

Organising to win: a programme for trade union renewal



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DIRECTION FOR THE
DEMOCRATIC LEFT

Organising to win: a programme for trade union renewal

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Dedication

"To my father Johnny Curran, who remains a constant inspiration to me, my family, the friends and comrades who stood by me and all those who believe that solidarity is unconditional"

Kevin B. Curran

Foreword

Social democracy is both a process and set of institutions through which society makes itself the master of the market. This means harnessing the creative energy of capitalism and directing it in ways that work for society and the planet, balancing its dynamism with its tendency, if left unchecked, to boom and bust and to exploit workers. The market doesn't have a morality – just a driving impulse to make profit. This is precisely why it makes a good servant of society but a poor master. We are allowing it become a poor master by refusing to assert a collective social authority over it. The future of the democratic left is the ongoing struggle to balance the dynamism of the market with the inherent dangers that come with it.

Central to this process are the unions. Without strong and modern unions there is little hope of society exerting sufficient influence over the market. We don't have to believe a class war is being fought to recognise that the interests of labour and capital can and will come into conflict and that collective organisation is a prerequisite of ensuring individual workers' rights. But as the form of markets change so must the way in which labour organises.

Tony Blair made a surprise intervention in the 'future of the unions' debate earlier this year at a Unions 21 event. Here he extolled the virtues of the unions but saw their role like any service sector provider as essentially technocratic. Like lawyers, unions for Blair are there to offer a service. But such a functional role is devoid of a vision or political purpose that is essential to a voluntary and activist-based movement built not on the principles of the business school but the belief in equality, liberty and solidarity.

The point of issue between labour and capital is one of balance. The power relationship naturally ebbs and flows. There is little chance of striking a perfect equilibrium. Rather a set of beliefs, processes and institutions are required to ensure a continued renegotiation of the balance of power. This was what gave rise to the remarkable post war period of growth and welfarism. That era has gone. What Kevin Curran begins to discuss in this pamphlet is the need for a new settlement for an

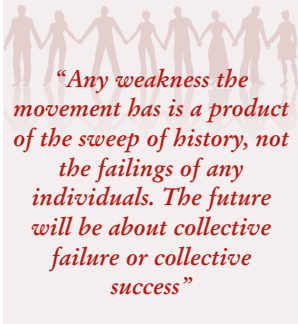
economy that is both globalising and localising.

Organisations thought of as beyond renewal regularly surprise even their harshest critics. But they don't do it without being brave. The Labour Party, after 1992, is an obvious case in point. Or look at football or the cinema; both were written off as dead in the 1970s but have come good and have a future – not just a past. Newspapers too are proving they have life beyond their presumed technological shelf life. There is no deterministic fate which says things must die. But unions are slipping from the mainstream of political and public life. Too many young people would not dream of joining a union. It's not that they are anti-union; rather it's just not something they would even think about.

Too often the movement is overly cautious, defensive and unwilling to understand that constructive criticism is meant with the best of intentions. As Kevin makes clear, the movement faces real problems but this is not a blame game. Any weakness the movement has is a product of the sweep of history, not the failings of any individuals. The future will be about collective failure or collective success.

So what are the challenges and the opportunities the movement faces?

The world in which unions came to national prominence and influence has gone or is fast disappearing. In this sense we cannot underestimate the challenge of modernisation. The movement was built in an era of deference, material need, centralisation and mass production. Today assertive individualism, post-material consumerism for many, disaggregated production and supply chains, and the dominance of market values demand a substantial rethink by the movement. Crucially, the acceptance of globalisation as a benign force pressurises countries and their governments to accept the market's definition of efficiency. This means closing the gap between producers and consumers to make market signals operate more efficiently. This squeezes out the space for mediating organisations like unions – because they necessitate time and energy in democracy and dialogue. In the race to



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win in a global economy there is no time or space for unions.

