

‘Our Membership Doesn’t Reflect the Industry’: The Challenges of Organising Disability Support Workers

Abstract

Mobilisation theory seeks to explain how workers and trade unions are able to shift workplace grievances to forms of collective action. Drawing on mobilisation theory the focus here is on two unions whose memberships include disability support workers in the not-for-profit disability support sector. Historically, union practice formed around servicing members in traditional workplaces. The introduction of neoliberal marketisation practices in the care sector in the 1990s diminished a workforce already the subject of institutional gender discrimination, low pay, poor working conditions, work undervaluation and weakened bargaining opportunities. How unions can identify and utilise opportunities to organise these workers continues to present significant challenges. Union strategy and tactics are examined to understand how vulnerable workers can be organised in an increasingly precarious and marketised environment.

Introduction

How trade unions in advanced capitalist economies address declining memberships, and organise the previously unorganised, is a problem that continues to confront labour movements (Fairbrother and Yates 2003; Kumar and Schenk 2009). The centrality of the ‘standard employment relationship’ (SER) representing secure and stable employment with legal protections, which was the primary form of employment in the latter part of the twentieth century (Burgess and Campbell 1998; Vosko 2010), shaped union practice such that workers outside the SER were less likely to be unionised. However, this SER was only ever available to a relatively narrow group of workers: predominantly adult male citizens working in blue- and white-collar industries (Vosko 2010). Through a sustained program of labour market deregulation from the 1980s, the standard form of employment has fractured with more workers experiencing a diminution of labour market protections (Burgess and Campbell 1998). The continuing marketisation and outsourcing of public service delivery to not-for-profit (NFP) and for-profit sectors, grounded in the assumption that greater productivity is achieved through less government intervention (Meagher and

Goodwin 2015), continues to undermine and diminish work quality for disability support workers. These conditions are amplified under the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), a no fault insurance scheme for people born with disability or those who acquire a disability before the age of 65 that funds individual clients to directly purchase their own services (Productivity Commission 2011).

The disability support workforce is a hybrid. It is made up of a decreasing number of public sector workers whose working conditions were developed and protected around the SER and those working in the NFP sector where workers performing the same roles as those in the public sector have much diminished conditions (Cortis et al. 2013). The work is low paid, highly feminised, undervalued, poorly regulated and underpinned by cultural and industrial expectations of presumed selfless acts of unpaid labour by women to ensure adequate care for clients (Baines, Charlesworth and Cunningham 2014; Charlesworth 2012; Macdonald and Charlesworth 2016). Collectively, these conditions amount to a 'care penalty' (England 2005). Unions share some responsibility for these poor conditions and low levels of unionisation as a result of cultural and social resistance to recognising care work as paid, professional work of industrial value (Briggs, Meagher and Healy 2007). Unions self-report greater success in organising workers in public sector work environments. This is despite NFP workplaces reflecting similar commonalities such as rostered shifts, a regular employer and a standard workplace.

This paper examines how two Victorian trade unions are organising disability support workers in the NFP sector. These unions were selected as their organising work is being impacted significantly by the continuing rollout of the NDIS. One union has coverage of mental health workers whose work is being outsourced to the NDIS. The other union's coverage includes disability support workers who provide support services to people living with intellectual disability and cognitive impairment in the public sector, NFP and for-profit sectors.

In this paper a disability support worker is defined as a front-line worker responsible for the physical and emotional care and support for people living with disability. Disability support workers provide support to people living with cognitive, intellectual, physical or psychological disability. This support can range from the provision of personal hygiene to structured support enabling community engagement. In Australia there is currently limited

research examining how disability support workers experience their work (Cortis et al. 2013) and equally limited research on how unions experience organising these workers.

