

Comparing Retail Union Strategy in a Neoliberal Context: The Case of Australia and New Zealand

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Retail employees are amongst the most vulnerable workers in the context of neoliberal market economies. In many countries, low paid retail employees comprise around 10 per cent of the workforce (ABS 2011). The retail labour market is typically highly feminised and youthful, with many employees in part time and various forms of precarious employment (Tailby & Pollert 2011). However, the industry and its trade unions have rarely been the focus of academic study (Tilly & Carré 2011). This paper thus aims to analyse and compare trade union strategies in the retail industry in Australia and New Zealand, by utilising findings from a larger comparative study. The respective unions studied are the Shop Distributive and Allied Workers Union (SDA) in Australia and the National Distribution Union (NDU) in New Zealand.

Data from interviews with union officials at different levels and from different regional locations in Australia and NZ are analysed. Union policy documents are also utilised to support the empirical data. Key findings from the comparison of retail unions' strategy in Australia and NZ include: 1) the importance of institutional factors and internal political differences in shaping and constraining union strategies; 2) different emphases on external relationships and variations in partnership approaches; 3) the need to recruit to 'stand still' by retail unions in both countries; and, 4) similarities and differences in the unions' organising approaches. The paper concludes by examining the implications of these findings for retail unions' strategic choices and their ability to deliver workplace justice for employees.

References

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