

Unions and the party

Time to stay friends but end the marriage?

By [Max Ogden](http://www.openlabor.net.au) www.openlabor.net.au 15/08/2021

The fate of the trade unions and the party has been entwined for 130 years, but in the interests of a stronger labour movement and ALP, it may be time to change the relationship, writes trade unionist Max Ogden.

The relationship between the unions, factions and the ALP is complex, especially in light of the fact that the unions founded the ALP, 130 years ago. This complexity also applies internationally, where unions and labour and social democratic parties have a range of different historical experiences in their relationship.

In Sweden, for example, the Social Democratic Party was formed earlier than many Swedish unions, so the party had a significant influence in building the union movement. This probably helps to explain why Swedish unions tend to be more political than Australian ones.

In seeking ways to improve the influence of workers and unions in the ALP, we cannot ignore the role of the unions in forming the party. But that was a long time ago, and the world has changed enormously. What was appropriate then may not be today.

Unions and the party – some membership and voting facts

Union membership in Australia peaked in the 1960s, at about 60% of all employees. Since then it has fallen to about 15%, a huge difference that is replicated in most developed countries, except for Nordic and Western European countries, where they have experienced some decline, but nothing as dramatic as in the USA and Australia.

In the past the labour movement could count on a very large percentage of its members voting ALP, and also to have significant numbers of ALP members within its ranks. But unions now have very few ALP members within their ranks — so much so that they often struggle to get enough ALP members to fill their party conference delegations. One only has to look around at most branch meetings to see that most members are university trained.

Trades persons in highly paid industries such as mining, construction and infrastructure, while still strong unionists, are now negatively gearing properties, sending their kids to private schools, and often changing their votes. Before the 2019 Federal Election a video clip showed a group of these workers, in their hard hats, confronting Bill Shorten and demanding that he not change negative gearing arrangements.

Research from the Australian National University shows that in that election, the ALP got 41% of working-class votes (defined as under a certain income with no qualifications) and this figure has dropped steadily from 60% in 1980. The Coalition got 31% of working-class

votes, with another 10% going to small parties, mostly conservative parties such as One Nation, not the Greens. In other words, the ALP and the conservatives each got roughly 42% of working-class votes.

By contrast, the Swedish Social Democrats have many more workers and unionists in their ranks, bearing in mind that Swedish unionists are still 75% of the workforce. Unionist membership of the Social Democrats slumped following a 1987 agreement in which the blue-collar union peak council, commonly referred to as the LO, agreed to no longer affiliate to the party. Yet unionist membership of the party grew once it established workplace-based branches and clubs. It now has about 2500 branches and clubs nationally, with about 100,000 members. I doubt whether the ALP has 500 branches for our 50,000 members or less, and none in a workplace, and yet we are more than twice the size of Sweden.

Research shows that this falling support of workers, including unionists, has been going on for about 40 years in almost every developed country. At the last national election the Swedish Social Democrats experienced its lowest vote in 100 years.

Yet because of the country's proportional representation system, many of those votes went to smaller progressive parties as well as conservatives. A coalition of centre-left and centre-right parties is in power, with Social Democrat leader Stefan Lofven, an ex-head of the union movement, as prime minister. The coalition is designed to prevent the far-right Sweden Democrats from becoming the government.

Research by French economist Thomas Piketty shows that voting patterns in developed countries are increasingly dividing along education lines rather than class lines (even though education represents class) to a certain extent. The less educated are now more likely to vote conservative, while the better educated are more likely to vote progressive. In last year's US election, the poorer, less educated voted far more for Trump, and the better off, more highly educated, voted far more for the Democratic Party.

That being the case, although some of the higher educated may be in unions, the relationship between the unions and ALP needs to be reviewed, to ensure it is appropriate for the modern era, and that it maintains and seeks to improve the membership and influence of the ALP among workers.

Today only about half of Australian unions, representing just 7–8% of unionists, are affiliated to the ALP. It is a far cry from the peak of union membership and representation within the party last century.

Yet despite that large drop, unions as organisations – as opposed to individual unionist ALP members – command 50 percent of all ALP decision making bodies. It is lopsided, because non-factionally-aligned branch members would easily outnumber union represented members, yet they only get to vote for 50% of seats on those bodies.

Unions and the party and the factions

An increasingly big problem, for most ALP members who are non-factional, is the massive influence of the factions. Factions are mainly based on affiliated unions. The result is that far-reaching decisions are made involving a handful of union leaders representing fewer than eight percent of workers, a complete denial of democracy within the party. Bargaining

between factions is based on the so-called “Stability Pact”, in which members have had no say, and is currently being challenged in the courts by ten unions. So much for stability.

I am not suggesting that factions do not have a role to play in the party. All members must have the right to come together to pursue particular policies, or candidates for office. It is permanent factions, acting as parties within the party, that is my focus. In these permanent factions, members are either required to show the faction leader their ballot paper before it goes into the ballot box or, worse still, hand it over to the leader. These actions are patently illegal.

Permanent factions cut right across the idea that members change their minds, will disagree on some policy or candidate on one occasion, but on the next agree. The decision-making process must be fluid to take account of these ever occurring changes. Through many years in the union movement and the party I have been able to find agreement with people with whom I may have profoundly disagreed in the past. The rigidity of permanent factions makes that much more difficult.

