

Why youth workers need to collectively organise

The collective identity of youth workers and their capacity to industrially organise is being eroded by deskilling, via the introduction of 'semi skilled specialisation' in TAFE training. There are also implications for the quality of service delivery, particularly for those young people most at risk. Recent attempts at professionalising the youth sector have focused on 'codes of ethics' and left pay and conditions issues to community sector unions. The history of nursing provides a case example of the benefits of combining professional aspirations with industrial organisation. If the professional and industrial interests of the community services sector are combined, the collective voice of youth workers will be strengthened and the quality of service provision will be enhanced.

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There are many factors that contribute to the current erosion of the collective identity of youth workers. To date, the disparate nature of the industry and the competitive nature of government funding to the sector are important factors. Agencies are in competition to gain government funding to deliver services, which discourages ongoing sector-wide collaboration between youth workers. Funding is often short term, which means that developing a continuity of professional practice, networks and outcomes that build collective industrial strength and history in a lasting manner is difficult.

The current government's training agenda, delivered through industry training boards, deconstructs the practice of "generalist" youth work. The introduction of "semi skilled specialisation" in TAFE training leads to "deskilling" and the subsequent eroding of pay and conditions. In the community services sector, there are approximately 50 qualifications, from work experience and entry level to advanced practice qualifications, endorsed through a framework aligned with the Australian Qualifications Framework (Community Services & Health Industry Skills Council (CSHISC) 2007). While some argue that these new, "specialist" (narrower) qualifications have been introduced to recognise the increasing complexity involved in the delivery of quality services, the reality is that these qualifications become a substitute for an undergraduate degree in many instances, and allow employers and government to employ and pay less qualified staff to

perform what is recognised as highly complex and skilled youth work. This is essentially deskilling.

The Youth Affairs Council of Victoria (YACVic), in their report *Who's carrying the can?* (2006), agrees. The report argues strongly that the holistic wellbeing of young people is supported by generalist youth work and not an issues-based response undertaken through the lens of a "specialist". What is required is generalist youth work that facilitates an integrated system of support for young people. Such a model provides a sound framework on which to base the provision of other services and ensures timely responses as young people transition from adolescence to adulthood (YACVic 2006).

Deskilling the youth work industry

The definition and practice of generalist "youth work" is being eroded, via semi-skilled specialisation, and this leads to "deskilling", segmentation of work and the loss of pay and conditions. The only way that workers can protect the uniqueness of their occupation and enhance their pay and conditions is by coming together and collectively organising to regain what has been lost. However, the depoliticising of workers largely through the implementation of "value free" competency-based training (Corney 2004; Corney & Broadbent 2007), combined with contestable and competitive tendering, has pitted workers against each other and weakened youth workers' ability to collectively bargain. This sector-wide amnesia regarding the role and history of industrial struggles to protect the rights of workers has been encouraged by governments and employers keen to decentralise the industry, and agreeing to minimum standards for employment, thereby effectively devaluing higher qualifications and deskilling youth work.

Deskilling and Taylorism

Deskilling or Taylorism is a central concept in labour theory. Braverman's (1974) criticism of modern Taylorist forms of capitalist production was that it "deskilled" highly skilled workers by dividing their skills into

numerous smaller and independent tasks. This division of skills reorganised the way skilled work was undertaken so that less skilled and less well paid workers could do the task. This he argued had the effect of taking away a worker's "craftsmanship" and their sense of identity as a worker with a particular and specialised skill. This had the further effect of weakening the broader collective identity of workers with the same identifiable skill or knowledge and placed that skill or knowledge in the hands of a much smaller number of highly paid managers.

Wood (1982), building on Braverman, describes Taylorism in terms of three principles:

... the rendering of the labour process independent of craft, tradition or workers' knowledge ... the separation of conception from execution and the use of the managerial monopoly over knowledge to control the labour process in detail (p.76).

Littler (1982) adds three further processes to Wood's definition:

- 1) the process whereby the shopfloor loses the right to design and plan; i.e. separation of planning and doing; 2) the fragmentation of work into meaningless segments; 3) the redistribution of tasks amongst unskilled and semi-skilled labour, associated with labour cheapening (p.25).

As such, employers and governments, using the methods of Taylorism, have deskilled the work of university-trained "generalist" youth workers, by dividing their work among the less well-trained "specialists". This has had several so-called "advantages" for employers, boards of management and governments, in particular the lowering of labour costs, but little or no advantage for generalist university-trained youth workers.

Deskilling has also given management greater control over the workforce as it is easier to monitor one generalist university-trained youth worker, who then monitors the semi-skilled, who then monitor the unskilled workers and so on. As such, segmentation acts against the notion of occupational solidarity in which workers come together to protect their common interests. There is also concern among youth workers about the

effect of this division on service delivery, particularly for those young people most at risk (YACVic 2006).

