



SOLIDARITY

John Howard's new workplace laws aim to put unions on the back foot. But as ANDREW FENTON discovers, they are also sparking inspired variations on traditional ways of fighting back.

■ THE picket line at Amcor Flexibles is like an apparition from an earlier era; a throwback to the days when burly unionists fought tooth and nail against scheming bosses and talked themselves hoarse about radical politics around blackened 44-gallon drums as they prepared for the inevitable attack on the line by hired goons.

Except this is Preston in August 2006, and this sort of thing was supposed to have been banned years ago.

One hundred workers are striking to protest against the forced redundancies of the site's five union delegates. Because of the new workplace laws the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union is struggling to have its delegates rehired.

First the Australian Industrial Relations Commission orders the AMWU to end the picket, then the Federal Court threatens massive fines unless the union issues a directive to its members to cease and desist. It complies, but the workers vote to press on anyway, despite the possibility of \$6000 individual fines and 12 months in prison.

That's when a new group steps in to keep the 44-gallon drum fires burning.

Union Solidarity is a new "brand" in the industrial relations landscape – an umbrella organisation that coordinates a coalition of community groups, socialists, Christians, ALP and Greens supporters, and mobilises them in support of striking workers. At Amcor, they are called in to help run the picket by local affiliate, the Darebin Workers' Rights and Social Justice Campaign.

Union Solidarity has been cunningly set up to get around the new

industrial relations laws. As an unregistered organisation, without assets, Union Solidarity is not liable for the huge fines or damages registered unions are. Its members never formally "join" the organisation so are not liable for individual fines. About the only thing they can get done for is breaching restraining orders – although a number of Union Solidarity members do this with seeming impunity at Amcor.

It is old-fashioned, militant unionism, contracted out to a community group to avoid the IR laws.

They are led by hardcore socialist and former Builders' Labourers Federation official Dave Kerin. He is an intense-looking bloke in his mid-50s with a leather jacket, shaved head and goatee. At Amcor he declines numerous requests for an interview, claiming he's just an old "red" and does not want "to become the story". But a couple of weeks later he relents, although he is wary about how his background will be portrayed.

"This is the first time I've spoken, because that's what will be focused on," he explains. "They (the media) rely on stereotypes and once you stereotype someone you don't have to deal with what a person is saying, but who is saying it."

Kerin turns out to be a somewhat difficult interviewee because he's forever diverting the conversation into a political discourse about "global capital", "class struggle at the point of production" and the "social contract being torn up".

His passion and belief becomes slightly hypnotic after a while. It is easy to see how he inspires unionists to hold

firm on the picket line when doubts start creeping in about the impact a fine or jail sentence would have on their families.

Kerin explains how a group of union elders formed a war council in late-2004 as the breadth of the IR changes became apparent following the Government's surprise win of the Senate.

Although he declines to name any of the people involved, we can reveal one of them was the late BLF boss John Cummins, who was highly regarded as a strategist by both unions and employer groups.

Kerin explains Union Solidarity is based on a very simple concept: "We make it very clear we have nothing to hide and no assets to protect, so the only thing they can take with us is the body – and if they want to try that on..." He leaves the thought hanging.

In the meantime the Amcor strike ends in victory, the union delegates are reinstated and the fines are dropped. During the 15-day illegal strike, a dozen Amcor sites across Australia take industrial action in support. Not a whisper about the strike makes it into the mass media.

Union Solidarity has quietly notched up a number of victories in the past two years by employing what they call a "community assembly" but what most would call an illegal picket line. Last year their picket lines secured workers' entitlements at Kozma Engineering in Campbellfield and forced Colrain Wholesalers in Derrimut to drop plans to force employees onto AWAs.

A picket outside Australian Envelopes in Notting Hill in mid-2005 turned ugly. In keeping with the emerging





Thousands rally against the Federal Government's Industrial Relations legislation last November

STRIKES

pattern of such disputes, the strike was in protest at the sacking of a union official and an OHS officer. Fifty "hired goons" turned up to break the line.

"They threw rocks at our heads, they threw buckets of urine at us, they drove forklifts through our cars," Kerin says.

After two weeks the parties negotiated a settlement. While the union delegate was still retrenched, the dispute cost the company about \$3 million and, contrary to the apparent intention, managed to strengthen unionism at the site.

At the notorious Finlay Engineering dispute in Heidelberg earlier this year a union delegate was sacked for smirking, along with another worker. About 200 people turned up during Union Solidarity's picket and the company backed down and reinstated the pair. Less than a fortnight ago a Union Solidarity-led community assembly thwarted Toyota Altona's efforts to get rid of a senior union delegate.

The lead-up to the picket mirrored the Amcor dispute in a series of events destined to play out again and again. The company moved to oust the union delegate, the workers voted to strike, the AIRC ordered the union to call them off and the union complied, but the workers voted to press on with help from Union Solidarity. The picket line was set up on the Wednesday and union delegate Tony Brooks got his trade job back on Friday.

Kerin claims the group avoids speaking with journalists because they see little point in winning the battle in the media. "If you can't win it at the point of production, ideas are irrelevant," he says.

This low media profile perhaps explains why the Victorian Employers' Chamber of Commerce and Industry's general manager of workplace relations David Gregory has not even heard of the group.

"I haven't had any dealings with them but we'd obviously be very concerned if there is a group out there proposing to resort to this type of action," he says.

The Office of Workplace Services, the

office of the Workplace Relations Minister Kevin Andrews and the Victorian Workplace Rights Advocate Tony Lawrence all declined to comment for this story.

Despite all this talk of militant unionism, the inaugural meeting of the Yarra branch of Union Solidarity at Fitzroy Town Hall in September is a relatively low-key affair. About 30 people turn up, a mixed bag of socialists, unionists, concerned citizens and members of the nearby high-rise estate tenants' group.

The meeting is organised by the Collingwood Action Group, which became involved with Union Solidarity after it helped to bulk up a protest about the Banco development. Most other branches in Melbourne were formed in a similar manner – on the backs of existing community groups.

Curiously enough, the Yarra group spends most of the meeting discussing a variety of community issues, from public housing to community health, and barely touches on IR.

This appears to be a strategy to engage grassroots supporters by tying together a variety of community concerns with more traditional trade union issues.

With the concept successfully road tested in Melbourne, Kerin now intends to take Union Solidarity nationwide. He says the group will eventually spread to every city in Australia. "It's inevitable – where you get repression, you get resistance," he says.

But the organisation is bracing itself for a backlash. "Union Solidarity community assemblies have scored a string of successes," a Darebin Defend Workers' Rights newsgroup moderator said in an email post last week, reporting the victory at Toyota.

"However, success means that sooner or later employers and their backers will try something to get round their current difficulties. We need to be ready for this."

The post called on members to sign up as many people as possible to a telephone tree that can quickly mobilise supporters in case of a large-scale stand-off. "The battle will hot up. It's just a question of when."



Louise Grace, co-convenor of Yarra branch of Union Solidarity



The picket line at Amcor Preston



Harry Rai was sacked for smirking from West Heidelberg's Finlay Engineering