

# ***Union power: Space, structure, strategy***

*Rae Cooper and Bradon Ellem*  
*School of Business, The University of Sydney*

---

## **ABSTRACT**

Contrary to much of the orthodoxy about the immutability of union structure and strategy, we argue that unions have undergone immense change in the recent past. The rise and fall of the Accord with the national Labor government, the rationalisation of union numbers through amalgamation, the very different visions of the Australian Council of Trade Unions' *Future Strategies* policies published in 1987 and 2003, the rise of organising strategies all point to this. Nevertheless, union power and membership remain, quite clearly, in crisis. One of the keys to unlocking this is the changing geographies of work and unionism. We suggest here that the changes which unions are making have, in the main, been at the national scale but that at other scales and sites there has been less change. We set out to show how, when, where and why these changes have occurred – and why they have not, thus far, been able to reinvigorate unionism overall. In part this failure is because of the changing geographies of work over the last twenty years: both economic globalisation and regulatory decentralism pose strategic and spatial challenges to nationally scaled labour organisations. In part it is because of weaknesses within and divisions between union structures. To explore and explain this argument, we look at the nature of union power and strategy over the last generation. We then chart some indicative episodes which illustrate some of the more novel developments which are taking place and the obstacles to their success.