Professionalisation versus proletarianisation

In order to “save” youth work from deskilling and segmentation, many in the youth sector are arguing for collective organisation via the professionalisation of youth work (Bessant 2004a, 2004b; Hoiles & Corney 2006). However, there are those (Quixley & Doostkhah 2007) who view professionalisation as detrimental to the interests of youth workers.

For example, Quixley and Doostkhah (2007), writing on behalf of the Youth Affairs Network of Queensland, see the professionalisation process, and in particular codes of ethics, as unnecessarily regulating and as “conservatising” the free agency of youth workers. This makes sense if youth workers are in fact free agents, defined as self-employed and acting on a fee-for-service basis and not defined as “salaried workers”, constrained by and reliant upon government or NGOs to employ them.

As most youth workers are salaried and are subject to direction from their employer, they are to some degree already proletarianised and not “free agent” professionals at all. Viewing youth workers as “workers” changes the nature of attempts to organise them under the banner of professionalisation and breaks down the false demarcations between collective organisation as either unionism or professionalisation that continue to be drawn in debates within the current Victorian youth sector (Grogan 2004; Bessant 2004a, 2004b). These polarising debates tend to focus collective organisation on codes of practice and training and leave the industrial pay and conditions issues to existing community sector unions, rather than combine the notion of professionalism with that of unionism.

Ironically the only successful and long-lasting attempt at collectively organising youth workers was the Victorian Youth Workers Association, which to date is the only youth sector organisation to have successfully achieved the twin aims of university-level education and industrial award classification for youth work (Goodwin 1991).

Training versus pay

Youth workers have long sought to lengthen university-based training programs and to raise admission standards in an attempt to bring these requirements into line with those of the more “prestigious” and status-laden professions, such as social work or psychology. These goals were largely achieved in the 1980s (Irving, Maunders & Sherrington 1995).

Consequently, the whole question of whether youth work is a profession, or can become one (Bessant 2004a, 2004b), is a distraction from the real issue. The real issue is the degree to which youth workers can resist deskilling and segmentation, maintain some measure of occupational identity within government and NGO bureaucracies and find enough in common with each other to collectively organise and bargain for increased pay and conditions.

In the past two decades much of the training debate in the youth sector has been followed by intervention from government and employers via industry skills councils and advisory bodies. Their interventions in the form of “value neutral” competency-based training and National Training Packages (Corney 2004) have dumbed down the youth sector. They have stripped it of a focus on practice standards and underpinning values and knowledge and removed the impetus for collective action to enhance pay and conditions. If youth workers come to understand this development within the broader political, economic and social policy context, they will be galvanised to see collective action as the only means of gaining recognition not only in the form of professional status, but also, more importantly, in the form of increased wages and industrial conditions.

The Australian Nurses Federation

The history of the nursing profession in Australia and its collective organisation, The Australian Nurses Federation, provides an important example of the tensions and subsequent collective struggles involved in building a salaried occupation into a profession that has industrial strength.

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the start of Victorian nurses' efforts to build a profession. Their initial focus was on registration, training and education. Registration was essential to, first, protect the profession by ensuring an identity that prevented overseas nurses with less training from filling positions, and, second, to provide international recognition that enabled state-trained Victorian nurses to work overseas (Colson 2001).

Interestingly, from the outset, registration was about forming a collective identity in a way that was not unlike that used by some unions who collectively organise members on the basis of their sets of skills and knowledge, which are identified with particular employment. To this end the nurses professional association made significant contributions to establishing education and training and progressing nursing from being a subset of "hospital employees" to a separate and professional identity (Colson 2001).

Nevertheless, the dichotomy of professionalism versus unionism began early on and continued through to the 1970s. In her history of nursing, Colson (2001) makes the point that the tension between preserving professional identity and demanding decent wages and conditions emerged as early as the 1930s. By 1934 the VTNA had become the Royal Victorian College of Nursing (RVCN), which reflected its greater involvement with nursing education (Australian Trade Union Archives (ATUA) 2002). It took the influence of the 1960s "New Left" anti-war and counterculture movements to change the industrial face of nursing and many of its traditional structures.

The sixties radically altered societies of the Western world. In Australia, the baby boomers were coming of age and redefining social movements. University education was fast becoming accessible to the masses and an expectation of many as the new rite of passage. Professional identity was gaining more importance as were the commensurate wages and conditions of the new consumer society. Nursing was changing and nurses were increasingly joining their union, which had previously been nationalised as the Australian Nursing Federation/ Employees Section (ANF/ES) (Colson 2001).

In Victoria, however, it took until October 1975 for the impracticality of having two representative bodies for nurses, the "professional"

(RVCN) and the "industrial" (ANF/ES), to force them to become one – the Royal Australian Nurses Federation (RANF), Victorian Branch (ATUA 2002). All other states had already amalgamated their professional and industrial organisations into the RANF. The decision marked the end of an era. Although the RVCN had an outstanding record of achievement, the need for the nursing profession to have a strong united industrial voice, along with professional and educational recognition, was now more evident than ever (Colson 2001).

