

Australian employees' attitudes towards Unions

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Executive summary

- Between 1996 and 2002, Australian employees' attitudes towards unions have become more positive
- In 2002, only 17 per cent of employees thought that Australia would be better off without unions compared to 25 per cent in 1996
- There has been a significant decline in the proportion of employees who think that unions in Australia do not look after their members (29 per cent in 2002 down from 43 per cent in 1996)
- The perception that management has more power than unions has remained the same
- The percentage of employees who would rather be in a union has remained around the 50 per cent mark
- Some of the attitudes towards unions of male employees, older workers aged 45 plus, younger employees aged 18 to 24 and those in larger organisations have improved relative to other employees
- 78 per cent of employees believe that executive pay rises should be linked to workers' pay rises
- 58 per cent of employees think that organisations in Australia conduct their business in an ethical and proper way
- About 40 per cent of employees who join unions do so for a 'safety net'
- Non membership of a union appears to be related to inertia or indifference rather than to ideological opposition to unions

About the survey

This latest nationwide household survey was conducted by telephone in November 2002. In total, 1,032 employees aged 15 or older were questioned about their attitudes to unions. The results were then weighted to reflect the characteristics of all employees aged 15 and above across Australia.

This is the latest in a series of surveys commissioned by the Labor Council of NSW. The main focus of this report is an analysis of any changes in employees' attitudes between 1996 (when the survey began) and 2002. As in previous surveys, employees were asked to indicate whether they agreed with, disagreed with or were neutral about a series of statements concerning unions.

It also examines the responses to four new questions, which were added to the 2002 survey. For the first time, respondents were asked questions about employee share ownership, the level of pay rises for executives and whether they thought organisations in Australia conducted their business in an ethical manner. In addition, trade union members were asked to give their reasons for joining a union and non-union employees asked to state why they were not a member

Characteristics of employees

Gender	56 per cent male; 44 per cent female
Age group	3 per cent aged 15 to 17; 13 per cent aged 18 to 24; 50 per cent aged 25 to 44; 33 per cent aged 45 or older
Educational qualifications	34 per cent had a Year 10 school certificate, basic vocational qualifications or no formal qualifications; 43 per cent had a Year 12 high school certificate or skilled vocational qualifications; 6 per cent had further qualifications (associate or graduate diploma); 17 per cent had tertiary qualifications
Trade union membership	30 per cent were trade union members
Employee share ownership	9 per cent owned shares in the company they worked for
Full-time or part-time	68 per cent worked full-time; 32 per cent part-time
Permanent or casual	74 per cent were permanently employed; 24 per cent were casuals
Sector	64 per cent in the private sector; 31 per cent in the public sector; 2 per cent in the voluntary sector
Size of organisation	36 per cent were employed in large organisations (1,000+ employees); 13 per cent in medium-sized organisations (101 to 999); 35 per cent in small organisations (100 or fewer)

Employees' attitudes to unions 1996 to 2002

In two important respects, employees' attitudes towards unions have become more positive between 1996 and 2002 (see Table 1 on page 3). In 2002, only 17 per cent of

employees thought that Australia would be better off without unions compared to 25 per cent in 1996. There has also been a decline in the proportion of employees who believe that unions in Australia do not look after their members. In 2002, 29 per cent held this view compared to 43 per cent in 1996.

Table 1: Australian employees' attitudes towards unions

	Percentage agreeing with statement				
	1996	1997	1999	2001	2002
Australia would be better off without unions	25	24	23	14	17
Management has more power than unions	46	53	53	56	45
Unions in Australia don't look after their members	43	42	39	34	29
I'd rather be in a union	48	43	44	52	50

Unweighted n=1,029 employees aged 15+, Australia

Otherwise attitudes towards unions in 2002 appear to be similar to what they were in 1996 (although they have fluctuated within this time period). The perception that management has more power than unions has returned to its 1996 level (about 45 per cent) even though it had increased to 56 per cent in the interim. Similarly, the percentage of employees who would rather be in a union has remained around the 50 per cent mark (48 per cent in 1996 and 50 per cent in 2002).

