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The Trades Union Congress 150 years on: a review of the organising challenges and responses to the changing nature of work

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is, to reflect on how the UK's Trade Union Congress, in the 150th year of its formation, has been responding to the significant changes in the labour market, working practices and union decline. The paper considers TUC initiatives to recruit and organise new groups of workers as it struggles to adapt to the new world of work many workers are experiencing. Although the paper reviews progress in this regard it also considers current and future challenges all of which are becoming increasingly urgent as the current cohort of union membership is aging and presents a demographic time bomb unless new strategies and tactics are adopted to bring in new groups of workers –particularly younger workers.

Design/methodology/approach – This is a review paper so it mainly draws on writings (both academic and practitioner) on trade union strategy and tactics in relations to organising approaches and in particularly the TUC's initiatives from the period of 'New Unionism' onwards.

Findings – We note that while unions have managed to retain a presence in workplaces and industries where they membership and recognition, there has, despite a 'turn to organising' been less success than was perhaps hoped for when new organising initiatives were introduced in 1998. In order to expand the bases of organisation into new workplaces and in new constituencies there needs to be a move away from the 'institutional sclerosis' that has prevented unions adapting to the changing nature of employment and the labour market restructuring. The paper concludes that in order to effect transformative change requires leaders to develop strategic capacity and innovation among staff and the wider union membership. This may require unions to rethink the way that they operate and be open to doing thing radically different.

Originality/value – The paper's value is that it provides a comprehensive overview of the TUC's role in attempting to inject an organising culture with the UK union movement by

drawing out some of the key debates on this topic from both scholarly and practitioner writings over the last few decades.

Key words — Trades Union Congress, Organising Academy, leadership, challenges, transformative change

Paper type — review paper.

The Trades Union Congress 150 years on: a review of the organising challenges and responses to the changing nature of work

Introduction

As the Trades Union Congress (TUC) celebrates its 150th anniversary, it is an opportunity to reflect on the challenges it faces as the peak-level representative body of UK unions. The TUC's strapline is 'changing the world of work for good' which succinctly captures some of the challenges facing the organisation. It has the role of bringing together 49 unions representing members in sectors as diverse as transport, health, and finance. Almost inevitably, uniting such a broad membership base is challenging. Bringing them together to facilitate change is even more so; and changing anything as broad as 'the world of work' is nearly impossible. Looking to the future, some long-standing challenges to achieving those objectives remain, and new ones are emerging. This article therefore considers some of the initiatives by the TUC since its relaunch in 1994 to deal with the complex issues arising from the changing nature of the labour market and different forms of work and employment, and their impact on the UK union movement. In doing so, we look forward to possible new initiatives and evaluate how likely future changes and developments could influence policy and practice within unions.

The focus is on the period from the mid-1990s onwards when the TUC committed resources to build the capacity of affiliate unions to strengthen their ability to organise and represent working people. The investment in the TUC Organising hAcademy from 1998 onwards has

been a flagship programme demonstrating a commitment to lead the UK union movement and emphasise the importance of building growth and strong workplace representation. In taking this focus, three issues are likely to continue to be challenges for the TUC: 1) providing leadership in a context of little direct control, 2) the on-going challenge of targeting new groups of workers, and 3) building solidarities between disparate interests of such a diverse group of union members as well as with workers more generally—particularly in the so called 'gig economy' and other growing forms of precarious work. In the final section of the article, we look to the future and reflect how the changing world of work may provide considerable opportunity, as well as on-going challenges.

Strategy and tactics in a changing labour market

When the TUC was founded 150 years ago workers were organising into trades unions in order to improve their working and living conditions and, in some ways—although not in others—not much has changed. The majority of workers today, as then, are not members of trade unions, and work is becoming increasingly precarious in many parts of the labour market, as it was in the late 1800s.

The 1970s was the high point of trade unionism in the UK, when there were 13.5 million workers in membership and union density was around 56 per cent (Kelly and Bailey, 1989). At that time, workers had the confidence that high levels of collectivism provided the strength to challenge employers and win concessions—because workers were organised as a class, for itself (Kelly, 2015). If workers today were organised at the same level of union density as they were in 1980 there would be 18.4 million workers in trade unions (Charlwood, 2002). Yet despite the relaunch of the TUC in 1994 (Heery, 1998) and the 'turn to organising' in the late 1990s to offset decades of decline union density is, in 2018, just 21 percent and around 6.2 million members (BEIS, 2018).