But these challenges also present real opportunities. Globalisation brings with it insecurity, not just for those at

the bottom of the labour market but at every level. When it feels as though any white collar job can be outsourced to India then everyone starts to feel anxious – not just low paid or migrant workers. People are working longer and harder just to stand still in the pressurised world of the turbo-consumer. But we are not just consumers but producers. Our political and economic system must start to reflect that reality instead of allowing the necessary balance of power between employer and employee to get too far out of kilter.

Globalisation is the big opportunity for the left and the unions. Capitalism continually seeks out new sites of production with the lowest levels of labour regulation. But the flight of capital to the bottom of the barrel is finite. The job of the union movement in the name of solidarity, but also enlightened self-interest, is to build the networks and organisation to ensure there is nowhere for capital to hide in a world that is being made smaller by cheap flights, the internet and mobile phones. Previously isolated workers can be joined up by new virtual transnational social space. If globalisation is a force that we believe can be managed for the good of society then the cause of the union movement is given new life.

The final big opportunity is the ‘good work’ agenda. The opportunity created by new forms of decentralised production and a more assertive individualism is the prospect of unleashing the creativity of the nation’s workforce to drive high productivity and performance. It is the people who work within an organisation that know it best, who

know what works and what doesn’t and how systems and outputs could be made to function more effectively. This benefits the individual – who is given the chance to become more autonomous, to manage their own working life and become more creative. And it benefits the organisation through increased productivity. But this will only happen if employees have more of a direct say in the running of the organisation and they share fairly in the spoils of increased productivity. This agenda takes unions beyond terms and conditions to adding real value to people’s working lives through personal development plans and the myriad forms of economic citizenship. All these opportunities combine to form the basis for a new legitimacy for the union movement.

Compass and Catalyst will be looking to develop this agenda of globalisation, good work, economic citizenship and new forms of corporatism that deliver social benefits like the Turner Commission on pensions. But here we start with what will make or break the union movement – its ability to organise. Kevin Curran has been a union general secretary, lost that position but has kept at it, working to organise people in the food industry across the globe. His take is naturally particular and he doesn’t attempt to answer every challenge and opportunity facing the movement. But he offers a starting point for a debate. Most importantly he rightly says that the unions’ focus must be on organising and he goes on to suggest ways in which scarce resources can best be used to substantially change the focus of activity.

There is an old saying that ‘after your love the most precious thing you can give is your labour’. As we become more aware of what we are trading in return for wages the role of the unions, if they can reinvent the means to achieve their historic purpose, can and must be central to our political, social and economic future.

Neal Lawson
Chair, Compass

Preface

I have been active in the trade union movement all my adult life, as a volunteer up to the age of 33 and then as a paid official in the GMB. I am now employed by the International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers Association (IUF) working with others all over the world on global organising strategies. I have been active as a shop steward, safety representative, branch secretary and almost every position up to and including general secretary. Although my experience of the movement is particular to me I believe that it has given me a perspective that allows me to draw wider lessons.

As a welder in the engineering construction industry I didn't just happen to get involved in active trade unionism. As a lifelong socialist I saw the active involvement in the trade union movement as a practical manifestation of collectivism, social solidarity and active citizenship, and a major tool for the promotion of social and economic justice and political progress on behalf of working people.

I care about the trade union movement not only because of my politics and my unassailable belief in its necessity to ensure a strong and fair democracy but because it has been and continues to be my life. I have always identified with its core values and it helps me to define myself and my relationship to society.

It is an amalgamation of all the above that has moved me to offer an analysis of where the movement is and where it could be. I am an optimist by nature and I believe there is a necessary role for vibrant and dynamic trade unionism in the UK. But equally I believe that we have constantly to review and earn that role so that we keep in step with the people we strive to protect and represent. There has to be a constant debate within trade unions about how the movement should meet the challenges of an ever faster evolving economy and society and adapt in order to ensure that we maintain our relevance to people at work and in their communities.

