

8 | A COLLECTIVE VOICE IN AN INSECURE WORLD

John Park

Trade unions must adapt to survive. As the world around them has rapidly changed, there is an impression they have remained stuck in the past with antagonistic rhetoric, outdated governance structures and an inflexible approach. Yet trade unions remain as vital as ever in an insecure jobs market, and do have the capacity to protect workers and inspire support when they use positivity in place of hostility. To continue to do so in our changing world, unions should seek to form partnerships with employers and government.

Early summer 2016 will be noted as one of the most politically volatile periods in the UK's economic and political history. In uncertain times such as these, we need a coherent voice for workers, ensuring their concerns are at the forefront of the discourse regarding the future of the country. When we honestly and self-critically consider where we are today, we must accept that while some voices are being heard – most notably those of junior doctors, steelworkers and teachers – these are in the main reactive to particular circumstances in their respective sectors. The failure of the Labour case for the European Union to cut through in the referendum debate only serves to highlight the lack of pro-active voices seeking to shape the UK from a workplace perspective. But the lack of a trade union

voice is a problem that goes beyond the debate about how to deal with Brexit.

The future of the UK trade union movement is at risk – trade union membership has been stagnating for the last 30 years and structural changes in the UK economy have led to trade union density in the private sector dropping below 14 per cent. Most European countries have witnessed a similar trend, although the levels of trade union density in most of the Scandinavian countries are still two to three times that of their central and southern European neighbours.

The most worrying aspect of this decline is that – despite work being increasingly less secure, salaries at the top racing away from those at the bottom and workers' rights being slowly rolled back since 2010 – trade unions, or more precisely trade union membership, appears not to be a relevant choice for millions of workers.

The issues that gave rise to the creation of trade unions – improving job security, the emancipation of industrial workers with new skills, and the ability to bargain with employers to ensure a more equitable share of rewards – are as desirable today as they were 150 years ago. Indeed, because many private sector employers are finding more ingenious ways of not sharing profits equitably across the workforce, it should be easy to argue that the promotion of trade union membership is a sound economic policy choice for any government.

The future of work and the trade union response

The future of work is difficult to predict but there are some changes we can anticipate. The exponential nature of change in this second machine age might not see all of the jobs we do now replaced by robots or driverless cars, but it will disrupt the way we work even more than the transition to the first machine age did. We are set to see an

explosion in self-employed and freelance workers and the digital revolution will lead to many jobs becoming obsolete. The 'gig economy' is growing, with work based on short-term arrangements, casual workers and independent contractors. Policy and decision makers are thinking through their responses to these changes and trade unions must seek ways to influence this debate.

For many, this pattern of work is a reality now. Some make a conscious choice but growing numbers have fewer options as traditional jobs in the manufacturing supply chain continue to be lost. For example, many members of my trade union, Community, made redundant from the steel industry in recent months have been encouraged by agencies, brought into mitigate job losses, to think about starting or growing a business, or becoming a freelance or lifestyle worker. In addition, younger people attracted to creative industries find themselves working for companies who use similar business models to Amazon, Microsoft and Uber which rely on individuals renting out their skills and possessions online in the shared economy.

This is a massive challenge. Even if trade unions start to map out our policy and structural response now, inertia in our movement may lead to us never being in a position to support these workers effectively and, arguably more importantly, to ensure that their voices are heard in the policy discussion around the future of work.

Of course it isn't only about the challenges presented by the gig economy – we'll need to recruit and organise members from emerging industries whilst consolidating in our traditional sectors. Achieving these twin objectives will take levels of innovation not seen in the UK trade union movement for many years, if at all.

The role trade unions have played in recent years in driving up productivity and ensuring that trade union members are equipped to participate in workplace change is also diminishing. Research recently published by the

Smith Institute highlights that only 18 per cent of employees think that their trade union is engaged with workplace productivity. Trade unions should be seen as a key partner in turning around the UK's stagnant productivity levels. A long-term strategy which seeks to build capacity within unions to engage on these issues would not only help improve productivity, it could increase trade union workplace activism and positively influence industrial policy development more widely.

Can we provide a solution?

The reputation of trade unions is vital to our continued success. If we are seen as a negative force or a voice of the past, then it will be almost impossible for us to connect with the workforce of the future. Indeed there is clear evidence that our reputation isn't as strong as it has been in the past or should be today. Some will blame the 'Tory press' or the culture of individualism that supposedly dominates our post-Thatcher culture, but if we are really serious about improving the standing of trade unions surely responsibility lies with our leaders?

We've contributed to this situation, particularly in our use of language. More concerning than the trade union terminology many of our non-activists struggle to understand is our tone of voice and our confrontational language. Recent research carried out on behalf of Unions 21 highlighted that the words used by trade unions have become more extreme over a 20 year period – where unions used to be angry, now they're furious. Consequently, trade unions tend to hit the headlines only when there is some form of industrial dispute or power struggle within the Labour party.