Attitudes of different employee groups 1996 to 2002

In general, the results show that employees' perceptions of unions have either improved or remained the same since 1996. However as in previous years, the attitudes of different groups of employees were compared and some distinct differences between various groups were discernible.

Union membership

As would be expected, in 2002 attitudes towards unions were more positive among trade union members than among those not in a union (see Table 2 below), but attitudes of both groups towards unions have improved between 1996 and 2002.

There was a significant decline in the number of union and non-union members who thought that unions in Australia do not look after their members. For example in 1996, 40 per cent of union members believed that unions did not look after their members. By 2002, this had fallen to 28 per cent. The fall was even greater among non-union members – from 48 per cent in 1996 down to 29 per cent in 2002.

Table 2: Union and non-union members' attitudes towards unions

	Percentage agreeing with statement									
	1996		1997		1999		2001		2002	
	<i>Union</i>	<i>Non</i>	<i>Union</i>	<i>Non</i>	<i>Union</i>	<i>Non</i>	<i>Union</i>	<i>Non</i>	<i>Union</i>	<i>Non</i>
Australia would be better off without unions	10	27	9	28	11	29	5	18	7	21
Management has more power than unions	54	45	67	51	63	52	65	51	54	43
Unions in Australia don't look after their members	40	48	32	48	37	39	33	35	28	29
I'd rather be in a union	80	37	80	32	79	32	82	38	77	37

Unweighted n=1,029 employees aged 15+, Australia

In a similar downward trend, in 1996 ten per cent of union members thought that Australia would be better off without unions. By 2002 this had dropped to seven per cent. Similarly, non-union members were less likely to believe that Australia would be better off without unions (27 per cent in 1996 down to 21 per cent in 2002).

In one respect - the perception that management has more power than unions – the opinions of both groups have remained more or less unchanged. It is also important to note that between 1996 and 2002 differences in attitudes between union members and non-union members have narrowed slightly.

Gender

On the whole, women's attitudes to unions have tended to be more positive than those of men since the survey began. Traditionally, men enjoyed full-time secure employment. However, the decline of the full-time labour market over the last 20 years has caused men's position to be eroded. In contrast, women's participation in the labour market is relatively new so that they have never really enjoyed the same advantages as men.

Between 1996 and 2002, the perceptions of female employees towards unions have continued to be more positive than male employees with one notable exception. Over this period the percentage of female employees who would rather be in a union has fallen from 50 to 46 per cent. At the same time, the percentage of male employees who would rather be in a union has risen from 46 to 53 percent.

Table 3: Attitudes of male and female employees towards unions

	Percentage agreeing with statement									
	1996		1997		1999		2001		2002	
	<i>Male</i>	<i>Fem</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Fem</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Fem</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Fem</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Fem</i>
Australia would be better off without unions	26	23	24	25	25	20	15	12	20	13
Management has more power than unions	50	39	58	46	59	45	60	52	52	38
Unions in Australia don't look after their members	49	34	48	35	45	31	40	29	35	22
I'd rather be in a union	46	50	43	44	43	46	51	53	53	46

Unweighted n=1,025 employees aged 15+, Australia

However, in two respects the attitudes of both male and female employees towards unions have become more positive. For example, in 2002 both groups – particularly men - were less likely to believe that unions do not look after their members than in 1996. Moreover, fewer male and female employees now believe that Australia would be better off without unions (20 per cent of male and 13 per cent of female employees in 2002 compared to 26 and 23 per cent respectively in 1996).

Size of organisation

Comparisons between the attitudes of employees in organisations of different sizes were first made in 1997. On the whole, employees working in small organisations (100 or fewer) have tended to be less positive about unions than those in large organisations (1,000 or more) – most probably because union presence is greater in large organisations (see Table 4 on page 5).

However, the difference in attitudes between employees in small organisations and those in large organisations has widened over the period with employees in large organisations becoming more positive about unions. In 2002, 28 per cent of employees in large organisations thought that unions did not look after their members compared to 44 per cent in 1996. Similarly, in 2002 just 12 per cent of employees in large organisations thought that Australia would be better off without unions compared to 20 per cent in 1997. Again, in 2002 63 per cent of employees in large organisations said they would rather be in a union compared to 52 per cent in 1997. And in 2002, 53 per cent of employees in large organisations agreed that management has more power than unions compared to 63 per cent in 1997.