The union movement faces the challenge that changes to the structure of the labour market bring in effective organising and representation. Increasing fragmentation and 'flexible' forms of employment have impacted greatly on how work is organised and has led to uncertainty for workers who have difficulty in understanding who in the supply chain is their actual employer (Rubery and Ralph Darlington, 2015). Encouraging affiliate unions to move beyond their existing membership boundaries to organise and recruit new groups in these

more precarious sections of the labour market is crucially important (Alberti, 2016, Tapia and Holgate, 2018, Grady and Simms, 2018). UK unions have faced fundamental changes as a consequence of labour market restructuring meaning that membership is increasingly concentrated in the public sector where density is just over 50 per cent, as compared with around 13 per cent in the —far larger —private sector (BEIS, 2018), yet evidence shows that active commitment to organising 'new' workers can pay dividends (Nowak, 2015). There are currently almost 18 million non-members in the private sector, 67 per cent of workplaces have no union members and just 15 per cent of workers in that sector are covered by a collective bargaining agreement (BEIS, 2018). One issue resulting directly from the dominance of public sector trade unionism is that large scale job losses in the public sector have directly led to a decline in union density as union members have either moved out of the workforce or into non-union jobs, or have been contracted out into more precarious forms of employment. Rebuilding membership and activism in that context is inevitably difficult and will require long-term action and co-ordination.

The challenges faced by the union movement is not to just lobby and campaign for the world of work as we would like it to be, but to organise the world of work *as it is now*. This is a challenge beyond any individual affiliate of the TUC and one that requires a whole movement response. Changing labour markets also present the difficulty that some groups of workers are far more likely than others to find themselves in sectors where unions have low levels of membership (Simms, et al., 2018, Tapia and Holgate, 2018). A clear manifestation of that is that young workers are disproportionately working in the private sector in areas such as hospitality and retail which have very low rates of unionisation (Simms, et al., 2018). For example; there are just short of one million young people working in retail and hospitality, a sector in which just 12 per cent of the workforce is in a union (BEIS, 2018). Over half a million young people work in accommodation and food services jobs, a sector where less than in one in twenty workers are members (ibid). Even in areas where unions have historically had stronger representation, such as manufacturing, there are challenges. The manufacturing sector employs a quarter of a million young people, but less than one fifth of all workers are in a union (ibid). As a result, it is increasingly rare for young people to experience trade union representation in their early working lives. The challenges of organising in those sectors which are often small, geographically-dispersed

workplaces is huge and requires significant investment of time, money and expertise (Hodder and Kretsos, 2015). In addition, we know that workers who engage with unions early in their working lives are far more likely to continue to be involved (Freeman and Diamond, 2003). So those challenges risk structuring future patterns of exclusion from trade unions which may be difficult to overcome in future.

Addressing these challenges requires strategic planning and concerted action. The TUC is often better positioned than individual unions to shape initiatives that require fundamental rethinking of objectives that go beyond core workplace concerns because it can help create space and practical support to facilitate action (Simms, et al., 2016).

The context: debates and controversies

Within this changing context, a number of debates and controversies emerge from the relatively small literature that examines the role of the TUC. First, the extent to which the TUC can, or even should, consider its role as leading or 'managing' the responses of the wider labour movement (Heery, 1998). Second, whether the TUC can, or should, advocate for a particular 'model' or approach to trade union organisation (Parker, 2008, Simms and Holgate, 2010). And third, the extent to which the TUC can, or should, seek to be an 'insider' within political policy making and implementation (McIlroy, 2000). Each of these debates is introduced briefly before reflecting on the direction of the TUC over the past 20 years.

Heery (1998: 340) argued that the formal relaunch of the TUC in 1994 under the leadership of John Monks had three key elements. The first was 'characterised as a venture in "managerial unionism" (Heery and Kelly 1994)'. He showed how the restructuring and implementation of a changed focus and direction following a significant decline in union membership, density and power was a deliberate decision taken at the highest levels and integrated into a strategic analysis. This change of strategic focus is the second element of repositioning the TUC to speak 'on behalf of a broadly conceived labour interest' (Heery 1998: 342). The third element was a new representative strategy focusing on union organising with the launch of the New Unionism campaign in 1996 and the Organising Academy in 1998. Heery argued that these three elements marked the relaunch as indicating a renewed purpose for the TUC in leading change within affiliate unions. A central

question therefore remains as to whether the TUC has been able to demonstrate this leadership and, if so, what the consequences of that shift in strategic direction have been.