The lesson that youth workers can learn from the professional and industrial experiences of nurses is that it takes more than cohabitation of the respective organisations to achieve success in both areas. It is the collective strength that comes from a united approach that enables long-term professional and industrial gains to be made. The more a profession is recognised as requiring skills that other occupations don't have, the greater its status and the higher the qualifications of people attracted to it. And, by extension, the better the conditions those practising it demand (Colson 2001).

The nurses union now insists its professional focus has not only been retained, but expanded. As evidence, it points to its three professional officers; its support for special interest groups; its on-site education and training centre; and the professional advances achieved by embedding such requirements as career structures and nurse-patient ratios in industrial agreements (Colson 2001).

As youth workers pursue collective organisation via the professionalisation agenda it is timely to consider the lessons learnt from the history of nursing and the importance of joining the professionalisation cause to that of industrial rights, pay and conditions.

Youth work and the Queensland Industrial Relations Commission

Social and community services workers (including youth workers) in the not-for-profit sector in Queensland have recently been beneficiaries of improved professional recognition. In a traditional "industrial" approach, the Queensland Services Union ran an equal remuneration case to address historical under-

valuation of social and community services work. On 6 May 2009, the Queensland Industrial Relations Commission (QIRC) handed down a decision that awarded between 18% and 37% wage increases to workers in these areas (*QSU v QCCI and Others* [2009] QIRComm 33; 191 QGIG 19, 6 May 2009).

The claim for increased recognition of the work through rates of pay was based on the Equal Remuneration Principle that an award provides “equal remuneration for work of equal and comparable value” (*Equal Remuneration Principle* (2002) 170 QGIG 15 and *State Wage Case* (2008) 188 QGIG 16).

The application also achieved pay equity by correcting historical undervaluation and acknowledged changes in work value for workers who were degree qualified and above. In the decision, Commissioner Fisher stated that a “confluence of factors ... when taken as a whole, have contributed to the work being undervalued”. Such factors included:

- undervaluation directly associated with “care” work being gendered
- changes in the nature of the work environment in which it is carried out that have not been reflected in the pay rates
- lack of bargaining / industrial collectivity,
- low government funding of the sector, which effectively sets a lower than adequate price for service delivery
- the origins of the community sector, that is as work performed by “well-intentioned women in a voluntary capacity or by those with a vocation” (*QSU v QCCI and Others* [2009] QIRComm 33; 191 QGIG 19, 6 May 2009, section 4, p.6).

In many ways, the Fischer decision represents a watershed in the professional recognition of all social and community workers, including youth workers, in the not-for-profit sector. The case has accepted what many youth work professionals already know, that “the work performed is complex and requires the application of high-level skills often described as emotional intelligence” (*QSU v QCCI and Others* [2009] QIRComm 33; 191 QGIG 19, 6 May 2009, section 4.2.1, p.8). Further, youth workers’ level of responsibility associated with work is high, given the social, medical or legal

consequences that may flow from the advice, assistance, counselling, support and advocacy they provide. This work can only be adequately performed by highly trained and qualified workers. The case recognises this through its discussion regarding appropriate classification levels. Indeed, the case sought guidance from the Report of the first Pay Equity Inquiry, *Worth valuing* (QIRC 2001). This report stated that qualifications and training are objective means by which to assess skills and knowledge and hence the work value of positions.

Through the *Worth valuing* report, it was objectively determined that training, qualifications and level of complexity of the work were undervalued, hence the awarding of significant increases in wages. The case clearly establishes that pay and conditions are linked to levels of training and qualifications. Therefore, professional recognition and identity cannot be considered separately. If youth workers are looking to professionalise in Victoria, all elements need to be brought together.

This is also evidenced in the experience of nurses (Colson 2001). Youth workers’ attempts to professionalise should be joined to the industrial efforts of their union in order to achieve better professional and industrial outcomes. There is a history of exclusion of the social and community services sector from industrial regulation. It should be noted that it was only in 1983 that a decision by the High Court (*R v Coldham; ex parte Australian Social Welfare Union* (1983) 153 CLR 297) recognised social and community services as an industry, to enable an industrial Award to be made to regulate terms and conditions for workers. Youth workers and the community services industry have been playing industrial recognition catch up since the award’s inception. This has been a major contributor to the poor working conditions experienced by workers in the sector (Briggs, Meagher & Healy 2007, p.497).

Conclusion

As the community services and allied industries continue to develop as complex, professional and skilled industries, to not join the “professional” with the “industrial” is to divide and weaken the collective voice of youth workers.

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As evidenced by the pay equity case in Queensland, various campaigns by unions in the field to address these industrial issues add to the progression of the professionalisation agenda. To undertake a professionalisation campaign that is separate to, or at odds with, the industrial agenda of unions will only undermine the prospects of increased professional and industrial outcomes and give ground to those who want to divide the identity and collective strength of youth workers.

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