



Resilient Unions:

Strategies for growth

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Unions21

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Retaining and Growing Membership During the Recession

Unions 21 held a fringe meeting at the 2009 TUC Congress, in the depths of recession, to consider what is needed to ensure trade union growth and relevance for the future. Contributions from five panellists set a foundation for further discussion and research that has informed this publication. .

Paul Noon, General Secretary of Prospect, expressed concern about the opportunities missed over the past decade – resulting in a decline in trade union membership of nearly 1.9%, in 2008 and union density of around 1 in 6 private sector workers.

He made three suggestions for future growth:

- A TUC card, facilitating continuing membership with an appropriate union as people join the workforce and when they change jobs. This would benefit from the TUC's strong 'brand'.
- Stronger and more assertive publicity about union achievements and the benefits of membership.
- Unions doing more together to promote trade unionism to potential members, following the lead of the STUC's 'unions into schools' programme.

Gail Cartmail, Assistant General Secretary of Unite, noted that union membership grows most strongly when unions are visibly active. For example, Unite had recruited 10,000 new members in the NHS around the 'Agenda of Change' negotiations.

Current challenges included the decline in male trade union membership at twice the rate of female membership and recruiting the 2 in 5 public sector workers likely, because of the composition of the public sector workforce, mainly to be women.

People join organisations that they can identify with, so fast tracking of women into positions of trade union leadership will directly assist this organising challenge.

Fiona Wilson, Head of Research and Economics at USDAW, noted that despite the adverse impact of the recession on the retail sector, the union had maintained significant numbers of redundant workers in membership. This could be attributed an organising approach which included the annual secondment of 48 lay representatives for a 6 month period. In 2008 this team of lay-reps recruited 30,000 new members.

Work to embrace the learning agenda was also important in retaining members. In one company Union Learning Reps had persuaded 90% of staff to take up some form of learning and 50% of staff had gained a nationally recognised qualification

Christine Payne, General Secretary of Equity, explained that the majority of Equity members are out of work at any time, yet the union had grown by 1000 members in 2008.

Equity focuses on provision of services and benefits that are of real value to members, such as advice on contracts, insurance, legal services, and pension provision which fits unusual working patterns. It also provides networking opportunities to young members including social events, a committee and bursaries. There are now around 5,000 student members in the union.

Performers' workplaces are constantly changing and Equity has had to develop new ways of reaching them. An 'Ambassadors' training programme identifies future activists and empowers them to talk about the benefits of union membership wherever they work.

Wayne Allison, former professional footballer, illustrated how the PFA makes a reality of its pledge to be a union for life. He outlined the support received during an extensive football and coaching career, but also access to training and study beyond sport. Coaching badges, a degree and a PhD have all been funded by his union.

Whilst Wayne's experience is very different to that of most working people, his concluding remarks have much wider resonance: 'I am so glad that I am a member for life because no doubt I will come knocking on their door again'.

It is this sentiment and the ideas put forward by all our panellists, all of which merit further debate, that inspired Unions 21 to bring together the articles in the following pages.

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Tomorrow's Pensions

Making the Point

The Authors

Alex Bryson

Alex is a Senior Research Fellow at the National Institute of Economic and Social Research and a Visiting Research Fellow at the Centre for Economic Performance. He was an editor of the British Journal of Industrial Relations between 2005 and 2009. His research interests span labour economics and industrial relations.

Paul Nowak

Paul Nowak heads the TUC's Organisation & Services department. The department is responsible for the TUC's regional councils, public services, organising and recruitment, and health and safety. The department also leads the TUC's work to reach out to young workers, inter-union relations and the organisation of the TUC's annual Congress.

Paul was one of the first intake of the TUC's 'Organising Academy' in 1998 - and prior to this had been an active member of unions including the GMB, UNISON and CWU.

In April 2000 he was appointed Regional Secretary of the Northern TUC where he was responsible for the TUC's work in the North East & Cumbria.

In 2002 he was appointed to lead the TUC's work on organising and recruitment, which included the development of the TUC Organising Academy.

Paul is married to Vicky, and has three young children.

Carl Roper

Carl spent 14 years as a CPSA then PCS Branch Chair and Secretary at the Ministry of Defence in Liverpool. After leaving the civil service he spent time on the TUC Organising Academy and then working for TUC Learning Services as a Project Worker and Regional Development Worker promoting the role of Union Learning Reps.

In 2004, Carl became Director of the TUC Organising Academy responsible for leading and developing the Academy's training programme for union organisers and officers. Between April 2007 and 2008 he worked at the NASUWT as its North West Regional Organiser before returning to the TUC as National Training and Consultancy Officer (Organising).