A second debate is hinted at within the first; the extent to which the TUC can or should advocate for a particular approach to trade unionism. In the early stages of the New Labour governments that debate was mainly about the extent to which the TUC should promote an approach based on workplace organising or whether it should focus more on engaging as a partner both at organisational and national levels (Heery, 2002). Despite notable criticism (Danford, et al., 2002, Kelly, 1999) the TUC was clear in its position that it could navigate and reconcile both. Twenty years on, the question is therefore about the legacy of that position and the tensions that remain.

The third important debate relates to the extent to which the TUC can be regarded as an 'insider' or 'outsider' in political decision making. McIlroy (2000: 3) conceives the TUC as a pressure group and, drawing on Grant (1995) and Baggot (1995) highlights an important distinction between 'insider' and 'outsider' pressure groups. He concludes that the TUC should be understood as an insider within Labour Party policy making; accepting the 'rules of the game' of policy development and implementation. The important question 20 years on is whether this characterisation is still valid and, if so, what has changed.

New ideas

The establishment of the TUC's Organising Academy in 1998 marked a recognition that unions needed to be pro-active both in order to increase density in workplaces where they already had a presence, and crucially to expand into un-organised workplaces and sectors where density was very low or non-existent (Simms and Holgate, 2007, Simms, et al., 2013). This was to be achieved by a focus on 'organising'—providing union staff and lay representatives with the skills and tools to teach workers about how to effect change and gain concessions and improvements at work through worker representation, power, leverage and collective bargaining.

The context of the launch was very important. The incoming Labour government had committed to a form of statutory recognition mechanism and although the details were not clear at the point the Academy was launched, it informed the focus on building strong

workplace membership and representation (Gall, 2005). It was also influenced by the success of high-profile organising campaigns in the USA such as Justice for Janitors. That campaign had responded to the difficulties of accessing workers in their workplaces by moving into communities highlighting much broader issues than only workplace problems such as shift scheduling, non-payment of wages and similar (Savage, 1998). Issues such as immigration status and harassment were integrated into organising campaigns, and unions worked closely with faith groups and community organisations to engage workers (Holgate and Wills, 2007).

In 'Union Voices: tactics and tensions in union organising' (Simms, Holgate and Heery, 2013) two of the authors of this article published a book that aimed to step back from the detailed analysis of individual campaigns that had dominated the literature on union organising to that point and evaluate more broadly what effect this 'turn to organising' (Holgate, 2018) had achieved across the UK labour movement as a whole. First, we showed how successful the Organising Academy had been as a training programme. We traced a large number of the participants and revealed that the vast majority had continued their careers in the trade union movement. Of those who had left, most had gone into related fields such as campaign work and politics. The graduates we interviewed almost all spoke extremely positively about how they continued to use their organising expertise even when they were not employed as a specialist organiser. Reflecting now, at a period another 5 years on from those interviews, it is clear that the graduates of the Academy have permeated the union movement, taking with them their skills and expertise. Their networks and open approach to sharing information across unions and between countries has also ensured an on-going flow of information and learning within and between UK unions. In that regard, the investment was— and continues to be— hugely important.

Second, we argued in the book that organising brings inherent tensions within unions. Ultimately unions are responsible for representing their members and a balance needs to be struck between investing resources there, while also trying to grow the union beyond its existing membership base. These tensions play out within the jobs of paid union officers, no matter what role they are employed to do. In an effort to manage this, many unions swing between investing in specialist paid organisers, and asking representative officers to take on organising as part of their generalist role. And, in many cases, organising roles are relatively

junior positions within union hierarchies and thus there are often challenges in getting their voices heard or leadership support for 'in the field' grass roots activism. The argument presented in that book is that these tensions are inherent and will always create challenges for senior leaders within unions as well as those at the 'sharp end'.

While some unions withdrew from the Organising Academy to establish their own internal organising programmes (Parker and Rees, 2013) the role for the TUC however was in creating a space in which organisers and leaders could exchange thoughts and experiences in an effort to overcome shared challenges. It has been remarkably successful at that and there are certainly many more forums in which experiences are shared with an effort to exchange information and improve practices. Flowing from that has been a demand for more knowledge and learning about leadership and organising which has led to the development of advanced training programmes for those wanting to develop skills managing organising activities, as well as a plethora of organising training initiatives for activists and representatives. Stepping back to reflect on the broader effectiveness of the 'turn to organising', it is clear that it has had some important successes—and it is pretty clear that the situation would be much worse if this work hadn't taken place. Overall, however, the approach has been limited in its effectiveness, but it has been hampered by some of the tensions that are inherent within organising activity—in particular in developing leadership roles that are able to push through transformative change within unions.

