

# Advocacy and industrial services

**A**dvocacy (n) : *pleading in support of*. This month's *inCite* theme is controversial as far as ALIA's industrial services are concerned. In that context, the critical question for the Association is: what form can, and should, advocacy take? There is sharp division of opinion about the answer.

At one extreme, some members want ALIA to operate as a union. Others believe any direct involvement in individual workplace difficulties or disputes is quite inappropriate. Certainly, the recent Australian Centre for Industrial Relations Research and Training (ACIRRT) survey of 1600 ALIA members unearthed strong views on the subject.

While many considered ALIA 'currently offers excellent support for members in the industrial relations area', some participants were critical. One said ALIA 'could be more proactive in setting salary standards'. Another commented that 'the foremost function of ALIA is to improve salaries of its members'. And, in perhaps the most critical of all responses, one member felt that 'ALIA is an organisation which has allowed the erosion of working conditions for librarians'.

Harsh criticism should not be ignored. It is probably good for all of us most of the time. But the problem with these particular views lies in some of the verbs used: *setting* salaries, *allowed* erosion, for example. They demonstrate what ACIRRT described as 'a significant misunderstanding of the nature of ALIA's industrial powers (because) some members seemed unaware of the difference between registered trade union organisations and professional or industry associations, in respect to their ability to intervene directly in industrial disputes'. The fact is, ALIA has no power or avenue through which to set, maintain or erode employment conditions directly.

Some members are strongly opposed to

ALIA acting like a trade union anyway. But it is a pointless debate because ALIA simply cannot do so, whether it wanted to or not. Australia's industrial relations system operates on the basis of 'registered organisations' which directly represent the interest of employees. Registration confers firm legal status, without which no organisation can play a significant role in formal dispute resolution or wage fixation.

Statutory criteria, such as Part 1X Division 1 of the *Workplace Relations Act 1996* for example, make it quite impossible for ALIA to register as an employee organisation (or for that matter as an employer body) for industrial relations purposes. Our mixture of individual and institutional membership makes the Association legally unable to adopt a union-like role, all the more so now that amalgamation with ACLIS is proceeding.

This is a fact of life. But it does not justify the view that ALIA should avoid any involvement at all in the industrial difficulties which members face. Our ACIRRT survey found that fifty-seven per cent of ALIA members are also unionists. For them, unions clearly represent the most effective vehicle for direct industrial representation.

But what about the other forty-three per cent? No doubt some choose not to join an available union which covers their work. But there are many who cannot take out union membership. Not all areas are organised and most of the private sector, in particular, works 'award free', with no trade union activity at all. In these enterprises members must deal directly with employers. For them to cope with this, assistance is often essential. ALIA's industrial service may be their only port of call.

Available services are made up of many different elements. On a broad level, the work we have done recently to ensure that librarians are a major focus for study in the very important New South Wales Pay Equity Inquiry is an example of initiatives with potential significance for all members. For individuals a wide range of services is sought (see diagram). Direct advocacy for those who have no union to represent them is just one. But all are designed to enable the better presentation of a member's case. In this respect, ALIA's primary aim is to ensure that effective advocacy means both 'pleading in support of' our members where that is appropriate and empowering them to be capable advocates themselves.

For organisations like ALIA, 'the customer (member) is always right' should be a mantra for providing service. Demand from those who pay their fees should clearly drive both content and standards. Suggestions for specific industrial services are always very welcome. But members do need to recognise just what is possible and what is not. ■



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## Industrial services — what members ask for:

