

Your Rights At Work – May the force be with you
Peter Ross: *UNI Communicators Meeting 2008, Cape Town, SA - 10/4/2008*

Intro Star Wars video

This is the text of the start of the video.

Election 2007

The Unions Fight back

It is a dark time for the Empire. The WorkChoices starfleet faces daily attacks from Labor rebels, cunningly disguised as Imperial troops.

The Empire suffered heavy casualties when Lieutenant Abbott accidentally triggered the self-destruct mechanism in the Starfleet infirmary.

Imperial strongholds in the Wentworth and Benelong nebulas face unprecedented assaults.

Meanwhile, the rebel leader has returned to his jungle homeland to prepare for battle, as the Empire hunts him across the galaxy.

The final confrontation draws near...

End text...

In a galaxy far, far away – well, okay Australia – in 2004 it was pretty clear that the dark side had taken over.

A conservative coalition of Siths, Dark Lords and Storm Troopers would soon have a majority in both houses of the Australian parliament giving them a mandate to do pretty much whatever they wanted.

What they wanted to do was crush the union movement, give business a free run, and make sure working people paid for it.

It was going to take more than a few Jedi Knights (that's good unionists, obviously) to save the planet Naboo (sorry, that's Australia).

[Click to Kevin 07](#)

This is a story of how we used the force (that's technology) to defeat the Death Star and bring peace and hope and Kevin07 to Australia.

The Jedi Council (okay I'll stop with the Star Wars analogies now I've got your attention), I really mean the Australian Council of Trade Unions, is Australia's peak union body. Historically it's always been a plastic chairs and threadbare carpet kind of place, and about as high tech as a couple of tin cans strung together with a bit of string.

But the ACTU and pretty much every union in the country agreed that it was time to harness the force to take on the Evil Empire – sorry... I meant it was time overdue to get smart about technology and how we could use it to take on a conservative government.

We were looking down the barrel of a government who just, simply, hated unions and the notion of working people getting organised collectively. They called us union thugs at every opportunity – which went down well with the dancers at Actors Equity, and the child care workers at the Australian Services Union.

They swiftly rammed through WorkChoices, Right of Entry, and Fair dismissal legislation and flogged Australian Workplace Agreements (AWAs) all over the country. They also set up what was laughingly called a Fair Pay Commission.

Each of these bits of trickery did the opposite of what they said they did – like taking away choice in the workplace, limiting right of entry, making it easy to sack employees if you didn't like their hair colour, promoting individual contracts and establishing a government body to rubber stamp it all.

So a group of ACTU officials and some hand picked tech-heads, including me, sat down for a campaign of war.

Our mission was to work out how we could use technology to get union members active, and spread our message to the broader community.

Every left leaning consultant under the sun made a pitch to us, they all told us they, and they alone, knew exactly what we needed.

We met with Get Up and Deanspace and friends of friends of friends. The quotes were all pretty hefty but even so they varied as much as \$100k. We squabbled. We wrung our hands. We ate a lot of pizza. Our panel was split.

Click to YRAW

From all of this Your Rights At Work (YRAW) was born, an internet based campaign focussing on unions, the working lives of all Australians and Australia's working families.

To get our website working we eventually chose a hybrid solution with Open Source tools from a small development company & IP from internet campaigners Get Up! We used Plone - [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Plone_\(content_management_system\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Plone_(content_management_system)) and a PHPList – Open source mailing list program <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phplist>.

And it worked a treat.

Our digital information campaign was backed by an extensive TV, radio and print campaign and pretty soon the website had 170,000 subscribers. From 2006 onwards the orange and black of the YRAW brand was everywhere.

You'd see an YRAW advertisement in the middle of the cricket on the television.

You could drive down Tullamarine Freeway in Melbourne and see an YRAW billboard (*that by the way was paid for by raising \$50,000 in five working days for the project on the website*).

There were mass rallies in town halls, football stadiums and church halls across the country, linked up by video conferencing so that the meetings felt like the giant community movement sweeping across the country, which it was.

People on the streets wore orange and black t-shirts, hats and badges, and pretty soon placards popped up in front-yards and household windows.

And it was all backed by the website.

We developed a comprehensive email database that enabled us to coordinate nationwide actions with a consistent message.

We use this database still.

As an aside, one important aspect of the campaign was the targeting of marginal electorates across the country. Under Australian electoral law where voting is compulsory, political organisations are allowed access to lists of enrolled voters.

Using this information the ACTU commissioned a software application for all affiliate unions that would match membership records against the electoral rolls.

This returned data about whether people were on the lists or not.

In our case, the Alliance used the names of our members in a couple of key seats and rang them from our offices encouraging them to enrol to vote but carefully avoiding making a recommendation to support the Australian Labor Party.

This would also help to undermine the incumbent government claims about ALP-union bias.

Using a carefully worded script, and armed with the knowledge we had gathered using our online survey tools and other polling, we knew that support amongst our members was a 75% to 25% split in support of the ALP.

By encouraging our members to be registered to vote we knew that the ratio was about 3:1 to the good guys.

But back to the web site. As the campaign progressed the site took on a life of its own and floods of Australians pledged money to the campaign online, and the site became a source for stories, campaign resources and strategy.

Online campaigns targeting employers included Spotlight, a haberdashery chain, Baker's Delight and chocolate empire, Darrell Lea, all of whom sought to undercut working conditions by forcing their workforces onto Australian Workplace Agreements, or individual contracts known as AWAs. The retailer had planned to put casual staff on AWAs that could cost them up to \$100 a week, slashing weekend and holiday pay as well as other benefits.

The CEO of Darrell Lea, John Tolmie, bowed to public pressure and halted his plans for AWAs when the YRAW site ensured that 10,000 Rights at Work supporters emailed him directly just prior to Easter asking him to reconsider.

Reconsider? He sure did.

The site was crucial in maintaining the campaign's consistent style and content across the country.

[Click to Tracey](#)

One of the pollsters and strategists for the conservative side told us that when he saw a street advertisement for Tracey - one of the young working mothers featured in the campaign – on a billboard in Far North Queensland, “I knew we were f*^ed.”

And they were.

The standard labour movement defences against hostile industrial reform – strike action and appeals to other laws and jurisdictions – were not going to fly with the harsh penalties threatened by WorkChoices so craftier thinking was required.

The unions established a marginal seats campaign and by appealing directly to voters and portraying the 2007 as a referendum on WorkChoices, unions took aim at the government's political, not industrial vulnerabilities.

The 2007 election was fought and lost by the conservative Government on the issue of industrial relations. The Labor Party won by a landslide, or as it was known a Rudd-slide, and not only that, it was only the second time in Australian history that a Prime Minister had lost his own seat.

Coincidentally the first time a PM lost his seat in Parliament was over IR as well!

Before the election, the conservative coalition consistently denied WorkChoices was the main reason voters were preparing to switch to Labor.

After the election, this denial was dropped in a heartbeat and in February this year, the Party dropped its opposition to Labor's alternative industrial relations system. The ACTU, unions, working people and YRAW had won the day.

And technology was the magical tool that enabled them to do it.

click to Force

So, as they say in the classics, "May the Force be With You".