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Unions Australia

Research shows that 1.5 million Australians who are not currently members of a union would like to join.

Demand for union membership is strong. Last year, the ABS reported a 4% increase in union membership with an extra 70,000 workers joining a union.

The Australian community recognises the important role unions play in representing the rights of working Australian and their families. ACTU research in marginal seats revealed that 87.5% of Australians believe in the right to belong to a union.

The Your Rights at Work campaign has been an 'overwhelming success' (as declared recently in the News Limited press 24/9). Australians want union representation, unions have a responsibility to deliver this through membership growth.

Unions Australia is a membership growth initiative developed by the ACTU to provide a simple and easy way to join a union, on the spot, via telephone or internet.

Federal Government's IR laws have increased demand for Union Membership

Polls have revealed that of those people who are not currently union members 46% said, they were more likely to join a union because of the Federal Government's new laws.

Many people are calling the ACTU workers' hotline to join a union as a direct response to the Federal Government's IR laws:

- *"I'm concerned about what is happening with these laws, so I want to join a union. I've been in my job for many years and have been enjoying the (union) benefits. I think I should be a member, it's just that I've never been approached before."*
- *"I told my daughter, you should join a union! Especially now as there is no one else to fight the fight for you."*



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- *“I’ve got some questions about the new rules and regulations. I’ve been meaning to join the union for a long time and I thought while I’m thinking about these things it is a good time to join.”*
- *“I’ve never thought before to join a union myself. My husband is a unionist. I’ve encouraged my children to join. It’s just for my job, as a carer, I never thought about it until now.”*
- *“I don’t speak English that well. I want to join a union. I work in a big workplace. It is important.”*
- *“I want to join a union as I don’t know how these laws are going to affect me. Firstly I want to know my rights; secondly I want to have backing.”*

The Initiative

Unions Australia is a national membership growth initiative developed by the ACTU to make joining a union easy and hassle free.

At the 2003 ACTU Congress the concept of a national telephone and internet based membership recruitment strategy was endorsed. The Unions Australia proposal was agreed to at the March 2006 Executive.

Unions Australia is about having a common sense modern approach to union membership.

Objective

The best thing a worker can do to protect themselves in the current Industrial Relations environment is to join the union. Growing union membership makes unions stronger and this means better representation at work for Australian workers and their families.

Unions Australia makes union membership accessible for all working Australians.



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Current Situation

If you don't have a delegate at your workplace it can be difficult to join a union.

For those not familiar with union acronyms working out which union covers them is near impossible. Especially as unions often cover numerous industries and have quite generic names.

The current process for joining a union normally involves a number of call transfers to find the right union, the right branch and the right person to talk to. In most cases, forms need to be sent out and they need to be signed and returned. Unions report that nearly half of their potential members are lost through forms never being returned.

Even if the current system worked perfectly a change to make the process more accessible and streamlined is necessary.

National Membership Centre

We live in a modern society where life moves quickly, people want to be able to do things immediately, on the spot, with minimum fuss.

Unions Australia is a one-stop-shop for union membership: all it takes to join is one telephone call on the easy to remember phone number, 1300 4 UNION (1300 486 466), or one internet interaction using the online membership form available at: www.actu.asn.au.

The process can happen immediately, as membership details, including bank details, are collected in the first interaction. As part of the modern membership centre, the ACTU has received permission from banks to process direct debit and credit card transactions without requiring signatures.

A standard membership rate is offered to all new members for the first 6 month. For full-time workers it is \$9 a week, for part-time or casual workers earning less than \$17,500 per annum, the fee is \$6 a week. This standard rate follows ACTU policy and allows Unions Australia to create a simple membership facility without having to reconcile all the different membership dues of all the different unions and branches.



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The new member is notified of their union in a membership welcome letter. They do not have to mess around being transferred between unions and branches, the trained organisers at the ACTU will work this out for them.

Unions Australia provides people with membership of their relevant union from day one. There is no membership with Unions Australia: it is a membership facility not a union.

