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## **Comparing Retail Union Strategy in a Neoliberal Context**

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Amongst the most vulnerable workers in a neoliberal world are retail employees. In many countries these low paid workers comprise around 10 per cent of the workforce. The retail labour market is highly feminised, in some countries quite youthful and often part time or in various forms of precarious employment. The industry and its unions have however rarely been studied by academics. A three-country research team (United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand) is investigating retail union strategy across these Anglophone countries in order to determine how, and how effectively, unions are contributing to workplace justice for retail workers.

Studies of union structure, types and institutional features across different countries are relatively common, but these studies do not drill down to the level of comparative strategy of unions in the same industry (Hyman 2001; Frege and Kelly 2003). This study therefore breaks new ground and is significant as we undertake a comparative, qualitative study of unions' strategy in the retail industry as suggested by Tilly and Carré (2011). The research uses a framework developed by Frege and Kelly (2003: 9) to analyse the strategies being utilised by the three unions, including: organizing, organizational restructuring, coalition building, partnerships with employers, political action and international links. This paper highlights the similarities and differences between the strategies of the three unions within the context of the overarching political economy in each country.

Data for the paper is drawn from interviews with union officials at different levels and regional locations in the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand, and from policy documents of the respective unions: the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers (USDAW) in the UK, the Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers Union (SDA) in Australia,

and the National Distribution Union (NDU) in New Zealand. These unions have significant numbers of members, with the SDA being the largest union in Australia (around 250,000 members) and both USDAW (around 400,000) and the NDU (21,000) being amongst the largest five unions in the UK and NZ respectively. Union density in each country in the retail industry is however low, with less than 20 per cent of retail employees being members, although density in retail is higher than the average in the private sector.

Key findings from the comparative study of retail unions include: (1) as expected, state industrial relations frameworks shape and constrain union strategies; (2) the three unions exhibit considerable internal political differences which influence strategy; (3) the UK and Australian unions place little focus on developing external relationships while the NZ union is more active in this area; (4) there is a need to recruit simply to 'stand still' in all countries, due to very high levels of turnover in the industry; (5) there are various shades of 'partnership' and 'mutual gains' approaches across the three countries, with the UK being at the 'high' end of this continuum and NZ at the lower end, and an interesting variant of a 'mutual gains' approach in Australia (at least with larger employers) within a legislative framework which does not particularly encourage such a strategy; (6) strong similarities in the organising approaches of the unions, with greater variation in the approaches of the NZ union and in some areas of the UK union's membership; and (7) developing, yet still nascent international strategies with a particular focus on collaborative work through the international trade union federation in the services sector, UNI.

Retail unions are in many ways at the crossroads in terms of the strategic choices they face in the context of what Budd (2004) identifies as the triple imperatives of efficiency, equity and voice. The narrow range of strategic choices that confront retail unions means they are being forced in directions that emphasise efficiency and equity over voice, which has implications for union democracy.

## References

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