I am a practical trade unionist and I offer my views to all activists, by whom I mean all in the movement who make practical contributions to the collective good, and all those who are committed to collectivism, who have faith and confidence in the ability of working people and who cherish the movement. Activists understand the political need for

the trade union movement to survive and prosper if we are ever to bend the market economy towards the benefit of society and not to its detriment, as well as stand up to the power of capitalism and the injustices and havoc it wreaks in our world.

It is you, the activists, who are the foundation on which the movement is based and none more so than those of you who represent our people in the workplace. It is my firm view that if we are to prosper then there has to be a substantial movement of power and resources toward the active membership.

So I proffer this pamphlet to each and every activist. It contains a lot of ideas, some of them my own, a lot of them the result of innumerable conversations and debates at tea breaks and over pints with friends, comrades and colleagues and at numerous conferences where the most sense is usually talked on the fringe. My reading of others' ideas and views, from our founders to recent publications, has also stimulated my thinking. I don't claim that the scenarios I describe are common throughout the movement; equally I acknowledge that there are a lot of positive initiatives and developments. My aim is not to criticise but to comment and be honest and searching about our present, so that we can help provide a better future.

Wherever these ideas sprung from and whatever you think of them I hope that they stimulate you to engage in discussion with your friends, colleagues and comrades. The purpose of this pamphlet is to spark a debate among trade unionists about the present and future of trade unionism and to try and create models that will ensure that this generation passes a strong and vibrant trade union movement to the next generation of activists. However, *tempus fugit* and it is a time to be bold and radical and throw off the straitjacket of convention and contemporary thinking.

Whatever you think of what you read I wish you all success in your endeavours, because without your endeavours the movement wouldn't exist.

Kevin B. Curran
September 2006

Executive summary

- Despite a growing economy and a more benign political environment trade union membership is still in decline, albeit slower.
- Economic and political power is shifting down to the locality and up to the global sphere.
- The economy is taking on the shape of an ‘hourglass’ – some are doing well but are cash rich and time poor; others at the bottom are both under-paid and over-worked.
- Everyone feels more anxious, insecure and pressurised whether because of white collar outsourcing, shifting production abroad or the power of employers over weakened employees.
- Trade unions need to rethink their strategies, resources and organisation to meet the threat of decline and rise to the opportunity of a pressurised workforce, which needs effective organising but also increasingly wants a ‘good work’ agenda.
- Unions need to oversee a massive shift in emphasis and resources towards workplace organisation and organising in non-union sectors.
- Unions should aim to set aside 25 per cent of annual income for organising activity, defined as consolidating and building workplace organisation and the expansion of organising into areas of non trade union membership.
- The workplace agenda must be updated and broadened out to include:
 - a ‘good work’ agenda
 - training and career development services
 - work–life balance policies
 - employment forecasting facilities to protect industries and jobs by ensuring they adapt faster
 - economic citizenship proposals to bring out the full productive and creative potential of workers.
- Unions need to form political alliances and local coalitions to pursue a wider economic and political agenda. Beyond the workplace the new union agenda must be extended to include:
 - the sustainability of the planet
 - wider social justice through a stronger and more effective link to a renewed Labour Party
 - community-based organising around such issues as a living wage and affordable housing through broadly based campaigns
 - establishing organising and communication centres in place of traditional union offices.
- A new international organising agenda is required to help stem the tide of transnational corporations being able to play one country’s workforce off against another in a flight to the bottom in terms of pay and conditions.
- To secure the proper level of international organisation those unions that exist outside public service unions should commit at least 10 per cent of their turnover to international organising work.
- To meet the challenges and opportunities, and against the backdrop of declining membership, unions need to become much more efficient and effective. This demands a new architecture to enable twenty-first-century union organisation.
- Communication and information technology (CIT) must be radically and wholeheartedly embraced to enable:
 - the self-sufficiency and more effective operation of officers and stewards
 - communications through text alerts and emails
 - campaigns and coalitions to be run virtually from the locality, through the national employers and the nation state to the international sphere.
- The union movement should create the resources to modernise by practising collectivism and solidarity in its organisation.
- Collective purchasing of CIT, cars, properties and all procurement needs across the movement could free up huge resources to help fund the new organising agenda.
- Collective service provision for legal and pension services, one national union call centre and help-line, plus the pooling of back-office functions would improve service provision, help less secure unions and free up resources for recruitment and workplace services.
- The enactment of single union environments (SITUEs) in every multi-union workplace would radically transform the effectiveness and efficiency of the movement. Instead of wastefully competing for members a system based on SITUE, administered by a reinvigorated Trades Union Congress (TUC), would ensure higher standards of service at minimal cost.
- A new central regulatory authority (CRA) for the union movement would be established to oversee, regulate and enforce single union environments.

