

Taking the Next Steps for Trade Unionism

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In working out where the trade union movement needs to go next, the trade union movement itself must first assess where it presently is. Like any balanced and fair 'school report', there are both the good bits and the not-so-good bits.

Looking at the upside first, there is a number of areas worthy of our attention. Since 1995, when it became clear that Labour would win the forthcoming general election and implement its promise of statutory union recognition, over 2,600 new recognition agreements have been signed, covering 1.1m workers, and union derecognition is almost unheard of now. The decline in absolute union membership has been halted. In 1998, the first increase was recorded, followed by annual increases in 1999 and 2000, then small falls in 2001 and 2002, and then another increase in 2003. The decline in the number of workers whose pay is covered by collective bargaining has also witnessed the halting of decline in 2000. This was followed by two small falls in 2001 and 2002 but then an increase in 2003. On other fronts, unions have become more vocal in their criticisms of any forces that are detrimental to their members' interests, whether employer or government. The most obvious sign has been the election of a new generation of union general secretaries and lay executives. Today, unions are now more popular than at any time since 1979. Successive opinion polls have demonstrated clear majorities believe the pendulum has swung too far in favour of employer, unions are 'good things' in wielding the 'sword of justice' (as opposed to representing 'vested interests') and that unions are not powerful enough.

But, of course, there are at least two sides to every story. Even with the increases in membership, density was still only 29% in 2003. It was 55% in 1979. Nearly 50% of workers have never been union members at any time, and only 14% of workers aged 16-24 years old are members, signalling an ageing membership. The vast bulk of members work in the public sector, with public sector density being 61% and private sector density being 19%. The percentage of workplaces covered by recognition has fallen from 64% in 1980 to 42% in 1998 while the percentage of workers in workplaces with recognition has fallen from 66% in 1983 to 47% in 2001. The high point of signing new recognition deals was 2001 with annual totals falling thereafter and employer resistance to signing new agreements is rising. Collective bargaining coverage has fallen from 70% of workers in 1984 to 41% by 1998. Strike activity, an important measure of workers' collective confidence, has fallen from 2125 strikes in 1979, with 4.6m workers involved and 29.4m days 'lost' to 146 in 2002, with 0.94m workers involved and 1.32m days 'lost'. Occasional and recent large strikes have made a temporary and slight dent in this decline.

So it is with a balanced approach that we need to recognise that despite the relatively more favourable political, economic and legal climate and all the recent effort and resources put into union organising and recruiting, the gains

have been small and limited. Indeed, Tony Woodley, TGWU general secretary, has gone so far as to say:

[W]e have run out of excuses. ... And we have to face the fact that we are struggling to stand still at present. Despite a number of excellent organising initiatives in recent years [like the Organising Academy], total membership numbers have done no better than stagnate. (Morning Star 13 February 2004)

Therefore, it must also be with a balanced perspective that we ask the question: 'Where do we go from here?' With no prospect of the further strengthening of the law on union recognition, worker consultation, employment protection or the removal of restrictions on industrial action, unions have to look ever more to themselves and their own resources.

Obvious options are to spend more on organising by increasing the proportion of union expenditure given over to this and to raise further finance by increasing subs through common agreements across unions. Both would increase the resources for the 'sinews of war' as Woodley puts it. Setting aside the shaky financial position of some unions and the high cost of recruitment using full-time organisers and officers, the sum of resources available would have to increase from around 5% of total union expenditure per annum to around 30% to make a significant difference. This looks like a tall order.

Moreover, simply employing more organisers with extra resources is necessary without being sufficient for it ignores the fulcrum of workplace union activists in recruitment, recognition and organising work. Put bluntly, the union movement will be held back until it finds far greater numbers of grassroots activists who are sufficiently motivated to carry out this mundane legwork. Currently, there is an unsatisfied demand for unionisation amongst 2.8m workers who work in non-union workplaces. They desire union representation or would join if a union was available. There are also another 3.3m workers who are 'free riders' – benefiting from collective bargaining without being members – who could be in-fill recruited. Finally, there are 1.6m union members who are not covered by recognition but who could benefit from it. The problem is that unions do not at present have the capacity to meet the demand and supply the 'product'.

Some 3,000 full-time officers cannot unionise this group and gain recognition for them but they can support and encourage a much wider milieu of lay activists to do so. So the question becomes: 'Where can these potential workplace activists be found?' The answer is here and there. Some are already within the union movement but many are amongst community, environmental, anti-globalisation and anti-war campaigns, in schools and colleges and amongst voluntary organisations. The latter's concern for social justice at large needs to be harnessed for the specific purposes of trade unionism.

So returning to the 'school report' metaphor, the assessment would be not just 'doing okay' but 'needs to do better'. But more than that it would be: 'can do better'. A balanced perspective would suggest that with increased

financial and physical resources the course could be set for slow but steady growth for unions over the next few years.