We do not talk openly enough about our successes. We shouldn't be embarrassed when we make something happen whilst working in partnership with decent

employers. Nor should we shy away from championing successes achieved through industrial strength, but we need to be more sensitive to how we frame this to a wider audience.

The junior doctors dispute demonstrated that if you have a sound organisational reputation then public support is much easier to foster (although it remains to be seen how long that can be sustained). The constructive approach taken by the trade unions in dealing with the crisis in the steel industry is another positive example, where the trade unions are viewed not only as the workforce representatives but also as an important part of the industry. Indeed, Community commissioned polling from YouGov which showed there had been a 16 per cent increase in the number of people who viewed trade unions positively since the beginning of the steel crisis.

Our reputation does matter, because ultimately most people make decisions to join organisations based on what they think about them. Other recent polling from YouGov highlighted that just 19 per cent of workers would be likely or very likely to seek assistance from a trade union if they had a problem at work. Amazingly this figure jumped up to 64 per cent when the question was phrased as 'paying for independent help and advice' for assistance with a problem at work – the very thing trade unions provide. The other most notable figure in this polling was that 30 per cent of those questioned were trade union members; our reputational problem isn't confined to non-members.

The importance of trade union governance to our future relevance

Changes to trade union legislation tends be something that is done to trade unions not with them. Normally, it's Conservative governments seeking to reduce trade union

influence in some way. This government's Trade Union Act is the most recent example of that approach and whilst Frances O'Grady and her colleagues at the TUC worked tirelessly to gain a number of concessions, trade unions are still on the back foot because of these measures.

Undoubtedly this government or a future Conservative government will seek to return to some of these measures in the future – probably after public opinion has shifted away from support for unions due to a prolonged dispute or high profile public sector strike – so why don't we take the initiative?

It shouldn't be beyond the collective wit of trade unions to seek to develop and modernise our own structures, develop ideas that would underpin our future independence and seek out best practice across the movement in the delivery of services and benefits.

Indeed, the efforts to introduce electronic balloting into the discussions around the trade union bill are a fine example of trade unions thinking differently. It is unfortunate that they were only given serious consideration due to the passage of the trade union bill through Westminster.

So why wouldn't we want to modernise and review our democratic structures? It's hard to measure workplace-level engagement accurately but it is clear that in the big ticket elections for general secretaries and executives, the turnout figures are woeful. There must be a more effective way of engaging trade union members in the decision making process of their union.

General secretaries being elected on tiny turnouts who are then accountable to executives elected on even smaller turnouts, is not good for decision making. It encourages a leadership approach which only seeks to address the concerns of small, often factional, groups as opposed to the wider interests of union members. This is less of a problem in smaller and more specialised unions because their scale naturally enables decision-making to be made closer to

members. But it is a problem in larger unions, a fact I am sure many senior officials would acknowledge privately.

Getting members to participate in general secretary or executive ballots might always be a problem but new statutory structures for executives would enhance and modernise trade union governance, for example setting limits on the size of executives and involving independently appointed trustees in decision-making.

The way ahead

We live in a significantly better society than did those who founded and established the trade union movement. Nevertheless, in many ways the world of work is just as insecure and precarious as it was then. Certainly, the need for a strong, responsible collective voice in that world has never been greater. And for those reasons, we can't allow UK trade unionism just to be a story of managing a long decline. For those workers who need us most, it has to be a story of recognition, recovery and relevance.

Firstly, we need to recognise the severity of the situation that we are in and face up to the facts of declining membership, relevance and authority. There needs to be an acceptance that it is the responsibility of the trade union movement to understand the problems we face and to address them – not to blame others such as the press, politicians or employers.

Secondly, we need to build a consensus across the trade union movement on a recovery strategy. Given the diverse interests of our many sister organisations, that is easier to say than to deliver on. Strengthening the governance of trade unions should be one priority, seeking to develop a tripartite social framework with employers and government should be another.

Continuing and increasing relevance of trade unions to the world of work is the final aspect we must address

quickly. We must recognise that we are struggling to connect beyond our membership and in many cases even beyond our activist base.

We need to speak in a way that engages people – we can be positive, passionate and persuasive – and still sound normal.

Our benefits and services must be responsive to the needs of workers today and be flexible enough for change when it comes. How these services are delivered is equally important – accessibility and core benefits such as representation, legal support and health and safety will always be relevant across most workplaces but what other kind of support will a worker in 2020 need? What are the new risks for workers in the sharing economy? And can trade unions develop their own ethical platforms in partnership with cooperatives to deliver services and employment opportunities to members?

These are undoubtedly big challenges for the trade union movement. I know we want to help build a fairer, more equitable society with decent jobs, housing and education. Wanting to do these things isn't enough, we need to be in a position to make change happen.