He was appointed TUC National Organiser, responsible for leading the TUC's work on organising and recruitment, in September 2009.

Carl studied History as a mature student at Liverpool John Moores University and lives in Liverpool, in close proximity to the three main passions in his life; his partner Lynn, daughter Milly and Everton Football Club.

Martin Smith

Martin Smith first became a full time union official as an Organiser for Battersea and Wandsworth TUC in the early 1990's, organising workers within the communities of South West London into their workplace unions. He contributed to the development of the TUC New Unionism project during 1997 and 1998 including the establishment of the Organising Academy and the creation of a new TUC approach to organising training for Workplace Reps and Officials.

On joining GMB as an Organiser, Martin lead the organising department in London before taking his current position in 2005 following the election of London Region Secretary Paul Kenny to the post of General Secretary. Martin is currently National Organiser of GMB, heading up the Organising Department within the General Secretary's office.

Chapter 1

Retaining and Attracting Members: Running to Stay Still?

Alex Bryson

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There is a rather old and tired debate, both here and in the United States, regarding the prospects for union revival. Underlying this debate is a preoccupation with the power unions once wielded. It juxtaposes prospects for a “Second Coming” for unions in which they rebuild their political and industrial power on the back of new organising strategies, and the prospect of terminal decline leading to near-annihilation. This debate rarely touches on a third scenario, namely unionisation in a guise and with a status similar to that which it enjoys currently. Trade unionism still constitutes the largest voluntary organisation in Britain; it represents eight million employees; negotiates on behalf of around a third of all employees; it dominates workplace employment relations in the public sector; and it continues to influence most important aspects of working life in the private sector as well, from health and safety and employee wellbeing through to training opportunities. But the challenge for unions today is to prevent further weakening of their position. The question arises: what do unions need to do to consolidate on where they currently find themselves and improve on the value they offer to their existing membership?

Most union activists would characterise trade unionism as a movement for justice and social change based on the power emanating from worker solidarity and the values it breeds. This characterisation can draw in new members when they are mobilised against a great injustice and see unionism as the answer. The difficulty is making these connections when over half of all employees in Britain today have never been union members (*Bryson and Forth, 2010*), and have little conception of what they do and what they are for. In the private sector 80% of workplaces have no union, and the percentage is still higher among new and younger workplaces. Mobilising along traditional industrial lines is also problematic when the bulk of the current movement is made up of professionals, often women, often working in the public sector. The old transmission mechanisms whereby workers got to know about the value of unions - parents who are union members, industrial communities - are simply not there anymore.

Until the 1980s, unions could rely - at least to some degree - on union membership being a ‘default’ position in those workplaces that were unionized. Not being a member came with a reputational cost for the individual. This was underpinned by the closed shop. Not so anymore. The closed shop was made unenforceable from the 1990s so that unions have to win over workers to union membership, even when they have a presence on-site. But this isn’t happening. Union density continues to decline even where unions are present at the workplace, leading to an increasing free-rider problem. Unions have their clear selling points: they continue to be a force for equity in the workplace; they are valuable to workers and employers alike in grievance handling; and they benefit members in a number of ways, including a union wage premium, practices to foster work-life balance, improved training opportunities and even lower stress levels when faced with worker innovation (*cite the Touchstone pamphlet based on Bryson/Forth*). The difficulty appears to be getting the message over. The immediate benefits of membership are often hard to perceive. Employees often resort to unions in a time of crisis when they have a problem, and rarely meet unions in ‘good times’. There is no ‘good buzz’ about joining a union as there might be when purchasing an item such as an iPod touch. And cost may be a real issue for some members, especially the lower paid.

Improving on what they have means unions must also reach out to employers. This is a complex ‘sell’. Most employers in the UK tend to be apathetic when it comes to unions, rather than hostile. Nevertheless, employers tend to harbour an image of trade unionism which is anchored in the experience of the 1970s and 1980s when they reduced productivity and profitability, lowered employment growth rates, and were associated with a poorer climate of employment relations. But as analysts have recently shown (*eg. Blanchflower and Bryson, 2009*) this is an outmoded view of unions. They no longer

have these negative effects on workplace performance. Indeed, when they are perceived by employees to be effective, employers view them as a positive influence on workplace performance (TUC, 2010). They are also positively associated with the high involvement management practices that some view as crucial in securing the UK's competitive position in the world economy (Bryson, Forth and Kirby, 2005). Unions continue to be associated with conflict in the workplace, but this conflict is often the product of worker 'voice' which seeks to confront tricky and difficult issues in the workplace with a view to solving them. This is precisely what happens in most cases, leading to a reduction in worker quit rates relative to similar non-union workplaces (Dix et al., 2009; TUC, 2010).