Membership details are transferred to the union as soon as coverage is confirmed. This means unions can send out their membership information, inform the relevant organiser of the new member and act on any organising leads.

In order to fund the membership centre, the first 6 months of membership dues are held in Unions Australia Trust. This Trust is set-up to fund the Initiative and participating unions are the beneficiaries of the Trust. This also means that the membership dues are tax deductible.

The member authorises their bank details to be processed by their specialised union at 6 months. From this point on the member pays the relevant fees of their union.

Unions Australia is designed to complement existing recruitment strategies, it does not in any way replace the important work of on the ground organising.

Union membership is important for every Australian worker and their family. Unions Australia adds value to the Your Rights at Work community campaign - every stall, sausage sizzle and event can have union membership forms. The beauty of Unions Australia is it is simple, it makes sense and it is accessible to all Australians.

The process:

1. A person calls the national telephone and speaks with a trained ACTU organiser;
2. Person decides to join a union;
3. Detailed membership records are collected for the union;
4. Bank details are collected and person authorises payments to begin on the next processing day (no signatures are necessary);
5. Relevant union identified and membership details transferred;



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6. At 6 months union processes direct debit or credit card membership payments.

New member receives:

- Union membership with their relevant union;
- Access to Member Services provided through Member Connect, such as cheap home loans through Members Equity, access to the financial advisors network, discount cars, best price on consumer goods through Union Shopper, cheap movie tickets, etc.;
- Be kept up to date with the campaign with the opportunity to be active and join community committees through Your Rights at Work e-bulletins;
- To make the most of their membership, members will receive Member Services e-bulletins;
- An opportunity to be part of the fight to protect the Rights at Work of all Australians and their families.

The benefits for unions:

- Modern and professional method to generate members;
- Development of modern union processes; such as, advice on joining members without signatures and the secure online joining form;
- Electronic membership details;
- Credit card or direct debit details for ongoing membership payments;
- Organising and recruitment leads and potential activists spotted; and
- A member the union may not otherwise get.



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Determining which union

After a person has decided to join through Unions Australia information will be collected to help determine which union. For a large majority of cases it is clear which union has coverage.

ACTU trained organisers will use the following standard information to assess the union who could represent the new member:

- Who is the union that has coverage as stated in the Award/Agreement (if person is on AWA, the award/agreement that would otherwise cover that workplace will be considered)?
- What union, if any, is present in the workplace?
- What industry?
- What are the core work duties of the worker? Of the workplace?
- Which state they're working in?
- Are there any established demarcation rulings? And
- Have unions informed the ACTU that it is a workplace with contested or joint coverage and notification of all relevant unions has been requested?

If there is doubt about the appropriate union the ACTU will consult the relevant unions.

The ACTU is committed to a transparent process. A report of union allocation will be provided to ACTU Executive.

In the event of a dispute the ACTU will follow the current standard practice. Every participating union has signed a Protocol Agreement that outlines commonsense criteria for allocating members, including considerations like: 'Which union has a genuine interest in the workplace?' and 'What will produce the best membership outcome and best protect wages and conditions for the workers?'



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The ACTU recognises it is important that the allocation of unions is an open and transparent process. However, the focus of Unions Australia is not to join 'which union' but to join *a union*. The Initiative is about union membership for all Australian workers, regardless of industry or classification.

Organising leads

Unions Australia is a recruitment tool to build unions. Like any new member, a member who joins through Unions Australia may be an organising lead. They may have an issue shared with other workers. They may have their wages and conditions at risk due to AWAs

Trained ACTU organisers will look out for organising leads. They will map workplaces and collect information to help union organisers. For example, they would find out what types of activities the new member and other workers at the workplace would be prepared to take part in. ACTU organisers will also, look out for and encourage potential activists.

Unions have been asked to nominate an organising lead contact person to liaise with the ACTU.

Your Rights at Work Supporters

Many Australians are concerned about the new IR laws. Opposing the Federal Government's IR laws is about making a decision about the type of Australia we want and the legacy we leave for our children.

