

The Union Library and Information Network

Martin Stott, librarian, Public Service Association of NSW

The mid-1980s saw a re-invention in the labour movement in this country. There was a belief that trade unions should be more proactive in the industrial relations environment, and in the economy generally.

This period saw the Prices and Incomes Accord at its peak, and the rise of wage indexation. At the same time we saw the emergence of the New Right, and economic rationalism. Think tanks, both Right and Left, were appearing. The information age was upon us, and trade unions were under pressure to look beyond their own membership and their industrial problems to the larger community issues impacting on their members. Many unions responded by developing their information resources, and employing specialist staff such as researchers and information managers.

In 1987 the Trade Union Training Authority (TUTA) held a 'Libraries in Trade Unions' workshop, at the Clyde Cameron College in Wodonga. The workshop canvassed issues such as the role of information resources in policy development, establishing and organising information services, and accessing computer and online resources, but the fundamental issue was one of definition. What was the role of libraries, not just within a particular union, but in the trade union movement generally?

In all but two cases the workshop's sixteen participants were library workers; the other two being a research officer and a records manager. While the majority of the participants were formally library-trained, only a small number came from unions that had what could be described as a traditional library. It is important to appreciate this point because it is from this group that the Union Library and Information Network (ULIN) was formed, and it has been both its strength and its weakness as a library network.

Out of the workshop a directory of the participants and their resources was compiled. It included: the ACTU, the Labor Council of New South

Wales, the Administrative and Clerical Officers Association, the Queensland Teachers Union, and TUTA itself, as among the larger library services. By the end of 1987, ULIN was formally established in Sydney, and included most of the workshop participants as well as another ten or so trade unions. Some of these included: the National Research Centre of the AMWU, NSW Teachers Federation, NSW Nurses Association, the BWIU, the AWU, the ETU, as well as a number of workers health centres in different states.

ULIN's main purpose was to provide a forum through which trade union (and worker organisation) library and information workers could communicate, and share information and resources, or just ideas. At the time of its formation, many of ULIN's members were just establishing their library services, and practical issues like selecting an automated system, developing a classification system, and levels of cataloguing were the main topics for discussion.

ULIN's focus has always been to support its members as library workers in the first instance, rather than as trade union workers. Many of ULIN's members work alone. Often they are the only specialist staff working for the union who have not come through the membership ranks; and usually the only union staff who have, or are required to have, a particular qualification (traditionally records managers, trainers, communications officers, etc have been trained in-house, though this trend is changing).

It is not unusual for unions that are factional enemies, or are locked in demarcation disputes, to continue to exchange information at the library level. In fact, if there is one thing that has helped the group to survive, it is the high level of professional regard, trust and friendship the members have for each other.

Since ULIN was established, a number of library and information services in the labour movement have been abolished or restructured

— often to become unrecognisable as library services. In some ways the fortunes of this sector are no different from any other, though trade unions have been and continue to be slow to recognise the value of professional information services.

Trade union officials are renowned for their reliance on their own information networks, mostly informal and often verbal. There has always been a certain amount of distrust of ideas and opinions that come from 'outside', particularly from academic sources.

Despite this, the 1980s saw the appearance of university-trained industrial staff and a more corporate approach to the running of trade unions. In recent times, trade unions have shown a renewed interest in information services — not so much as a research or resource centre but as an information facilitator. With the advent of the internet and electronic-based resources and communication, many librarians are now web designers and information disseminators of electronic documents, as well as their custodians.

ULIN continues today as a testament to the resilience of the trade union movement, even though union membership is at an all-time low. There are doubts about the relevance and influence of trade unions, and their centrality to the labour movement. Certainly, we are seeing a re-defining of the role of trade unions. Union amalgamations, emphasis on an investment in services to members, and the adoption of professional management practices in trade unions, have meant a re-examination of the union's role as a player in the economy and society of Australia.

The importance of library and information services to this future can be realised only if libraries are clear about their own role both in and outside the organisations they serve. While small in numbers, hopefully ULIN is large enough to be seen as representing and preserving the knowledge of the labour movement to the wider community of our own profession. ■