The picture is not completely one-sided. In 2002, employees in small organisations were also less likely to believe that management has more power than unions and less likely to think that unions in Australia do not look after their members.

Table 4: Attitudes of employees in small and large organisations towards unions

	Percentage agreeing with statement							
	1997		1999		2001		2002	
	<i>Small</i>	<i>Large</i>	<i>Small</i>	<i>Large</i>	<i>Small</i>	<i>Large</i>	<i>Small</i>	<i>Large</i>
Australia would be better off without unions	23	20	25	17	17	10	23	12
Management has more power than unions	49	63	52	62	49	62	43	53
Unions in Australia don't look after their members	41	44	36	38	34	37	35	28
I'd rather be in a union	46	52	44	57	43	59	41	63

Unweighted n=930 employees aged 15+, Australia

Note: Small refers to organisations with 100 or fewer employees; large refers to organisations with 1,000 or more employees.

Age

Overall, the attitudes of employees in all age groups have become more positive since 1996 (see table 4 on page 6). Across all age groups, there has been a significant fall in the number of employees who think that unions do not look after their members. A less dramatic finding but notable nonetheless is that a smaller proportion of employees in all age groups believe that Australia would be better off without unions.

On the whole, older workers aged 45 and over have become more positive about unions between 1996 and 2002. When asked about union membership, in 2002 older employees (52 per cent) were more likely to say they would rather be in a union than in 1996 (44 per cent). They were also less likely in 2002 (34 per cent) to think that unions do not look after their members than in 1996 (50 per cent). Presumably, older workers have felt the effects of greater insecurity in the labour market more acutely than their younger colleagues and therefore need and value the protection that unions offer. However, when respondents were asked whether they thought management had more power than unions, the results were mixed. In 2002, employees aged 18 to 24 (36 per cent) were much less likely to believe that management had more power than unions compared to 1996 (49 per cent). Older employees were more inclined to think the opposite (46 per cent in 1996 rising to 54 per cent in 2002).

Table 5: Attitudes towards unions based on age

	Percentage agreeing with statement														
	1996			1997			1999			2001			2002		
	<i>18-24</i>	<i>25-44</i>	<i>45 plus</i>	<i>18-24</i>	<i>25-44</i>	<i>45 plus</i>	<i>18-24</i>	<i>25-44</i>	<i>45 plus</i>	<i>18-24</i>	<i>25-44</i>	<i>45 plus</i>	<i>18-24</i>	<i>25-44</i>	<i>45 plus</i>
Australia would be better off without unions	24	26	23	14	27	24	25	25	18	9	14	15	12	19	17
Management has more power than unions	49	44	46	49	53	56	48	51	60	43	56	61	36	44	54
Unions in Australia don't look after their members	35	41	50	27	45	43	31	36	47	23	35	39	19	29	34
I'd rather be in a union	54	48	44	61	41	39	53	42	44	58	51	50	51	50	52

Unweighted n=1,018 employees aged 15+, Australia

Attitudes towards unions by other characteristics

In the 2002 survey, more demographic information was gathered on employees than in previous years. Therefore, it was possible to examine attitudes towards unions by a wider range of employee characteristics.

Educational attainment

There is some variation in attitudes towards unions depending on the level of an employee's qualifications (see table 6 below). On the whole, more highly qualified employees tend to hold more positive views about unions. For example, a higher proportion of employees with further or tertiary qualifications (57 per cent respectively) said they would rather be in a union, compared to lesser qualified respondents.

Moreover, employees with lower or no formal qualifications (22 per cent) were more likely to think that Australia would be better off without unions. Similarly, about a third of employees with a Year 12 high school certificate, skilled vocational qualifications or less thought that unions do not look after their members compared to about a quarter of more highly qualified employees.

