. Young workers don't need any convincing to join together to improve wages and conditions."