Future challenges

Given the tensions in organising, it is important to reflect on how they are likely to influence the future direction of TUC policy and practice. To this end, we identified three important challenges that remain and must be engaged with for the TUC to continue to provide leadership in the renewal of trade unions in the UK; (1) providing leadership in a context of little control, (2) encouraging affiliate unions to broaden activities to engage new members, and (3) building solidarities both within unions and with the wider workforce.

Providing leadership in a challenging context

When union members are asked what it is that makes unions relevant and effective, the presence of representatives in the workplace is often a key factor in shaping their

expectations. This is not surprising as the model of workers supporting and representing each other at their place of work speaks to one of the core principles of trade unionism. Yet this is a model threatened not just by attacks on paid time off for reps in the public sector, but also because of an ageing activist base and evidence that the union movement is not encouraging enough young reps. Evidence from the last two Workplace Employment Relations Surveys shows that union reps are getting older (Hoque and Bacon, 2015). Between 2004 and 2011 the proportion of reps aged 30 fell whilst the proportion of reps aged between 40 and 49 and over 50 increased. In addition, looking at the age profile of reps enrolled onto the TUC's online reps training programme we see that more than half are over 46, and only one fifth are aged under 35. Once again, a failure to back fill reps as they approach their working lives has the potential to seriously undermine the movement's organisational effectiveness. There is clearly, then, a role for the TUC to shape and lead initiatives to recruit and train new, younger workplace representatives.

There is also evidence of growing concern in wider public discourse about poor working conditions in areas of the 'gig economy' and a general downgrading of wages, terms and conditions, particularly since the Great Financial Crisis of 2007/2008 (Taylor 2017). This provides space for many commentators, including the TUC and individual unions, to intervene in debates about the future of work and the regulation of labour standards across the economy as part of a wider public discourse of resistance and discontent. The challenge for the TUC is therefore to provide leadership around these issues which adds to the contributions being made by individual affiliate member unions. One way, moving beyond current organising based on workplaces, is—as is being argued by some labour lawyers—to press for the increase in the regulatory scope of collective bargaining to improve the pay and conditions of all workers (Ewing and Hendy, 2017, Bogg and Ewing, 2013). Such a strategy is not an alternative to grass roots organising but as Ewing and Hendy (2017: 50) note: 'trade unions need *impact* as well as members, and their effectiveness will be judged by the number of lives they touch, as well as the number of members they have'.

Targeting new groups

Amidst the decline in union density and rising non-membership there are another set of figures that should be cause for concern across the trade union movement. These tell a story of an ageing membership and, perhaps most worryingly, an ageing activist base, a double whammy that if not addressed will reduce membership and seriously damage the ability of unions to effectively represent members individually and collectively. Just 13.4 per cent of 16–24-year olds in employment are members of a trade union (BEIS, 2018). This is not necessarily because they are reluctant to join unions, as the evidence suggests otherwise (Tapia and Turner, 2018), rather that they are unable to join one because unions are largely absent from the sectors in which they are starting their working lives, or have simply never been targeted to join a union.

If unions were able to re-imagine what it is to be a worker today then they might be more successful in not only reaching out to new groups and those currently outside the union movement, but also to consider how the identity of workers, for example, in relation to ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, disability, affects their experiences. One approach to dealing with these issues it to adopt 'whole worker' organizing that understands that workers' lives— including the oppression and discrimination they experience—does not end at the workplace door (McAlevey, 2016). People's lives are intersectional and are embedded in a wide range of social networks which can be utilized in deep organizing strategies to build power and to attract the widest range of participants. Many workers have already made these connections, and this is an area that unions could profitably tap into should they reconfigure themselves to be a wider social movement (Holgate, 2018, Cha, et al., 2018, Parker, 2008).