Table 6: Attitudes towards unions based on qualifications

	Percentage agreeing with statement (2002)			
	Year 10 and basic voc or less ¹	Year 12 and skilled voc	Further quals ²	Tertiary quals
Australia would be better off without unions	22	16	12	14
Management has more power than unions	43	48	51	43
Unions in Australia don't look after their members	32	30	25	23
I'd rather be in a union	48	49	57	57

Unweighted n=1,023 employees aged 15+, Australia

Note: ¹Includes employees with no formal qualifications. ²Associate or undergraduate diploma.

Occupation

Respondents' occupations were categorised according to the nine major ASCO categories (see Table 7 on page 8). There were some notable differences in attitudes towards unions between the various occupational categories. As would be expected, managers and administrators tended to hold less positive views about unions.

Interestingly, intermediate production and transport workers (eg plant operators, road and rail transport drivers) also appeared to have less positive attitudes towards unions. Along with managers, they were more likely to think that Australia would be better off without unions and that unions in Australia do not look after their members. Another interesting observation is that advanced clerical and service workers (eg secretaries, personal assistants, bookkeepers) were less likely to agree that Australia would be better off without unions and that unions do not look after their members, yet they were much less likely than other groups of workers to say they would rather be in a union. More

than half of professionals, tradespersons, intermediate production and transport workers and labourers said they would rather be in a union than not.

Table 7: Attitudes of employees based on occupation

	Percentage agreeing with statement (2002)								
	Managers & administrators	Professionals	Associate professionals	Tradespersons & related	Advanced clerical & service	Intermediate clerical, sales & service	Intermediate production & transport	Elementary clerical, sales & service	Laborers & related
Australia would be better off without unions	32	16	16	10	6	19	26	14	12
Management has more power than unions	55	44	40	56	46	44	38	39	47
Unions in Australia don't look after their members	45	26	18	29	15	26	46	25	27
I'd rather be in a union	42	56	46	53	20	45	54	50	58

Unweighted n=1,020 employees aged 15+, Australia

Attitudes towards executive pay rises and ethical business conduct

For the first time in this series of surveys employees were asked about the level of executive pay rises and whether they thought organisations in Australia conducted their business in an ethical and proper way.

Executive pay rises

Overall, just over three quarters of employees (78 per cent) agreed with the statement that executive pay rises should be linked to workers' pay rises. While there was little variation between the different employee groups, union members (84 per cent) and young workers (88 per cent) were slightly more likely to agree with the statement.

Ethical business conduct

Overall, just over half of employees (58 per cent) agreed with the statement that organisations in Australia conducted their business in an ethical and proper way. While there was little variation between the various employee groups, some occupations were slightly more sceptical about the way organisations conducted their business. The most critical were labourers and tradespersons (51 per cent) and the least critical were managers (72 per cent).

Trade union membership

Reasons for trade union membership

Trade union members (who comprised 30 per cent of all respondents) were asked why they had become members. In allocating responses to categories, care was taken to differentiate between responses that indicated more individual or personal reasons for membership and those that were more collectivist. For example, responses in the categories of 'Security/protecting rights', 'Legal advice/representation' and 'Information/advice' tended to indicate what the individual respondent had to gain personally from being in a union. In contrast, responses in the categories of 'Ensure fair treatment of employees' and 'Represent employees' views/provide a voice' tended to focus more on what employees as a whole stood to gain from union membership. In this respect, these responses were closer in spirit to those contained in the 'Belief in unions' category. On the other hand, 'Unions do a good job' contains responses both from employees who had experience of a union being effective (eg "They did good work on the EBA") and those who thought that unions did a good job generally. The 'Encouraged/expected to join' category includes respondents who said joining was compulsory when they started with their employer and others who felt that there was peer pressure to be a member ([Being in the union is] "an expected thing").

Table 8: Reasons for trade union membership

	Percentage of total reasons given
Security/protecting rights	25.8
Encouraged/expected to join	23.6
Belief in unions	13.2
Legal advice/representation	12.1
Pay & conditions/benefits	11.2
Ensure fair treatment of employees	8.9
Don't know/no reason	7.6
Unions do a good job	7.2
Represent employees' views/provide a voice	3.6
Information/advice	2.5

Unweighted n=293 employees aged 15+, Australia

Note: The percentages total 115.7 per cent of multiple responses.

