

Psychological downside to strike action

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While industrial action is largely perceived as a legitimate means of encouraging organisational change in Australia, research has shown industrial action can adversely affect those involved.

Dr Jane Fowler, an industrial-organisational psychologist at Griffith University, has examined the psychological impact on members of the United Steelworkers of America while on strike from 2004-2006.

She found strikers reported higher levels of depression, anxiety and irritation and lower levels of general mental health than non-strikers.

"This is not surprising when you think about the financial concerns, changing relationships and roles, and uncertainty about outcomes that occur during a strike," she said.

However, the study also found that strikers who were more involved with the Union by being on picket line duty, raising public awareness, or doing administrative work at the Union hall, were not as negatively affected as those who were less involved.

"In fact, the more a member was involved in the Union's activities, the lower was their level of depression and anxiety and the higher was their level of general mental health."

"It is possible that the benefits of employment, beyond remuneration, come into play for union members on strike. That is, members who are union active while on strike benefit from the combination of regular

activity, daily structure, social contact with other members, and a sense of being part of a collective."

Dr Fowler said unions can be proactive in minimising the negative affects on their members.

She suggested unions advise their members on how to prepare financially and psychologically for a possible strike and provide practical support in terms of financial assistance and access to professional counselling.

"Unions should also encourage active participation by members during the strike as an alternative pattern of daily activities can at least reduce the psychological impact of strike action."

Source: Research Australia

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