To meet the challenges faced by neoliberalism, the changing nature of the labour market, the growth of the gig economy, as well as the loss of power in the union movement, there needs to be a transformation in organizing practice. What is required is rethinking of the structures of power in society (not just in the industrial arena) and what sort of tactics are needed to organize around these in the most effective way. There is a need to build new alliances to widen the scope of union activity that can bring in under-represented members, but further, it requires a deep *internal* focus on how to make this happen. Established patterns of behaviour can create obstacles to the type of organizational learning and power

analysis necessary for the type of deep organizing innovation that is necessary for significant renewal and revitalization (Ibsen and Tapia, 2017).

Addressing these challenges will require unions to address the structural issues that restrict the capacity to organise to anywhere near the scale needed. Currently, a disproportionate amount of the movement's resource is tied up in places where unions already have members, organisation and recognition, and not enough are targeted at the sectors and workplaces where the movement needs to grow. Of course, unions must support existing members, but they will struggle to survive, let alone grow, if they only serve existing members, especially as they grow older. After all, if looking after existing members were the route to revival then the movement would not be facing its current problems. The established organising model of workers in large workplaces or companies, engaged by union organisers, who build campaigns, develop leadership and build remains relevant and must always be at the centre of our strategies for growth. But the sheer scale of the challenge will oblige the TUC, and its affiliates, to do more and think more innovatively.

Building solidarities between workers

Central to the activities of the TUC in addressing some of these challenges has been a focus on building solidarities between very diverse groups of workers (see Doellgast, et al., 2018 for a broader discussion). The TUC is well-positioned to contribute to wider debates and campaigns about the world of work and has successfully done so through, for example, identifying the challenges of recruiting and representing young workers as one of the three priority areas for 2018. That campaign aims to push affiliate unions to co-ordinate activity that is already taking place and to learn from each other as they attempt to reach out both to young workers in unionised workplaces, and to young workers in parts of the labour market that are more difficult to organise. Developing the point made above, part of the approach has been to emphasise that the issues of concern to a lot of young workers go far beyond the workplace. Integrating issues housing and mental health helps reach out beyond existing workplace representation and lead a far wider debate about the effects of poor quality work on other aspects of workers' lives which can be difficult for individual unions to lead.

That said, there is scope to push this approach further. There is evidence that the quality of jobs is reducing in many sectors and occupations and there can be a tendency in public debate to see job quality as a race to the bottom: 'why should they have good pensions, when we don't?' Paying attention to building solidarities not only between unions, but between unionised and un-unionised workers is an important role for the TUC and is necessary to rebuilding a narrative that labour is valued and should be rewarded accordingly.

One of the advantages of having a single peak-level organisation representing unions is that there is a real effort to build common interest across sectors and occupations. Having a single representative body brings a strength in unity but also means that the issues on which such a diverse group of unions can find a common voice can be limited. A central challenge is to unite what can be very diverse interests; between different unions, and also between union members and workers more generally. Building alliances between unions can require considerable effort to emphasise the long-term interests of all unions in building stronger workplace rights that cover all workers. Similarly, the TUC is in the advantageous position to focus on building solidarities between union members and workers more generally. With UK union membership hovering at around only 23 per cent of the workforce, it is crucially important that there is somebody taking the lead on speaking to and for workers more generally. Bringing together the three themes identified above, it is time for a rethink of strategy and tactics. What do unions need to do differently and what can they learn from other unions and social movements in terms of renewal and revitalisation?

Future directions: looking to the future

Leadership in expanding the agenda

A common misunderstanding about TUC leadership is that it exercises direct control over affiliate unions. It would be hard to find a structure less likely to produce that outcome. Rather the role is one of co-ordination and representation on common issues. TUC policy is decided through structures where affiliates propose, debate and vote on motions rather than instructions to affiliates to adopt particular positions. This opens opportunities for leadership around common issues and it is here that the TUC is probably most successful in

its campaign activities. A good example was the speedy and high-profile mobilisation of both legal and campaign resources in responses to the Trade Union Act 2016.

Similarly, the TUC has shown considerable leadership over the past 20 years in encouraging affiliate unions to strengthen their recruitment and organising activities. This kind of activity can fall by the wayside in the day-to-day routines of bargaining and representing members, so providing space and support to develop activities to promote long-term organising objectives has been crucial. These initiatives seek to build expertise and engagement around the labour movement towards common objectives that can be difficult for individual unions to invest in. Leadership has been demonstrated by launching campaigns, providing access to training and deploying the considerable weight of research evidence and campaign staff to link together and support initiatives that were often happening in a patchy way.