It seems clear, then, that unions have things to offer to both employees and employers. Perhaps the greatest difficulty unions face, however, is their capacity to deliver. Union finances have been badly hit by the loss of revenue due to declining union membership. At the same time the cost of servicing existing members has grown due to the increase in individual grievance representation and a decline in the number of on-site lay representatives per union member. Union mergers have not delivered substantial cost reductions which might have put them on a better financial footing. The costs of organizing new workplaces are also very high. In addition, employee perceptions of union effectiveness have been poor for a number of years. Recent research based on the British Social Attitudes Survey indicates that fewer than three-fifths of union members think that the union at their workplace were taken seriously by management and under one-half think unions made a difference to what it was like to work there. The one factor making a huge difference to perceptions of union effectiveness is the presence of an on-site lay representative or 'shop steward'. But as the chart shows overleaf, these have been declining markedly.

Despite all of this unions do face a new world. Bankers, financiers and the free market are done for a while. There is an opportunity for unions to take the initiative as the voice of ordinary people, along the lines of unions in the USA recently such as Americans for Financial Reform: Accountability, Fairness, Security (<http://ourfinancialsecurity.org/>). There are new opportunities to organise and service members too. British unions may wish to take a leaf out of experiments in the USA such as Working America which operates in the community rather than in the workplace (<http://www.workingamerica.org/>). The internet offers huge opportunities for worker reps to benefit from one another's experiences to cut the costs of servicing members (<http://www.unionreps.org.uk/login.cfm>). The future looks more promising than the recent past.

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Dix, G., Sisson, K. and Forth, J. (2009) 'Conflict and Work: the changing pattern of disputes', Chapter 8 in W. Brown, A. Bryson, J. Forth and K. Whitfield (eds.) *The Evolution of the Modern Workplace*, pp. 176-200, Cambridge University Press

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TUC (2010) *The Road to recovery: how effective unions can help rebuild the economy*, Touchstone Pamphlet



Over the next few months unions will understandably focus on the General Election. Unions affiliated to the Labour Party will be busy mobilising people and resources to try and deliver a Labour victory; and unions more broadly will be working hard to ensure that the priorities of union members and their families are reflected in Party manifestos.

Whatever the outcome of the next election, two things are clear. Firstly, unions and the TUC will want to ensure that government takes on board the issues that matter to working people and their families. Ours is a broad agenda: tackling unemployment; fairness at work; supporting properly funded public services; encouraging government investment in new green jobs and technology and combating climate change; fighting for equality in the workplace and beyond; making sure skills and education are open to all. Whoever is resident in Number 10, we will need to work to ensure that these priorities are high on the political agenda, and to develop a convincing narrative about the contribution that unions can make to a better, fairer society.

But secondly - and perhaps most importantly - we will need to step up our efforts to ensure that unions have the capacity and the resilience to do the bread and butter work of representing our members effectively in the workplace and beyond. Having a broad political programme and a vision for the future is one thing - ensuring that we are equipped to play our part in delivering that vision is another altogether. Many unions have already made great strides toward meeting this organising challenge, reflected in the fact that the majority of TUC unions have reported growth rather than decline over the last decade, but despite this progress, there is undoubtedly much more to do.

Emerging from recession

Unions have been placed under intense pressure because of the recession. After ten years of relative membership stability, last year there was a sharp dip in the numbers of workers in union membership. Many union members have lost their jobs. Union reps and staff are spending huge amounts of time and effort trying to support workers at risk of redundancy, and working with employers to find ways to help them survive the downturn. But as the economy begins to emerge from recession, we need a positive programme to increase our membership; increase the number of people who are active and involved in their unions; and to engage employers across the private and public sector.

Underpinning that positive programme should be two key foundation-stones. Firstly, we need to place an absolute focus on developing strong, effective workplace organisation, with well trained, visible confident reps at the heart of our organising strategies. Secondly, we need to think imaginatively about how we extend collective bargaining and union organisation - the last decade has shown that organising workplace by workplace, or even company by company, is time-consuming, resource-hungry and not up to the job of making a real impact in sectors with endemic low union organisation and density.

A focus on reps

As others have argued elsewhere in this publication, good, well trained, confident, visible union reps and activists are central to any serious effort to grow union membership and extend union influence. If we want to organise a significant proportion of the 20m or so non-members of the workforce, we need to better engage the 200,000 or more lay reps and stewards who for most members and potential members are the face of the union. At the very least, lay reps and stewards are ideally placed to recruit the 3m or so non-union workers working in unionised workplaces, 2m of whom have never been asked to join the union in their current workplace. Research undertaken by Alex Bryson and John Forth for the TUC using the WERS survey has conclusively shown that it is lay reps that determine whether or not members think unions are

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What more can we do to grow?