This analysis examines mobilisation theory to understand opportunities and barriers faced by the two unions. Mobilisation theory has been used to frame how union memberships act in relation to work and employment grievances (Murphy and Turner 2016). The argument here is that the mobilisation thesis assumes that the social and economic conditions for mobilisation around grievances exist. The article proceeds with a brief review of relevant mobilisation literature, followed by an outline of the conditions of disability support work. The next section sets out the basis of a small study and the research approach adopted. Drawing on this study, the next section considers the challenges facing unions organising disability support workers. The final section provides findings and analysis. This paper contributes to the growing literature on how disability support workers and their unions might be able to sustain themselves in an environment that challenges the existence of unions and undermines the value of support work.

Mobilisation theory

Industrial relations analyses have been criticised for conceptualising theory and practice within a prism that presumes the existence of a homogenous labour market with workers experiencing treatment and effects in the same way (Pocock 1997: Wajcman 2000). In recent decades theorists have made more visible the intersections of race, gender, age and ethnicity in labour markets (Alberti, Holgate and Tapia 2013: McBride, Hebson and Holgate 2015). Despite the existence of these limitations it is widely accepted that Kelly's (1998) mobilisation theory presents an analytical tool that provides insights into how unions can revitalise memberships via a process of collective action preceded by injustice identification and group identity formation (Gahan and Pekarek 2013). Drawing on social movement literature, mobilisation theory sets out a number of steps workers and unions can take to embed a sense of collective identity at the workplace and to act to improve terms and conditions of employment. It is via the activation of these steps—not necessarily sequentially—that workers can recognise that individual interests are shared and, through a process of collectivisation, join together and take action (Murphy and Turner 2016).

The first step requires workers to recognise a grievance has occurred causing workers to feel an injustice exists. Kelly posits that it is injustice itself 'that should form the core intellectual agenda for industrial relations' (1998: 126). The conscious development of a

deeply felt sense of injustice must convert to a belief that blame is to be attributed to the employer who holds oppositional interests and is able to exercise those interests over employees through the exercise of power (Murphy and Turner 2016). As organisations able to bring individuals together, unions are the institutions used to channel this focus of injustice and are instrumental in successful mobilisation. This second step, union formation, encourages workers to act collectively through the union as the organisation with capacity and resources to articulate the collective voice. Third, workers must believe that acting collectively can address the grievance, which creates the conditions in which workers will mobilise. Collective identity and solidarity are crucial to workers building a sense of confidence in the action they are taking, and are enhanced through the development of a 'common purpose' (Murphy and Turner 2016: 593). This step creates a sense of solidarity that can withstand counter-mobilisation tactics by the employer. Fourth, opportunities must exist for workers to ventilate grievances, which take place via a range of collective actions (Cockfield 2007), the fifth step. Opportunities are shaped by external factors such as state regulation, which can at any time impede collective action (Cockfield 2007). In all, these steps set the conditions for unions to exercise power at the workplace - a central plank of union revitalisation efforts (Lévesque and Murray 2010).

Implicit in mobilisation theory is the condition that face-to-face interactions are necessary to build group identification, share grievances, develop workplace power and act collectively within opportunity structures. This notional acceptance of what a workplace is, and how the workplace itself provides the conditions for collectivism, overlooks the different ways in which women workers, young people or migrants experience work. Without workplace power, workers' capacities to advance their interests, either individually or collectively through processes such as bargaining, are compromised. Pocock (1998) has elaborated on the impact of cultural power in unions, in particular the exclusive ways in which notions of solidarity have formed to reinforce a culture reflective of the SER. How unions overcome these structural forms of discrimination within cultural forms of power building is challenging. Applying mobilisation theory to disability support work offers an important analysis of how the principal elements of Kelly's 'injustice, attribution and common interest' (1998: 126-27) theory applies to social, political and economic power inequalities within the work environment.

