

***Power in Coalition: Strategies for Strong Unions and Social Change* by Amanda Tattersall, Allan & Unwin, 2010. \$27.99**

Trade unions, for all their proud history, are in uniform decline, both in terms of membership and influence, in most of the developed world, failing to adjust to the neoliberal onslaught and the financialisation of capitalism that has wrought a world very different from the more equitable ideal in which unions a mere generation ago boldly sought a form of power sharing with government and corporate might.

The seat at the bargaining table in the brief era of Keynesian ascendancy is all but a thing of the past as the rising power of capital increased its ascendancy over labour as well as government. And the ever-increasing mobility of capital, the decentralization of industrial relations and the rush towards privatisation have changed both the workplace as well as the very nature of work almost beyond recognition, in most cases leaving unions floundering in the wake of rapid change.

Adaptation, where it has occurred, has been slow with many unions clinging to a narrow definition of their role, barely venturing beyond the institutionalised comfort zones of business unionism or arbitration unionism, in which they merely did what they had always done – that is, negotiate with employers (where they could), using collective bargaining and working through various forms of industrial boards and tribunals to improve wages and conditions. Whereas unions could once rely on the support of social democratic and labour parties to bolster their influence and amplify their voice, this is no longer the case with parties such as the Australian Labor Party, which grew from the union movement, now actively distancing themselves from unions.

Far from being consigned to museums of history, unions can adapt to changing circumstances and play key roles as civil society actors, as Amanda Tattersall, a Unions NSW official, writes here in the book version of her doctoral dissertation.

Through a thorough analysis of case studies in Australian, the United States and Canada, Dr Tattersall addresses what she terms the unions' "crisis of power" through their creative engagement with other civil society organisations in seeking to go beyond advancing traditional union goals and wages and conditions in seeking broader social change in what she characterises as "positive-sum coalitions."

She applies her research to the three case studies, identifying three central propositions: building organisational strength, strategic choice of coalition participants and the potential for unions to build capacity and revitalise.

Successful coalitions between unions and community organisations in the three countries illustrate useful lessons, both for unions and community activists. Under the microscope here are the public education coalition in Sydney, Toronto's Ontario Health Coalition fighting to save universal health care, and Chicago's living wage campaign run by the Grassroots Collaborative, and in each of these detailed studies, Dr Tattersall demonstrates the ways in which coalitions can constitute powerful strategies for social change, organisational development and union renewal.

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