Paul Nowak

effective in the workplace (i). Where we have reps, members and non-members alike are more likely to think that unions are responsive to the issues that matter to them; are taken seriously by management; and are able to make a real difference in the workplace.

So we need to do more to attract members to take on rep and activist roles but also need to ensure that support is in place for our existing reps, and that reps see organising and recruitment - building the union in their workplace - as a key part of their job. This will not be easy. The last WERS survey revealed that the proportion of union members with access to an on-site union representative had declined by 10% between 1998 and 2004 to 45%; many reps struggle to secure proper paid time off to train or to carry out their duties effectively (ii); and where there are reps, they are often not 'representative' (iii). In addition many union reps feel their employers do not value the work that they do, and that being an activist may impact negatively upon their career prospects (iv). These, and a range of other problems faced by union reps, not only impact upon the work of current reps, but also undoubtedly act as a disincentive to other members to get more involved in the day-to-day work of the union.

Despite these problems, there are many good practice examples showing how unions can not only recruit and retain reps, but also get them focussed on organising and building the union. As Martin Smith has outlined, the GMB has put lay reps at the centre of its national organising strategy; USDAW has developed 'stand down' agreements with a wide range of national employers including Tesco, Sainsbury, Morrison, Poundland and the Co-op allowing reps to take time-off to undertake organising and recruitment activity; and between 2005 and 2007, Unison put nearly 2,000 stewards through its 'One Step Ahead' programme which is 'designed to engage longstanding reps and to build team work in branches around organising and recruiting'. In addition the rise of the Union Learning Rep suggests there would be a positive return for increased union investment in developing new representative roles around issues such as equalities, pensions and the environment.

One practical step unions can take to increase and support lay rep activity is to make sure we prioritise support for reps and workplace organisation at the bargaining table. For many employers, the costs of improving or extending facilities and facility time for union reps would be marginal - and indeed there is now plenty of evidence of the positive contribution that reps can make to workplace performance (v) - but this could represent a much needed, and relatively easily secured, resource for union organising. For unions, ensuring that we recognise and celebrate the work of our reps is crucial, as is ensuring reps have access to ongoing support and advice from the union and, crucially, other reps. The TUC's unionreps web-site (www.unionreps.org.uk) is a good example of the value of this support - linking 15,000 reps across the country and across a range of TUC unions - offering reps the chance to share ideas, experiences and solutions.

Extending collective bargaining

Over the last 10-12 years, a focus on 'organising' has become the norm rather than the exception in the UK trade union movement. Unions have invested heavily in new organisers, in training and mobilising lay reps and stewards and in setting about extending union organisation into sectors where unions have traditionally struggled to get a foothold. But the impact of these efforts has been partly offset by the resource-hungry nature of organising and bargaining in the UK.

Unlike many parts of Western Europe, collective bargaining coverage in the UK is almost co-terminus with union density and organisation. Sectoral or industry-level arrangements are generally confined to the public sector, or in a very few traditionally

well-organised parts of the private sector such as print. This is reflected in collective bargaining coverage in Britain – with unions negotiating terms and conditions for just over a third of the workforce, and only 20% of private sector workers. By contrast union density in Germany is less than 20%, but German unions bargain on behalf of two of thirds of the workforce; in Spain density is 16% but unions bargain on behalf of 80% of the workforce; and in Italy density is 34% and unions bargain on behalf of 70% of the workforce.

The close link between bargaining coverage and density in Britain poses two key challenges for unions. First, it is hard for unions to break ‘new ground’ in many parts of (particularly) the private service sector as employers in competitive sectors with low density and low collective bargaining coverage are effectively ‘incentivised’ to resist unionisation efforts. Second, organising and bargaining plant-by-plant, workplace-by-workplace or even company-by-company is resource intensive. Smaller workplaces, increased workplace fragmentation, the use of outsourcing and contracting out, agency working and sub-contracting all further drain resources. While unions have been able to use the statutory recognition process relatively successfully to gain new agreements, these agreements often only cover small numbers of workers (the average size of the ‘bargaining unit’ in statutory applications is just 119 workers) and are only secured as a result of resource intensive campaigns.

In the face of this problem a number of unions have tried to adopt strategic sectoral organising strategies (vi). But alongside these organising efforts, unions should press government to play a more active role in promoting the role of unions and collective bargaining. This could be done by restoring ACAS’s duty to promote collective bargaining; looking at how the tax system could incentivise employers to support collective bargaining; supporting and extending existing collective agreements in the public sector; and supporting the development of sector forums. Extending collective bargaining would help unions grow, but it would have much broader positive economic and social benefits - helping reduce wage and income inequality.