Fluid factions arising only around particular issues or candidates at certain times, then joining with other colleagues at other times, is a sign of a healthy democracy, but it should never involve tampering with ballot papers. A faction should not demand the complete adherence of its members, but provide leadership as part a sophisticated and democratic process.

Many social democratic and labour parties around the world do not tolerate permanent factions, but allow fluid factions, as described above.

I have had significant experience of the New Zealand labour movement and am always impressed by the quality of its leaders, elected on merit, not because of loyalty to a permanent faction. In 2017, the Labour Party leader, Andrew Little, stepped down in favour of Jacinda Ardern, seven weeks before an election, because he acknowledged that he was not cutting through. It was a very fine, unselfish gesture, smoothly carried out, and an example of the comradely culture of the New Zealand labour movement. It is doubtful that such an event could have happened in Australia without a bitter battle between our permanent factions, as we have experienced with the revolving doors of our federal leadership.

Relationships between unions and the party

Are there options for change in the relationship between the unions and the party, particularly when the permanent factions are based around affiliated unions?

An issue for our unions is that a significant and growing number of their members are voting for the Coalition, and in some cases for Pauline Hanson. In Queensland a union official was a candidate for her. If this cohort of members continues to grow, some will become vocal that their unions are not catering for their political preferences, and not giving them the electoral assistance they give to ALP candidates. I am not sure how to deal with this problem but it needs to be considered before it arises. I suspect that just saying the unions founded the ALP will not cut it.

One downside of union-ALP affiliation is the constant attack by conservatives and parts of the media that the ALP is under the control of the unions. While this is not the case, voters widely believe it and the attack will be more effective since unionisation is now so much

smaller. An ALP free of union affiliation will have one less burden to bear, even if it is important to think through whether the costs outweigh the benefits.

One interesting element of the ACTU–ALP Accord of the 1980s and ‘90s – without debating its success or otherwise – is that it had nothing to do with unions being affiliated. It was bargained between the two parties on behalf of all unions, which shows that unions do not have to be affiliated to have a profound impact on the ALP. It also shows that unions must always be prepared to bargain with whichever government is in office, and being independent of the party will assist that process, even if they will always do better with the ALP in power.

I now believe that as a matter of principle, unions should remain independent of all political parties, but of course work closely with the ALP. That change would not preclude unions funding the ALP to the degree they do today. By operating independently, unions will be in a stronger position to bargain about policy positions as part of any funding agreement.

People join the ALP to build a better and more equal society. Central to that is deepening democracy so that businesses are democratically owned and managed, government at all levels involves greater participation and democracy, and that local communities and all relevant organisations are truly democratic, with great participation.

Options for a future Union–Factions–ALP relationship

Three overarching questions when considering options for future relationships are:

- **Does the relationship ensure a truly democratic ALP?**
- **Does it have the greatest potential to attract more workers and unionists to the ALP?**
- **Will it improve the working relationship between the unions and ALP?**

The options to consider are:

1. A rule to outlaw permanent factions.
2. If that is not possible, a court action to outlaw permanent factions and their tampering with ballot papers as breaches of the intent of ALP rules.
3. A good suggestion made at a recent Open Labor/Independents Zoom meeting is a rule that all state and national party votes require a secret ballot, to be conducted by the relevant Electoral Commission.
4. All unions no longer affiliate to the ALP, with the important proviso that unions commit resources to encourage their members to join the ALP. In Sweden unions can legitimately and democratically mobilise their many members to pursue union policy and candidate objectives, rather than a handful of union leaders making significant decisions, as is the case here.
5. Whether a union is affiliated or not, a rule that when joining a union, or every year, the member is asked whether he or she wants to pay a small amount on top of their membership fee as a political levy. The union affiliates to, and has rights within, the ALP on the basis of that verified number, and those paying the levy get rights to participate in party debates and votes. This rule would overcome the problem of some unions overstating their membership to increase their conference numbers. A similar rule was introduced in the British Labour Party to counter Thatcher legislation

aimed at damaging unions. The unions were pleasantly surprised at how many members opted to pay that extra political levy.

6. Such a rule could suit those unions who for good reasons will never affiliate to the party, but are happy for their members to join the party and play a role. Some members may prefer to join other progressive parties and even Coalition parties. That would not necessarily be a bad thing, as worker and union influence in other parties, even the Coalition, would probably be more positive than negative.
7. A rule that proposal 5 above be available to every member, and they not pay an extra fee for the privilege. However, I think this privilege or right will be more valued and used if members do pay a fee.

Final comment – we mean what we say about democracy

If we are to move in that direction, the very organisations we operate in, especially unions and the ALP, must become models of the kind of democratic society we are aiming for. If not, we are hypocrites. A US colleague calls it “building the road we travel”.

We are all well aware that so many voters have a deep cynicism of government and political parties. A move to overcome this cynicism will be to build an open, transparent ALP, so voters can see that we mean what we say about democracy. Reforming the ALP factions and the role of the unions will be a vital part of that process.

Max Ogden is a former metal worker, shop steward and longtime Industrial Officer with the Australian Metalworkers Union. As a boy he was asked to leave Cubs because he refused to sing ‘God Save the Queen’ and salute the flag. He is a member of the ALP and of Open Labor. His book, [A Long View From The Left](#), was published this year.

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