The Australian disability support workforce

The focus of this research is disability support workers working in supported accommodation providing care and support for people for whom intellectual or cognitive disability is their primary diagnosis. Disability support workers have to navigate a web of relationships with clients, other workers, managers, employers, medical and ancillary staff, parents, carers and other service providers in an environment of increasing medical complexity, compliance, advocacy and policy interpretation (Quilliam, Bigby and Douglas 2015; Vassos and Nankervis 2012). The social construction of this work considers care work to be a vocation undertaken by women who, because of their gender, are inherent carers, underpinned by sector norms of female self-sacrifice to care for others (McDonald and Charlesworth 2011). Disability support services have been the subject of neoliberal-driven practices espousing the virtues of competitive labour markets and the use of the private sector through marketisation processes characterised by the withdrawal of government from the delivery of services while remaining the key funder (Meagher and Goodwin 2015). Marketisation aspects of neoliberal ideology, combined with historical institutional wage-setting failures and inadequate advocacy, have collided to produce precarious employment as a distinct feature of disability support work.

Estimating the size of the care sector is ‘revealingly difficult’ (Charlesworth 2012: 111). Martin and Healy (2010), in a report commissioned by the federal government and used by the Productivity Commission (2011) in the shaping of the NDIS, use employer and employee survey data to describe the contours of the disability workforce. Consistent with national data, this report uses the category of ‘non-professional’ to identify direct care or disability support workers, of which there were approximately 58,200 (2010). Around half worked on a permanent part-time basis, a third casually, while less than 15% were permanent full-time workers. It is estimated that around 80% of all workers in the sector are women (2010). Disability services are overwhelmingly provided by the NFP sector, which delivers almost 75% of services. Government provides about 21% of direct service delivery and the private sector supplies about 6% of services (2010). Wages for workers employed directly by government have remained significantly higher than for those employed in the other sectors, where workers often have multiple employers.

The implementation of the NDIS comes after sustained advocacy from the disability community who have championed the need for people living with disability to have greater choice and control in how they live their lives, and over the supports they require to achieve their life goals (Soldatic et al. 2014). Workforce data collection, however, remains

inadequate with a recent Productivity Commission report finding that ‘existing data on the size and scope of disability care workers and the organisations they are employed by are poor and not commensurate with the importance of the NDIS’ (Productivity Commission 2017). When tested against other female-dominated occupations and the broader workforce, the conditions under which disability support workers are employed are deficient. For instance, the *Social, Community, Home Care and Disability Services (SCHADS) Industry Award 2010*, which together with the National Employment Standards provides the labour minima applicable to disability support work under the *Fair Work Act 2009* (Cth), has no minimum hours for part-time employees and a minimum of two hours engagement for casual disability support employees. These conditions are poorer than in male-dominated work such as that covered under the *Manufacturing and Associated Industries and Occupations Award 2010*, which provides a minimum of four hours pay for casual workers each time they are required to attend work and a minimum of three consecutive hours per shift for part-time workers. Conditions in other highly feminised work, such as that covered under the *General Retail Industry Award 2010*, provide a minimum daily engagement for part-time and non-school-student casual employees of three hours.

The failures of industrial and political institutions to prevent worker exploitation continue under the NDIS. Systemic underfunding undermines the conditions under which these workers operate; peer supervision is diminished and employers are classifying work at lower grade levels in order to pay lower wages to keep within the NDIS-imposed pricing structure (Cortis et al. 2017). These poorer standards remain, despite increasing demand for labour under the NDIS.

The study

This research draws on a broader doctoral thesis examining how trade unions can organise workers in precarious employment. The aim of this paper in particular is to explore how unions are approaching the challenges of organising a disability support workforce operating in a complex work environment that is increasingly precarious. Social science research is not ‘value free’ (Darlington and Dobson 2013). I come to this research as an insider having worked as an industrial officer with the Health and Community Services Union (HACSU Victoria). I have observed firsthand the social, policy, political and regulatory complexities of disability support work and the work environment in my work

with HACSU. My interactions with vulnerable workers in the Textile, Clothing & Footwear Union of Australia (TCFUA), particularly outworkers, provided the basis for my view that disability support work was developing the same characteristics as vulnerable outworkers in terms of isolated workplaces, limited bargaining opportunities, low pay, and demanding physical and emotional labour. Disability support worker roles clearly fall within accepted characteristics of precarious employment (Charlesworth 2012). Labour demand is high under the NDIS (Productivity Commission 2017), yet employment conditions remain poor (Macdonald and Charlesworth 2016).