Co-ordinating approaches to target new groups

Many employers seem intent on using new technology to challenge job quality and working conditions. For unions, digital technology provides a chance to significantly scale up organising campaigns. What is required is nothing less than a digital revolution in the movement. Union leaders need to fully understand the scope of what digital can offer, and also to recognise its limitations (Hodder and Houghton, 2015). There needs to be a significant investment in digital skills and capacity, and an understanding that it is only an *additional* tool and it is not a *replacement* for face-to-face organising with members. However, there needs to be an influx of new staff with digital experience and, just as was done with the Organising Academy, the movement needs to retrain existing staff to give them the chance to integrate digital into their existing jobs and to use it to support organising campaigns. This clearly opens up space for the TUC to lead this kind of investment.

Within the movement this may sound radical, but to many of the workers unions need to reach, and who need unions to reach them, it is their daily practice. These developments affect younger workers particularly acutely and there is clear evidence that they are affected disproportionately in terms of precarity and poor routes to progress. And as described earlier, they are also the most underrepresented group amongst trade union members. The TUC's response has been to attempt to innovate and develop new

approaches of collective organising for young core workers that will be effective in the sectors where they work, appeal to them, and work within the context of their lives.

Emerging from the findings, the TUC has planned a strategy to lead activity to respond to the needs articulated in the research. In particular, young workers expressed a desire to feel that they are investing in their own personal development, and a strong desire to share problems and feelings about work with other people in a non-competitive environment. As a result, a website and app called Worksmart has been developed that provides advice and training on issues such as career progression and personal development. Worksmart is explicitly an organising tool in that the initial engagement is with workers in the moment at which they have a problem or aspiration. It engages them in the issues they care about that that particular moment in time. Like all organising, the trick is then to use that issue as a jumping off point to broaden the conversation and introduce new possibilities; including union membership. It is explicitly an effort to move organising activity into a digital space and target groups of workers who are deeply comfortable in that space, and yet are often excluded from union membership because of the sectors in which they work.

To this end, the objective of Worksmart is not only to engage workers, but also to engage unions. The hope is that if affiliate unions can see 'proof of concept' of a digital organising tool, they can learn from some of the investment—and mistakes—made along the way. It may even be that these platforms could offer a way to develop digital branches and online spaces where workers can engage with each other, and with unions, in ways that reflect the real (working) lives that they lead.

Building wider solidarities

In recent years, we have also seen a growing interest from unions in the notion of 'community organising' (McBride and Greenwood, 2009, Tattersall, 2006, Holgate, 2015) where the places and spaces in which workers live as well as work are utilised to broaden the terrain upon which unions operate. Some unions have experimented with initiatives in this terrain and achieved impressive results—albeit at a relatively small scale as yet. For example, in 2011, Unite opened its membership to people not in paid employment such as students, retirees, claimants and carers. In part, this initiative is a recognition of the loss of power in the workplace and an attempt to re-create an 'old' form of trade unionism where

trade unions were once part of the community as well as the workplace. This approach widens the purpose of trade unionism to advance the interests of the working-class as a whole—whether or not individuals are, indeed, working— and as such has the potential to broaden the ideology of trade unionism from its narrow economistic focus to being more like a social movement (Holgate, 2015).

The UK union movement could also perhaps learn organizing tactics from living wage campaigns, which have been highly successful in increasing the wages of hundreds of thousands of workers (Heery, et al., 2017, Prowse, et al., 2017). The combination of bringing together communities, including faith groups, schools, and NGOs, to assert moral pressure on companies paying low wages, and at the same time developing leaders in these communities to strengthen their own institutions, helps to build a better organized civil society that is able to assert its power collectively (Holgate and Wills, 2007, Holgate, 2009). Wherever unions are able to innovate and find new ways of organising and building worker power the second part of the challenge will be to scale it up so that this best practice becomes common practice and makes a significant dent in the number of members.

Discussion

Returning to the three themes highlighted at the start of the article, it is clear that contemporary initiatives by the TUC clearly shape those debates. Taking each in turn, it is clearly central to the purpose and objectives of the TUC that they act to co-ordinate an analysis of the challenges facing the UK union movement and responses to those challenges. It is also clear that role has developed and matured in the 20 years since the debates about 'New New Unionism' (Heery, 1996). The success of the Organising Academy in training a new generation of organisers, most of whom now work across the labour movement, has given a renewed sense of purpose and confidence to supporting affiliate unions in the challenges they face. Acting to prioritise and promote difficult issues such as organising young workers and showing leadership in actions to support those priorities is central to the current role of the TUC.