Challenges and opportunities

Its clear that the next period will be a challenging one for unions and our members. The public sector will come under increasing financial pressure and despite the stirrings of economic recovery, many of our unions will still be grappling with redundancies and workplace upheaval. Employment growth is likely to be concentrated in sectors where unions are weakest, and unions will be running hard just to stand still never mind grow, and extend their influence.

But alongside these challenges are a number of exciting opportunities. The last 2 years have shown that the neo-liberal, ‘free-market knows best’ consensus that has held sway for much of the last two decades is no longer credible. In its place unions have the opportunity to help forge a new consensus - one which balances growth with sustainability; which places the broad interest of the many over the narrow wants of the few; and one which recognises that unions are essential to establishing both fairness at work, and fairness across society more generally. Our message to potential members, employers and government alike must be that better, stronger trade unions can help create a better, fairer society.

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(i) *‘The Road to recovery: how effective unions can help rebuild the economy,’* TUC, March 2010.

(ii) A 2005 TUC survey found that 16% of reps say that less than a quarter of the time

they spend on reps duties is paid for by the employer. A TUC/Personnel Today survey of union reps and HR managers found that nearly 40% of union reps reported their employer paid for less than 25% of the time spent on their duties and that 'on average just 53% of the time union reps spend on union duties is paid for by employers' (Personnel Today 30 January 2007).

(iii) In a 2008 survey of unions undertaken by the TUC, over half cited differences between the profile of reps and their wider membership vis-à-vis age (reps tended to be older), gender (reps tended to be male) and ethnicity (reps tended not to be from BME communities)

(iv) The TUC/Personnel Today survey in January 2007 found that 92% of union reps believed their career prospects were threatened because of their representative role

v) See *'Reps in Action: how workplaces can gain from modern workplace representation'*, BIS/CBI/TUC, May 2009.

(vi) Unite has adopted this approach in contract cleaning, low cost aviation and meat processing with some significant successes. Key elements of such an approach include an upfront investment in comprehensive strategic research, identifying key target employers, identifying and pressuring points of leverage within and beyond the workplace (for example, in supply chains), and focussing of resources on the campaign.

In 1964, a year before he was due to graduate from Harvard University, Marshall Ganz left to volunteer as a civil rights organiser in Mississippi. In 1965, he joined Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers and then over the next 16 years he gained experience in union, community and political organising. During the 1980s, his organising work continued designing voter mobilization strategies in local, state, and national election campaigns for grassroots organisations.

Ganz returned to Harvard in 1991 to complete his degree and in 2000 he completed a Ph.D. in sociology. He currently teaches public policy and organising at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government and the Hauser Centre for Non-profit organisations. During the 2009 US Presidential election, Ganz had a central role in developing the grassroots organising effort that underpinned Barack Obama's campaign and was influential in the design of the 'Camp Obama' training sessions that were responsible for training over 20,000 volunteers during the campaign.

I first met Marshall Ganz in November 2008 when he spoke to that year's Leading Change group during their study visit to Harvard, just days before Obama's historic victory. An indication of how impressed and inspired the group were by what he had to say was the fact that we were still emailing each other about his presentation several weeks later and attempts were made to bring him to the UK. This was prevented only by a combination of his work load and ill health. This interview was recorded a year later when I returned to Harvard with the 2009 Leading Change group.

It was his experience of the civil rights movement that developed Ganz's view on what shape effective organising should take. His understanding of the reasons for and the solution to the discrimination and oppression that black people endured was very simple; that the white people were benefitting from the political and cultural oppression of black people and any solution that didn't address the underlying dynamics of the question of power (and in particular the black population's lack of power) was doomed to fail.

The question Ganz identified as sitting at the heart of the civil rights movement, at least as that point was, "OK, how do we get some power?."

"What I learnt was that you have to start with the people that have the most interest in taking power; in other words the people who are suffering the most from the consequences of lack of power, but then that's a paradox, isn't it, because the reason they have got problems is that they don't have power, so how are they going to get some power.

"What we learned, and this was a really important understanding for me about organising was that there is a big difference between resources and power and that while many communities lack power, they are not all lacking in resources - and the challenge is then how to turn the resources of the community into the power that it needs to get what it wants. For me that was a basic learning point, that at lots of times individual resources don't add up to power because people aren't using them together."