This article is based on semi-structured interviews undertaken in 2016-2017 with trade union officials and disability support workers. Interviews were conducted with 29 disability support workers, 19 of whom worked in the NFP sector and 10 in the public sector. Reflective of the care sector, worker respondents were predominantly older with an average age of 48 years; 66% were female. Fifteen trade union officials (TUO) across the two unions were interviewed, representing 80% of those in leadership positions and 80% of those whose role it is to organise these workers. Consistent with the gender bias of trade union officials—elected and employed—respondents were 60% male and 80% of leadership positions were held by men (ACTU Women’s Committee 2012).

Findings

Injustice in the workplace

Work intensification is a feature of disability support work. Governments have removed themselves from direct service delivery, opting instead for competitive-based tendering arrangements in the NFP sector (Goodwin and Phillips 2015). Paying workers poorly allows employers to remain within constrained pricing structures, increasingly a behaviour of NDIS service providers (Cortis et al. 2017). Work stress is intensifying through role ambiguity, lack of capacity to influence decision-making in the workplace, and workers having to deal with challenging client behaviours (Judd, Dorozenko and Breen 2017). Employers rely on these workers sacrificing time and income to achieve better outcomes for service users (Baines, Charlesworth and Cunningham 2014).

Interviews with workers reflected a deep sense of injustice regarding the low wages for responsibilities undertaken in the role:

when you look at people that have got intellectual disability, they've got psychiatric disability, they've got complex physical problems as well, I don't think we're recognised and rewarded for all of that knowledge and assistance that we give to people on that level (NFP 13).

Work intensification appears to have gathered pace, particularly in the NFP sector. A number of workers advised employers in recent years have withdrawn supervisors from homes and replaced them with a managerial structure where one person is responsible for a number of homes, 'They've just got rid of Team Leaders about twelve months ago' (NFP 10). This increases administrative and operational work for disability support workers who are increasingly performing roles previously undertaken by supervisors. One former public sector, now NFP worker advised:

[administration responsibilities] is far greater with [NFP] than it is with the government...because DHS have supervisors, team leaders and deputies to do all of it all the time, whereas [NFP] don't do that, they don't have the team leaders in their houses anymore (NFP 1).

A rural worker with a NFP employer described the managerial structure being remotely located in two separate country towns away from the place of work. Workers described other facets of precarious employment: inconsistent hours, having to cover shifts as a result of others' absences and exhaustion from the physical and emotional labour inherent in support work:

if there is nobody else to replace you, even if you are feeling tired or sick yourself: ... you have to start ringing around trying to find someone and just stay there until they find someone: if no one comes, you're just stuck there, you just can't walk away and leave the guys (NFP 4).

Persistent low pay and irregular working hours have long-lasting impacts on workers. Reliance on Australia's social income and welfare system (Centrelink) to meet living costs is a common experience for those in precarious employment (Howe 2012). One interviewee observed, 'most of us still get Centrelink because ... the hours are up and down, up and down all the time' (NFP 17). The complexity of the work and work environment are neglected features of the industry (Judd, Dorozenko and Breen 2017). A number of workers spoke about the amount of administrative duties involved in supporting people living with disability. These responsibilities are required of all workers regardless of employment type:

it is expected from management, that each casual will read the notes and read the files, the health care plan, the support plan, the how I move plan, that how I eat plan... and you can't do it!' (NFP 2).

Workers overwhelmingly advised that the increasingly demanding work environment where they are responsible for implementing evidence based active support plans, behavioural support plans, administering medication to name a few responsibilities requires workers to take on more risk. These are drivers for joining a union:

For security, for financial backup because if the finger gets pointed at you, you have somebody behind you that knows the laws, knows the right way and your rights and can back you. You need the backing. We're in such a vulnerable workforce, such a vulnerable workforce that I strongly believe I need the union behind me because if somebody wants to say something about me, make an accusation or whatever, I need that support behind me, because lord knows I don't have the money to go and get my own legal advice (NFP 15).