The ACTU is aware that there are many people who want to contribute to the campaign who are not eligible for union membership. This may be because they are retired, self-employed (and not a subcontractor or owner operators who might be eligible for membership), business owners or not currently employed.

These people will be able to become a Your Rights at Work Supporter by making regular ongoing donations, via direct debit or credit card, of whatever amount they can afford.

As a Your Rights at Work Supporter they will be kept up-to-date with the campaign through the online campaigning emails. They will also have access to member services.



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Only full union members will have access to industrial advice and representation.

Modernising Union Processes

In preparing for implementation of Unions Australia, the ACTU has had to find solutions to:

- Members joining over the phone without signatures;
- Members joining online; and
- Members paying over the phone or online without needing to sign a direct debit or credit card form.

It became obvious that even without Unions Australia the investigation and resolution of these issues would benefit unions and help modernise the joining process.

Members joining over the phone without signatures

People call up a union and they want to join on the spot. Unions have reported to the ACTU, that if they have to send out a form they lose over half the potential members through people failing to return the forms.

The perceived requirement that a signature is needed to confirm union membership has led to the loss of many potential members.

The ACTU has investigated what the requirements are to verify union membership. It found no Government legislation or authority requires union members' signatures to validate membership.

However, often union rules stipulate that signatures are required to validate membership.

Since this fact was brought up at the March Executive many unions have changed, or are in the process of changing their rules to accommodate members joining on the spot.



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Joining online

More and more daily interactions are occurring online. Unions are aware of the demand for joining members online. Some unions report that up to 40% of their membership applications occur online.

The issue of the requirement for members' signatures, as addressed above, is but one of the online issues.

The other issue is how to make the forms secure and also get the necessary membership data.

One option that some unions have investigated is the use of already established secure gateway providers. That is, you use an online bank processing service.

To use these online processing services the cost per transaction is often substantially higher (One union was quoted as much as \$1.50 a transaction! Although, some unions have negotiated \$0.25 per transaction; this is still double the cost of processing directly through the banks).

Additionally, these online processing services encrypt bank details, which can create administrative hassles for unions. That is, the union does not receive the bank account or credit card details.

The ACTU investigated other options and found that there was a far simpler and cost effective approach available.

The simpler option is to encrypt a basic data-form through purchasing a Secure Socket Layer (SSL) certificate (this certificate can cost as little as \$100 a year).

This option is already being used successfully by some unions.

The ACTU has built a prototype that can be easily customised and shared with unions.

Members paying over the phone or online

It is obvious that if you are asking people to sign forms there is always going to be a percentage of people who never get around to filling it out and posting it in (many unions say this number is as high as 50%).



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For a member to join over the phone or internet, the ACTU needed to find a way to process ongoing payments without signatures.

The easiest and most reliable form of getting members to pay membership fees is either via direct debit or periodical credit card deductions. Banks openly accept that credit card payments can be processed without signatures, but are less consistent with their position on processing direct debit forms without signatures.

There was a time when all credit card payments required signatures. It is now commonly accepted that credit cards can be processed over the phone and internet, and many people routinely rely on this service.

The ACTU has been advised that as of March 2006 the Government authority Australian Payment Clearing Association (APCA) reviewed its guidelines on processing direct debit electronically or by telephone. APCA outlines criteria to assess appropriate service providers that banks can give authorisation to process direct debit without signatures.

'Appropriate services' are those that minimise customer fraud risk; that is they have an ongoing or established business relationship and provide services rather than products that might be easily resold. APCA guidelines can be found on their website: www.apca.com.au.

The bank will only give authorisation if the union accepts that if there is a query it will refund the payment. Most payment queries can be resolved with a simple explanation.

Some unions have been processing members without signatures for a number of years. These payments are rarely queried by members and very few refunds are required.

Unions Australia Launch

Unions Australia will be launch at the 2006 ACTU Congress.

The support of ACTU affiliates for this historic initiative will help the union movement continue to focus on membership growth and will make it easier for many workers to realise the benefits of union membership.