In the case of the farm labourers whom Ganz was involved in organising after his time working in the civil rights movement, there were similarities to the experiences of black people in Mississippi in terms of the racial segregation and economic oppression they faced. Their method of fighting back was organising a union routed in community organisation. Ganz says of his time working with Farm Labourers leader Cesar Chavez;

"It was rooted in a movement, but we ended up learning the same lessons about the need for power - we weren't going to get the power given to us. In our case, what we

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A critical eye and a hopeful heart! An interview with Marshall Ganz

Carl Roper

had to do, we would go on strike and it would be pretty easy to replace people. Californian agriculture was like a mosaic of ethnic groups because somebody had always gotten the idea to bring in some other group of workers, Sikh, Philippine, Yemeni or whatever to undermine the efforts of whoever was trying to organise. That was sort of the history of the deal.

“But we found that farm worker strikers could leave the picket lines and go to the cities and become organisers and organise unions and churches and students to boycott the supermarkets that sold the grapes that were picked by the strike-breakers and so it turned into a grape boycott and it took us five years, but it ultimately was successful and we were able to win 200 contracts which covered 70,000 workers, and the first contracts really in agriculture in our history. But we learnt the same lessons about how to get some power, how to mobilise people to get it and how to develop the leadership.” Ganz says that what he took away from these experiences was a picture of organising as being about three main things:

“First, identifying, recruiting and developing leadership. Secondly, building community around that leadership - in other words using the leadership to build the strength of community; and thirdly, developing power from the resources of that community. So, leadership, community and power were how I came to understand organising.” This framework formed the basis of Ganz’s work for the Obama campaign, and this is obviously a subject that he is asked about repeatedly.

“We approached training this generation of organisers in terms of five core practices. The first of these was that the first question they should ask is not ‘what’s the issue’, but ‘who are our people?’ We tried to convey that organising begins with who the people are, not with what the issues are, not with what the policy is, but with who the people are. Therefore the first skill that we trained them in was relationship building. We taught people how to do one on one meetings, how to do house meetings and to use these skills with intentionality, with focus and with learning

“The second piece of work was to establish what’s at stake here? What is going to be worth it for people to actually take risks, make commitments and find the courage that it takes to embrace doing something new or differently. The marketing approach that had been popular in previous campaigns was all about making it easy for people, making things fit with the way people are and even thinking about how to make it so they don’t have to do anything. In my experience, that never organised anything. It may sell soap, but for me the foundation of organising is challenging people to make commitments of their own resources, because that’s where the power comes from. If it doesn’t come from the people you organise, it’s not going to come in any way that’s real and powerful and transformational.

“The third part was to understand and develop these values through narrative, the telling of stories; organisers telling their stories and the people telling theirs, to identify not so much what we think about things but how we feel about things - in other words to identify our values. It’s the values we place on people, experiences and circumstances that actually become sources of motivation, so taking seriously the emotional content of values and the significance of emotional understanding as a way to move people from values to action was and is critical.

“The fourth part related to strategy; turning what you have into what you need to get what you want. Now, you know strategy is one of those things that like storytelling we are hard-wired to do. I also think we’re hard-wired to do strategy, because when you think of it at the most basic level, its common sense. That’s why the definition I work with is how to turn what we have into what we need to get what we want. In other

words, it's imagining a purpose, and then figuring out how to take the resources we have and turn them into the power or capacity we need to get what we want.

"Finally we developed a structure based on leadership teams rather than a model based on a single person. We found that in volunteer movements that was just too fragile. All too often the person who takes charge, is exactly the person you don't want to take charge, because they have this alpha idea about what it is to be in charge and they want to give orders to everybody and then, guess what, there's nobody around to give orders to, and so pretty soon, they are isolated, they burn out and they complain that no-one will help them. Does any of this sound familiar?"

"On the other hand, you get people who say 'we don't believe in leadership, we don't want any structure. It's just everybody equal. It's everybody the same.' In that format nothing ever happens. We came up with a way to cut through that, which I think worked well for us, which was to create interdependent leadership teams. In other words, identify the work that has to be done, establish the common purpose, bring people together to agree upon clear norms of how they're going to work together, and define clear roles. That team structure was how we would wrap up Camp Obamas, launching people at the campaign - with clear goals, the tools they needed and then launch the leadership team. Now, it took coaching from organisers, it took structured support. As you moved up, you needed more coaching. It wasn't just like magic, it wasn't going to happen by itself, but it really took us a lot further. It created the space in which new leadership could develop and in which young people could acquire the skills and practices, but also actually have some real responsibility and could learn and grow. As a result we trained over 3,000 young people in the basics of organising."

Why does Ganz believe that this approach has attracted so much attention both with and beyond the US? It is simply because it, or at least the campaign it supported, was successful?

"I think that his approach has really connected with people here in the US, I think in part because it puts values back in the picture and it sort of takes seriously the fact that commitment matters, how we feel about things matters and hope matters.