These poor working conditions contrast with the reward workers achieve in their roles, with many speaking positively about their jobs: 'I love that you are actually doing something for somebody' (PS 5); 'When you have people in your care, it is a sense of responsibility' (NFP 14). While there is evidence of an injustice frame within which unions can mobilise workers, attribution of blame appears to be a difficult task. Many workers interviewed accepted funding shortfalls as a condition of employment and something they could do nothing about. Common responses reflected the institutional requirement for acts of altruism in this work:

Being a non-profit organisation, there's only so much money that they have in terms of funding ... to go round to all the houses, so they've got to try and spread that, you know, as best they can' (NFP 12).

The acceptance of a failure to adequately resource the sector appears to shape the ways in which workers assess client opportunities from the client's perspective, rather than attributing blame to the employer. Workers are able to identify issues that are felt as unjust conditions of their work. Workers also attribute blame to the funding mechanisms that fail to provide adequate resources. The emotional commitment to this work enables workers to transfer the employer's failure to seek better funding to a responsibility they hold to ensure that service users continue to receive adequate support.

Organising disability support workers

Translating experiences of poor working conditions to collective action challenges unions. The title of this article was taken from an interview with a union official reflecting on the task of finding new members in an increasingly fractured work environment. Union

interviewees advised that anecdotally their assessment was they had good coverage of workers in the stable public and local government sectors, but that this was not the case for non-public-sector workforces. Union organisers generally spoke of their work in terms of continuing use of traditional organising strategies and tactics that rely on visiting mass workplaces to attract members and develop workplace delegates:

We often use a strategy where I meet [in the] lunch room and we...talk about the union.... We need to look at how we train our delegates and so that they could do more work on the ground (TUO 3).

Internal union structures lean toward maintaining historical forms of organising arrangements. Practical reasons such as maintaining an income base by servicing existing members and recruiting in bigger workplaces are necessary to continue union operations. Shifting to newer forms of internal structures remains challenging. In one union all organisers are responsible for organising in the NFP sector however, officials report it remains problematic finding ways of seeking out new members and workplaces:

there's only a finite amount of us and it's seemingly an almost infinite amount of workplaces you can get to.... there's only so many hours in a day (TUO 5).

In the other union the structure has only one of seven organisers carrying primary responsibility for all NFP workplaces:

[W]e have one organiser who does predominantly... most of the non-government organising. And then the other six organisers have a mix of public sector, mental health public sector disability but also with small pockets of NGO disability coverage, as well (TUO 9).

Union officials also report high turnover of workers as an impediment to organising and retention of members: 'We've expanded our organisers that cover that area [but] in the last twelve months we've had very little growth. [Retention is] poor (TUO 15); and 'We have a 30% turnover every year in membership' (TUO 2). Overwhelmingly union officials acknowledged the composition of internal workforces do not reflect the support workforce. One official observed: 'The union workforce is not diverse enough I think to adequately meet the needs of potential members ... gender, ethnicity, age ... we're very homogenous ...' (TUO 4). Officials from the membership felt that coming from the shop floor provided 'authenticity' (TUO 3) for prospective members. Others felt their skill sets and commitment to the values of unionism made them equally credible organisers.

Overwhelmingly union interviewees recognised organising workers in fractured workplaces as a necessary but seemingly impenetrable mission. Developing relationships with prospective members was seen as crucial to organising:

Well, you've got to be able to communicate, you have to show and exhibit a certain amount of empathy for struggles that your members have, particularly with non-government organisations, because of the lower pay and the way they're managed (TUO 6).

Reaching these workers continues to challenge unions. Reflecting on the new work environment one official observed:

The underlying thing is that with the NDIS and the pricing—it's a whole notion of work is going to be very different. It will all be done in the text message. So how do we organise around that? It's a big challenge' (TUO 11).