The most common reason for joining a trade union (a quarter of all responses) was security or protecting an employee's rights. However, if this category is combined with that of legal advice or representation, nearly 40 per cent of all reasons given for union membership point to unions being a 'safety net' in case something goes wrong. The fact that 'Pay and condition/benefits' contains only 11 per cent of responses would suggest that unions are perceived as less successful in recent years at achieving improved pay and conditions.

There was little difference between the reasons for trade union membership given by male and female employees, except that more males (26 per cent of responses) than females (19 per cent of responses) said they were expected or encouraged to join a union. (see table 10 in Appendix). However, there were some notable differences in responses between the various age groups (see table 9 in Appendix). For example, employees aged 18 to 24 were much more likely to say they did not know why they were in a union (a third of reasons) than their older colleagues. Moreover, not one respondent in this age group said they were a member because they believed in unions. Employees aged 25 to 44 were more likely to say they were a union member because they were either expected or encouraged to join (32 per cent of reasons) than 18 to 24 year olds (a fifth of reasons) and those aged 45 and over (15 per cent of reasons).

There were no major differences between full-time and part-time workers (see Table 11 in Appendix), although more part-timers (19 per cent of responses) than full-time workers (10 per cent of responses) said they had joined for legal advice or representation. Casual employees (37 per cent of responses) were more likely than permanent employees (22 per cent of reasons) to say they had been encouraged or expected to join a union (see Table 12 in Appendix).

The size of the organization appears to be an important factor in explaining the reasons for trade union membership, particularly for employees in small organisations (see table 13 in Appendix) 'Security/protection' accounted for just 11 per cent of reasons from employees in small organisations compared to nearly a third of responses from employees in medium-sized and large organisations. One possible explanation for this is that employees in larger organisations have borne the brunt of downsizing more than those in small organisations. Employees in small organisations were also more likely to say they were expected to encouraged to join a union (over a third of responses) compared to those employed in medium-sized (a quarter of responses) and to workers in large organisations (a fifth of responses). Presumably, any peer pressure to be a member is more keenly felt in a smaller workforce. Employees in small

organisations were also more likely to say they did not know why they were a union member (15 per cent compared to 5 per cent of employees in large organisations).

The level of educational attainment is another important factor in explaining reasons for trade union membership (see table 14 in Appendix). The reasons given by employees with tertiary qualifications differ in several respects from those of less qualified employees. Employees with tertiary qualifications were more likely to be a member because they believed in trade unions (22 per cent of responses) and because of access to legal advice and representation (23 per cent of reasons). They were also less likely (10 per cent of responses) than other employees to be a member because they were expected or encouraged to. Those with a year 10 school certificate, a basic vocational qualification or with no formal qualifications were the least likely to know why they were a member (14 per cent of responses).

Reasons for trade union membership were also examined by occupation, although many of the sample sizes were too small to come to any meaningful conclusions (see table 15 in Appendix). However, nearly a third of the reasons given by professionals stressed access to legal advice or representation' – a far higher proportion than any other occupational group. This group was also far less likely to have been encouraged or expected to join (only 5 per cent of responses). Similar findings are also evident when the responses for industry are examined (see table 16 in appendix). Employees in education (28 per cent of reasons) and in health and community services (27 per cent of reasons) were much more likely to be union members for legal advice and representation. Moreover, the security or protection of a union was an important factor for employees in the health and community services (nearly 40 per cent of responses). Workers in education and in health and community services (7 and 12 per cent of reasons) were also less likely to say they had been expected or encouraged to join a union.

Reasons for not joining a union

The reasons given by non-union members about why they had not joined a trade union were classified into twelve categories (see Table 9 below). The largest category 'No need to/not worth it' covered two types of responses: firstly respondents who felt they did not need a union because they could manage quite well on their own (eg "Because it's only a small place, the boss is approachable and can be confronted by any problems"). Other responses came from employees who said it was not worth them joining a union. Some of these said it was not worthwhile being a member because they were part-time or casual and did not work enough hours. The category 'No relevant union/no union available' included respondents who said there was no union to cover their particular job and others who said there was no union at the workplace. Responses in the 'Not appropriate' category came from employees - mostly managers - who felt that union membership was inappropriate for their current position.