"I think what summarises a lot about this whole approach is the questions posed by Rabi Hillel, the first century Rabi who didn't have quite as good a publicity operation as us, I guess, so we don't know as much about him, but he posed three questions, which I'm sure you've heard before. Just think about it, because I think they sum up a lot of what this work is. The first question is to ask yourself: 'If I am not for myself, who will be for me?' The meaning is not a selfish statement. It's a statement saying that the starting point is my values, what moves me - is understanding what my strengths, my resources, my values are - whether an individual or a community or a movement or an organisation - without that appreciation there is no foundation. But then, the second question is 'If I am for myself alone, what am I? It's recognition of the fact that not who, but what we are in the world is in relationship to others and so the only capacity we have to develop, to realise our own dreams is in relationship with the capacity of others to do that also. The final question is 'If not now, when?' Because the future is so unknown that we cannot learn what's possible until we act on it and for me, the critical thing is learning from what we're doing, so that we are not blind, but that we become intentional and strategically clear about how to develop this wonderful capacity that we have.

I asked Ganz what lessons trade unions could draw from this approach particularly in respect of their attempts to increase activity in the union by members and given the fact that most union members in the UK at the moment didn't join a union as a result of an organising drive. Many joined unions and see union membership, as an insurance policy

and they certainly also didn't join the union as some kind of covert way of becoming a leader or an activist. For Ganz it all goes back to values and motivation;

"I think that the challenge you pose is one also for American unions. They'll be motivated if there is something for them to really be motivated about, in other words, what kind of challenges would be so urgent and so critical that they could experience why they would be needed to actually do something. In other words, it's not simply a matter of education programmes, although these are valuable things, but to move people to action, it takes something that gets them in the gut, for which action is needed. If the unions aren't fighting those kinds of fights, then it's not going to happen. So, I guess the question I'd put back is to say, well, where are the fights, what are the struggles, because it's around struggle that people are engaged."

Over the last 10 years, unions in the UK have made significant progress in building capacity to address their respective organising challenges. Many unions now have national organising strategies and employ specialist organisers. And of course, over the same period, many unions have managed to increase their membership.

But, there remain a few lessons that those of us concerned with organising and building stronger unions here in the UK might draw from Marshall Ganz's work, experience and approach to organising.

Firstly, there is the question of how we 'do' trade unionism and how members experience it, if at all. For too many members, union membership can be a passive experience where recourse to the union only occurs when an individual problem is experienced. The majority of union members work in offices and factories where there is no on-site union rep and becoming more active in the life of the union and what that activity involves is an alien concept to many. Even for those who might want to get involved opportunities for activism appear limited and when they do occur they are in formalised roles that can appear unattractive and impractical given the demands of life in and beyond the workplace. We need to think more freely and creatively about how unions work at a workplace and branch level and to find ways of motivating people not just to join up but to join in. Creating more opportunities for activism based on what members are able and willing to do, not just on what we need them to do, offers the chance to ease the burden on existing activists and find the next generation of leaders.

Secondly, calls over the last 10 years for unions in the UK to devote more resources to organising have perhaps too often been seen solely in terms of pounds and pence. But we are not a movement with scarce resources. Our 200,000 union reps are not only the foundations upon which the trade movement is based; many union reps are active within their local communities. Lay reps are supported by union officers, regional and national officials and increasing numbers of organisers. We have a well developed Trade Union Education programme run by the TUC which continues to deliver training to increasing numbers of lay reps and officers and which supports and supplements the educational efforts of individual unions.

Whilst additional resources to fund campaigns and employ staff will always have an importance, there must be an increased effort to realise and appreciate the resources we have, and then to consciously forge these together more deliberately to deliver power and influence to current and future members.

Finally, I wonder how much more we might need to do in changing the pitch to members and potential members. More often than not, are we still selling union membership as a transactional rather than transformative relationship?

Individual members will also require individual support, services and representation from unions, and rightly so. But how far do we go in explaining that the union's ability to deliver individually and collectively effectively depends to a large degree on the participation of members? Devoting some effort to understanding the values of our current and prospective members as well as their cares and concerns may make give us renewed and increased confidence in presenting union membership not as mere insurance but an exercise in commitment and hope.

Chapter 4

GMB@Work: Growth, Accountability and Democracy in GMB

Martin Smith
National Organiser
GMB

Total GMB membership has grown by 15% in real terms over the previous 5 years following the adoption of the GMB@Work national organising strategy in 2005.

We emerged from a deep financial crisis and the threat of merger in 2004/5 with a new leadership but fewer officers and resources than at any other time. Yet by spending less and asking more of our Workplace Organisers we have turned around decades of membership and financial decline.