Finding workplaces, emerging workplace leaders and fostering collective identities in these circumstances challenge traditional forms of workplace-based organising.

Collective action

Collective action by most officials was framed within the enterprise bargaining system. As previously discussed, care workers were excluded from the rights of industrial citizenship until the 1990s (Briggs, Meagher and Healy 2007). This exclusion also coincided with a period of rapid change to industrial laws from 1988 to 1992 that elevated workplace bargaining over centralised wage setting (Gahan and Pekarek 2012) and was in part a driver for unions to embrace organising to build workplace structures as enterprise bargaining was implemented (Griffin, Small and Svensen 2003). Many union officials observed that disability support workers do not have a history of taking industrial action and saw this is an impediment to industrial campaigning. One official stated that members are:

very reluctant to take industrial action ... and very responsive to the guilt that their employer can put on them. That you [workers] asking for this is directly affecting our client delivery. If we pay you more, we won't be able to do as much good in the community (TUO 1).

Comparing internal union expectations of strike action taken by public-sector as compared to NFP workers reveals internal contestation as to what constitutes 'real' unionism. In a recent industrial action ballot process for a NFP workforce, union internal discussion rested on success being achieved through raw numbers participating in the ballot process.

Given the smaller scale of members in the non-government workplace, a lower number of individual ballots were received. While proportionally higher than the public-sector ballot process, this was nevertheless construed by some as being of less significance than the public-sector ballot return numbers. One official celebrated the ballot return:

You might say returning a ballot form is a fairly low level form of activism, but it is ... at least attitudinally saying ... 'Well, you're acting as a worker and a unionist more so than as a carer'. ... [The] prism we look through it as a union movement in unfair. ... I think it is actually a more active sector than we give it credit for ... [U]nions have cultural histories of being militant. These workers are considered less active because they are likely to put their clients before their own needs (TUO 9).

There is evidence that opportunities to mobilise workers and encourage collective action have been reframed by unions. One official set out a thought process undertaken by the union when considering how to think about what industrial actions means for non-government members, stating:

Members are not experienced in it... Previously we always felt that our density wasn't great enough for it to have an impact, but we've essentially reframed our [protected industrial action] ... it's not going to bring the employer or the organisation or agency to its knees, we acknowledge that, but it's about members actually, even just the voting. To vote to take [industrial action], they've never done that before (TUO 8).

These shifts in union thinking about what industrial action means and how it can be assessed are important steps in reframing how power at the workplace can be leveraged to organise disability support workers. Counter-mobilisation efforts by the state through sustained underfunding and a neoliberal narrative of individualism within the NDIS presents opportunities and challenges for unions organising in this sector. Workers taking industrial action in a NFP reported there was confusion over the implementation of work bans:

We've got bans at the moment, but they're not even getting carried out properly ... staff not doing some of the admin responsibilities, but ... the organisation is finding ways around things as well. So ... everybody's confused. And then you get one answer from the union and one answer ... from our organisation (NFP 10).

A non-member in the same organisation reported complaining to management about non-members having to pick up the work members were not performing. Without having a comprehensive attribution narrative and collective identity, mobilisation to take collective action becomes a challenging task for unions whose memberships are disparate.

The limits of mobilisation

Kelly's injustice thesis would suggest that given the poor quality of employment conditions and work intensification, the disability workforce would be predisposed to being organised. However, isolation was presented by many officials as a clear barrier to mobilising workers:

It's hard. It's getting people excited, people being confident. Because [for] a lot of the NGO staff, with disability [it] is just one person here, two people in a house. It's hard for you to blend into the numbers a little bit, because they can pick you out and say, "You, and you. You're trouble makers" (TUO 15).

On the other hand, where physical isolation is not an impediment to organising, diminished activism was connected to the control the employer has over workers:

I think it's a very oppressed workforce and no one is encouraged to speak up ever. Just the very act or thought or notion of speaking to someone ... like the organisation or the employer... to even question... or to think about another way is seen as oppositional and in defiance and should be crushed and [workers] should be moved out or on (TUO 8).