Table 9: Reasons for not joining a union

	Percentage of total reasons given
No need to/not worth it	28.1
Don't know/no reason	23.2
No relevant union/no union available	19.9
Don't believe in unions	10.6
Not enough knowledge about unions	5.1
Never been asked	4.6
Disillusioned with unions	4.6
Haven't got round to it	3.4
Other	2.3
Not appropriate	2.1
Not allowed to be/membership discouraged	1.7
Too expensive	1.6

Unweighted n=616 employees aged 15+, Australia

Note: The percentage total is 107.1 of multiple responses.

There was relatively little ideological opposition to unions (only eleven per cent of responses) and only five per cent conveyed disillusionment with unions in the past. The results also suggest that there is quite a lot of inertia related to non membership. Nearly a quarter of responses gave no explicit reason for non membership, suggesting that many employees in the survey had genuinely never thought about it and could potentially become members. Combined with 'Not enough knowledge about unions' (5 per cent) and 'Never been asked' (5 per cent) there appears to be a significant proportion of respondents who are not necessarily against unions per se. Moreover, the three per cent of responses in the 'Haven't got round to it' category indicate that these employees probably intend to join a union at some point. While some employees in the 'Don't need to/not worth it' category clearly feel they can manage without the support of a union, there remains a sizeable number - especially part-time and casual workers - who may be convinced that union membership would be worthwhile.

Overall, there are no really large differences between the reasons given by male and female employees for not joining a union (see table 19 in Appendix). That said, more male than female employees (14 per cent compared to 7 per cent of reasons) said that they do not believe in unions. Female employees (29 per cent of responses) were also more likely to say they did not know why they were not union members than male employees (18 per cent of responses). Moreover, more males (32 per cent of responses) than females (24 per cent of responses) said there was no need for them to join a union.

Employees aged 45 or older (14 per cent of reasons) were less likely than their younger colleagues to say they did not know why they had not joined a union (see table 18 in appendix). This group was also more likely to not believe in unions (18 per cent of responses) than other employees. Unsurprisingly, more 18 to 24 year olds (13 per cent of responses) said they did not know enough about unions compared to the other age groups.

There were few major differences in the reasons given by full-time and part-time employees for not joining a union (see table 20 in Appendix). The one exception was the extent of ideological opposition to unions – this constituted only three per cent of the responses given by part-time employees compared to 15 per cent of responses from full-timers. Similarly, casual employees (see Table 21 in Appendix) were much less likely to say they did not believe in unions (3 per cent of reasons) than permanent employees (13 per cent of reasons).

The size of the organization (see table 22 in Appendix) does not appear to be a significant factor for employees who said they were not union members because there was not one available for their job or at their workplace. In fact, size of organization appeared to have little bearing on the reasons given for not joining a union. Similarly, the level of an employee's educational qualifications (see table 23 in Appendix) was also not very significant.

There were, however, some differences between the reasons given by the various occupational groups (see Table 24 in Appendix). For example, compared to other occupations managers and administrators (36 per cent of reasons) were much more likely to say that they did not believe in unions. In contrast, only a small percentage of elementary clerical, sales and service workers (two per cent of responses) gave this as a reason for not joining a union. This group (35 per cent of responses) was also much more likely to say they did not know why they had not joined a union.

Industry sector also appears to have some bearing on the reasons for not joining a union (see table 25 in Appendix). For example, employees in property and business services (34 per cent of responses) and in the finance and insurance sector (39 per cent of responses) were much more likely to point to the lack of a relevant union or of one at the workplace as a reason for not being a union member. Employees in infrastructure were more likely than those in other sectors to say they had never been asked to be a union member (15 per cent of reasons).

Conclusion

The findings of this report are encouraging for the trade union movement. Overall, between 1996 and 2002 the attitudes of employees – both union and non-union members - have become more positive towards unions, although some distinct differences remain between the various employee groups. A significant proportion of employees who become union members do so for a 'safety net' in case something goes wrong. Among non members, there appears to be relatively little ideological opposition towards unions. In fact, the report findings suggest there is a lot of inertia and indifference related to non membership and that a sizeable number of employees could potentially be convinced that membership would be worthwhile.