This has been achieved in several ways, but the basic foundation stone of GMB@Work was a painfully honest assessment of the scale of our challenge within the union. We needed to build a unity of purpose never seen before in the union to make any plan work - unity between our regions and our national office, between our CEC and our Senior Managers, and between all our Officials, whether focussed on building membership or servicing existing members.

Years of exaggerating our membership numbers to people outside the union had led to cynicism and mistrust inside the union. Complacency and denial grew to be powerful elements of our internal culture as the GMB leadership of the Nineties worked hard to prevent front line Officers and Workplace Organisers knowing the true extent of the problem. So, as a first step in 2005 we started the managed removal of tens of thousands of ghost members from our records to achieve an accurate membership list in every workplace, Branch, Sector and Region.

Achieving the unity of purpose we needed also meant making sure that every Officer, Workplace Organiser, Branch Secretary and member of staff shared the same information on GMB membership and growth trends as the General Secretary, and this was regularly updated each month. From this we could work out collectively our shared targets and ensure everyone in the union was held to account for their delivery. Three sectoral projects were agreed upon and everyone accepted a mandate to work together across the whole union to achieve membership growth and industrial progress.

We put an end to the notion that you could separate the recruitment and servicing of members and that some officers should build the union while others maintained it. We stopped officials and regions competing to hit arbitrary sales targets and focussed on building our members power in the workplace and their industry. We put an end to the stale debate about recruitment versus retention and created a climate where every Official and Workplace Organiser became responsible for both functions.

Next we undertook a consultation exercise with all Officials, staff and senior Workplace Organisers on what needed to be done. The politics was simple - to turn the process of developing organising policy within GMB on its head. To ask the people who do it every day to come up with the plan for turning the union around – and then be bound by the collective responsibility of implementing it. To make sure that “sharing best practice” became an operational requirement rather than a smokescreen for keeping the status quo.

The first message that came back loud and clear from the consultation was that we should stop chasing rainbows – the endless search for the easy top down bureaucratic or political solution to membership decline. We came to understand that partnership organising had failed us and confused our members over what the union stood for, and that government funded schemes like Union Learning would never deliver growth. Critically, we rejected merger as an unnecessary distraction that would only compound the complacency within the union and further obscure the scale of the membership challenge we faced in GMB organised workplaces.

Despite years of blaming governments, employers, the media and the state of the economy for our troubles, we have eventually developed an understanding that we got ourselves into our own membership crisis and so it is down to us and us alone to get ourselves out of it.

We were advised by our front line staff that selling the union as a set of services in return for a monthly fee had produced an unsustainable demand for a personalised service on the union at all levels. Our Officers and activists told us that we needed to build the union wholesale not flog it retail. To emphasise the collective strength of working people where they work, not their individual interests as mere customers of union services.

Finally we were urged to tackle the over dependence of many of our Workplace Organisers on their Officers for the delivery of union services, in particular representing members and negotiations with employers. In response GMB took control of the training of its new and existing Workplace Organisers and ended our reliance on outside organisations. Training is now delivered by GMB Officers to their own Workplace Organisers using course materials written by GMB Officials drawing on their own experience and assessment of the skills a union representative needs to build the union.

In the end we developed a single set of 38 policies and organising approaches simply based on our common understanding of what works and what doesn't. These have been adopted and implemented in all regions and sections of the union. But the GMB@Work strategy has 5 fundamental organising principles which we promote to all our Officials and Workplace Organisers

1. **The Workplace is the building block of the union.** It's at work, rather than in the community, or in the media that working people are most able to build the collective solidarity they need to tackle the injustice and inequality they face head on.
2. **Each workplace should be organised as if a ballot for industrial action was due.** We need our members to be match fit and ready, but we also need our organisation in each workplace to be democratic, transparent and accountable every day.
3. **The employers have different interests than our members.** Its our members' employers who are the cause of most of their problems at work and our job is to stand up for and promote our members interests not bury them in partnership agreements.
4. **Its the process of industrial relations that builds a union.** People don't join unions out of gratitude for what we have done in the past but out of fear and anger for the present and hope we can give for the future
5. **People are strongest when they organise themselves.** Our members must be encouraged to find their own solutions to the problems they face with our support. We must take steps to give our members in each workplace the power and authority they need to make decisions and we must stop doing for our members what they can do for themselves. Workplace democracy and organising must co-exist.

Our growth rate and the GMB@Work strategy has begun to fundamentally change the union, 4 out of 5 members are now service workers, almost half are women, Officials no longer sit on the CEC, we have reduced from 8 sections to 3 and returned to annual Congress. All to focus on the core truth - that a growing union delivers for its members while a shrinking union lets members down.





