

Defending integrity

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Tracey Evans

A vibrant labour movement is a defining characteristic of strong democratic societies, says international industrial relations expert Dr Tom Schneider.

Any decline in union membership has serious implications not only for workers, but also employers and society as a whole, warns Tom Schneider, president and CEO of the US organisational and employment consultancy, Restructuring Associates Inc, and chairman of Schneider (Australia) Consulting.

And, with more than 25 years' experience consulting to some of the biggest companies and public sector organisations in the United States, Australia and Canada; he is well placed to comment. Organised labour movements have traditionally played a "very strong" role in driving social policy and minimum wages and in providing a certain discipline for employers by raising the standards of workplace practices and benefits, he says.

Meanwhile non-unionists are becoming "free-riders" in economic terms, he says. "People have been able to take advantage of the benefits that unions have delivered."

For example, while a significant part of the US vehicle-manufacturing sector is now non-union, wages and benefits are close to the levels of those companies where union membership remains high. That's because, says Schneider, if there was too much of a discrepancy, the auto workers' union would be easily able to recruit members.

"So, in effect, all of the non-union workers in those companies benefit from the United Auto Workers union, whether they're members or not," he says.

Protecting professional standards

For professional associations, such as APESMA, improving membership numbers is as much about the battle to protect and improve professional standards, says Schneider. "You need to reinforce the importance of a collective voice in making certain that professional integrity and skills are recognised."

The nursing profession in the US has, to an extent, taken this approach, he says. "Their focus is on protecting the integrity of the profession. If they simply demand a bigger share of the pie, they lose. Instead they argue for good wages and conditions and training in order to attract and keep the best people in the profession."

"In many cases they're making many of the same demands that traditional unions do, but they're being framed in a way that resonates with those who say, 'I didn't go into nursing to make a lot of money but it's insulting that my contribution to society isn't recognised financially'".

"So it's a funny little twist—it's not: 'I have more power, therefore I'm going to command more money'. It's that, 'Because of what I'm doing, I deserve the recognition that comes with a higher wage'.

Schneider says professional unions that take this approach, over the traditional militant approach, achieve higher membership and better results.

No compromise

But that doesn't mean abandoning confrontation where necessary. "The context for militancy is: we will not compromise standards, we will not compromise quality, and we will not compromise the professionalism of our members. We cannot compromise on wages and benefits because low wages mean that we're unable to attract the calibre of people that our profession demands."

Extending this line of reasoning beyond the workplace to have a voice at industry and government level is another crucial plank in the campaign on behalf of professional members, says Schneider. After all, it has been a highly successful approach for doctors and lawyers.

"If you go back a long time, doctors and lawyers operated as individuals, but legal societies, bar associations and medical associations have become very important and forceful advocates of their members."

"Even though most lawyers and doctors are not employees, they have a collective voice through their associations, something that is as important to them as it was for the skilled worker 30 years ago."

As a result, the law and medicine have won a high level of recognition for their professional standards. "So, you can see there's a need for strong professional associations to maintain standards in any profession as well as give professionals a collective voice to make sure their interests are protected," says Schneider.

But he cautions that, for professional associations to be successful, both in negotiating on behalf of members and at attracting new members, they must demonstrate the connection between the needs of the profession and the individuals who are part of it.

“In the future, the challenge is whether professional organisations can put those two together,” Schneider says.

“The extent to which the union builds on professional pride determines whether it becomes a strong voice and people say, ‘Yes, I’m part of that group.’”