Working time was presented as problematic to developing delegate structures. When discussing difficulties arranging public service delegate meetings, an official observed '[T]hey're funny—they don't tend to want to meet, and the hours they work make it difficult for them to meet.' (TUO 6). Workers also advised they were reluctant to report issues to the union as it is the service users who are affected more than the workers. When discussing what issues a worker might take to the union, one worker described a shift where they had the taxi driver wheel one of the clients to a meeting area while the worker wheeled the other. When discussing ways to improve this situation the worker advised they would not make a complaint to the employer or union 'because the outcome will ... mean that instead of two clients going out and having community access, only one will' (NFP 6).

Assessment

As noted previously, the provision of highly feminised disability support services relies on women care workers self-sacrificing financial reward, time, emotional labour and skill recognition in order to provide quality support services. This occurs in an industry subject to systemic and systematic underfunding and where workers' social relations are tightly attached to a person requiring ongoing support in an individualised care arrangement. The

data demonstrate that workforces and workplaces shaped by assumptions of gendered self-sacrifice experience diminished conditions of employment. This research supports analyses by Alberti, Holgate and Tapia 2013, Pocock 1997 and Wajcman 2000 that theories of organising require increased attention on the intersectionalities inherent in workforces. Examinations of power, exercised at arm's length by government, that employers are reluctant to challenge also requires examination in disability support work.

In terms of mobilisation theory, a strong sense of injustice related to work undervaluation and low wages in relation to the responsibilities of disability support roles is clearly evident. However, for disability support workers and their unions, attributing blame to an employer—who could be either the person living with disability or an NFP—is exceptionally difficult. The formation of collective identity is tempered by the social, political and institutional settings requiring workers to self-sacrifice their labour. Many workers reported that they join unions for insurance protection, which in itself is a conscious response to the possibility of a future injustice; however, activism was a lower priority.

Officials repeatedly acknowledged the importance, if not absolute requirement, to build relationships with prospective members as key to mobilising workers—the third step in Kelly's theory. However, difficulties locating workers and workplaces presented a significant hurdle for officials. Opportunities for workers to act are dampened by structural failures that continue to require workers to self-sacrifice. Taking collective action is problematic given the prevalence of worker identity intertwined with clients' needs and pressures to perform the work at a cost to the worker.

Conclusion

This paper has explored how Kelly's (1998) mobilisation theory as an analytical tool might assist unions in organising disability workers. The industrial, social and political environment in which care work has developed continues to harm disability support workers in a range of complex ways. The social construction of care work as women's work subject to acts of self-sacrifice, and the existence of diminished employment conditions, are significant barriers to organising these workers. While mobilisation theory helps explain why workers (as union members) may become collectively engaged in relation to grievances it assumes that workers are in a position to act collectively. Labour demand is high and this study suggests that injustices are keenly felt by workers providing

opportunities for unions to recruit members who feel their work requirements present significant risks to the security of their ongoing employment.

For unions, reshaping these experiences to build a sense of solidarity as a precursor to collective action appears to in part rest on unions redefining how they imagine collective solidarity. Examining this task through the lens of mobilisation theory also highlights the difficulties unions face in this sector. How unions can draw these workers into union organisational structures is complicated. Where unions are able to access workers, opportunities to bind them to collective action is most often formed around the enterprise bargaining process. Unions face tensions between the individualisation of support work and unions' adherence to traditional conceptions of collective action expressed through acts of militancy, suggesting continued development of existing union organising strategies are necessary as a means to develop solidarity and collective identity in the face of the developing work environment.

Mobilisation theory as it applies to this workforce is useful for setting out a strategy to identify how the key elements of injustice, attribution and identity can impact union organising. These findings demonstrate that mobilisation theory as it applies to the disability support workforce requires a more comprehensive analysis of the impact of gender, power and industrial relations exclusion that has shaped the ways in which this work is undertaken. The continued privatisation of services within an already partly organised sector continues to present challenges to unions to find innovative ways to organise these workers.

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