To speak to the wider debate that emerged in the 1990s (Heery and Kelly 1994), it would be a mistake to understand these initiatives as a form of managerialism; leadership would be a more appropriate term. Rather than directing affiliate unions to prioritise particular issues,

the TUC understands its role as being uniquely positioned to act strategically to fill in gaps that emerge as individual unions focus on issues of importance to members as well as supporting affiliate unions with capacity building when and if they want to develop their own initiatives in these areas. Richard Hyman(2007) has been calling for a while now for unions to develop new strategies to respond to external and internal challenges faced by neoliberalism and aggressive capitalism by harnessing leadership to deliver organisational change.

Moving to the second issue highlighted in the opening sections, it is evident that the TUC does not advocate a single approach to the challenges facing the union movement. The language of the 'organising model' has ebbed away, and there is explicit recognition that there is wider acceptance in the UK labour movement of the language and practices of organising. Academic debates are now significantly more nuanced and tend to focus on the challenges of how organising practices take place (Holgate et al 2018) and what outcomes can be achieved (Simms and Holgate 2010), but it's debatable whether this is happening to the same extent within the labour movement.

Of course, one of the major changes since 2015 has been a re-emphasis of the important links between the trade union movement and the Labour Party. Since the election of Jeremy Corbyn to the leadership of the party there has been a reinvigorated enthusiasm for acknowledging the role the union movement plays in funding the Party and broad questions about the policy direction. What is clear is that workers' rights are central to the current political agenda within the Labour party and there is considerable opportunity to influence the future direction of policy. There is undoubtedly a role for the TUC in co-ordinating a practical policy response that is more than simply a 'wish list', and it is essential that feasible program to reform labour standards in the UK is developed.

Towards the start of the period of Labour party governance between 1997-2010, McIlroy (2000) argued that the TUC was largely failing in is role of pursing its political objectives within the Labour party. He was extremely critical of the TUC for failing to secure progress on key issues (McIlroy 2000: 12) despite restoring its status as an 'insider' in government policy making. Reflecting back on that period with the benefit of hindsight, it seems strange to argue that the TUC was a genuine 'insider' in the political context of New Labour. It

certainly had more influence than under Conservative-led governments before and since, but the trade union movement always occupied a difficult position in New Labour policy making (Smith, 2009, Smith and Morton, 2006).

It seems clear that the current Labour party leadership are deeply committed to bringing the trade union movement back into policy development, and it seems likely that the TUC and affiliated unions would also be crucially important to policy implementation should the party return to power. This is a seismic shift within the political context and positions the TUC very strongly within future political developments.

The challenges facing the TUC and the labour movement in general are considerable, but not insurmountable. Building solidarities within the labour movement and across the workforce in general is a top priority. Further investment in organising and recruitment so that unions are able to organise to scale is also crucial in order to address the challenges of changing membership patterns associated with structural changes in the labour market. And there are good reasons to be optimistic. There has been a change in the political direction, at least within the Labour party, and the TUC and affiliate unions are well positioned to take advantage of what seems to be a growing public dissatisfaction with deteriorating working conditions. In that context, it is clear there will continue to be an important role for a co-ordinated voice highlighting both problems at work and future solutions.

Concluding comments

While unions retain an impressive ability to represent and recruit members in workplaces and industries where they have a footprint, to build out from existing bases of organisation is what is required and this is a move away from the 'institutional sclerosis' that has prevented unions adapting to changing circumstances and held back trade unions for the last few decades (Pocock, 1998). The TUC, if also able to restructure and reprioritise deep organising of workers (McAlevey, 2016) could maybe assist with this. To effect transformative change requires leaders that are able to develop strategic capacity and innovation among staff and the wider union membership. This may require unions to rethink the way that they operate and be open to doing thing radically different. A *transformative* leadership programme facilitated by the TUC—drawing on its experience of

establishing the Organising Academy and its Leading Change programme—could provide the space for radical rethinking of the future of trade unionism.

The early pioneers of the union movement had a vision in the 1800s that led to the birth of trade unionism, and it's now the responsibility of today's labour movement (broadly defined) to continue to take that forward, but this cannot happen without some serious consideration of how to organize a way out of the decline that faced over the last four decades.

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