Part I: An analysis of union decline

The trade union movement is in decline both in numbers and influence. After the Tory onslaught ended in 1997 the trade union movement experienced a period of government that can at least be described, even by their fiercest critics, as being neutral towards trade unions. It hasn't attacked, and some would argue that it has tried within its limited understanding to assist. However, it is clear that this government is not going to give us a legal leg up. This is reflected in the modest demands in the Trade Union Freedom Bill, which in itself expresses the tacit understanding in the movement that we are only going to grow by our own efforts.

In May 1997 there were 26.4 million people in jobs in the UK. Today there are 29.9 million in jobs, an increase of 2.5 million in the workforce. Many of these jobs are in the service sectors. The growth in public sector spending has created around 600,000 jobs in a sector where trade union organisation is strongest and more able to recruit new members. Yet over the same period trade union membership has fallen by over a million. The growth in low-paid service jobs in the cleaning, catering, security and hotels sectors, especially in the south east, has been met by a new generation of economic migrants seeking work and an improvement in their quality of life. Many of these workers earn the minimum wage, have English as their second language and are often exploited by unscrupulous contractors and agencies. In theory they represent an ideal constituency for trade union organisation and representation. However, it's not only in these sectors that we have been failing. Although there have been some positive developments, notably at the Public and Commercial Services (PCS) Union, the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers (RMT) and Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU), the overall picture is one of decline.

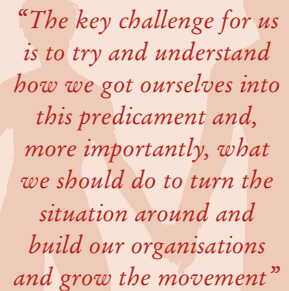
If we had maintained our share of the workforce, overall membership would have increased substantially. Therefore despite there being a record number of jobs in the UK, historically low levels of unemployment and a politically neutral environment, the trade union movement is shrinking.

The strategic response has been a continuing rationalisation by amalgamation, which has done little to stop the slide. Although we are still strong, the clear and inescapable truth is that the trade union movement is failing. However, while we retain strength we have the opportunity to change and renew the movement.

This decline should be of great concern to the vast majority of people at work who depend on collective bargaining to deliver their terms and conditions, either directly or indirectly, through a strong trade union movement. Those who believe in a strong civic movement that can act as a counterbalance to state and corporate power should share the concern. The key challenge for us is to try and understand how we got ourselves into this predicament and, more importantly, what we should do to turn the situation around and build our organisations and grow the movement. For this to happen trade unions have to develop strategies and structures to encourage participation in their governance and activity and to connect with working people who are outside our remaining strongholds.

I believe that trade unions have become too institutionalised and prevented from progressing by outdated paralysing structures, which give precedence to process and that have developed governance systems in which the real control lies with the full-time management who oversee a command and control ethos. This hasn't been a deliberate or even conscious process, but is the result of a gradual drift that has encouraged the movement to ebb away from organising as the prime objective of trade unionism, to be replaced by the prioritisation of the institutions that trade unions have unwittingly developed into. Many might say that this is the fate suffered by any successful organisation that has failed to renew its purpose.

The result has been that the organising ethos that was at the core of trade union purpose has gradually been replaced by institutional self-interest. This has resulted in a resources transfer away from the organisations they were and towards maintaining the institutions they have become. This was never meant to be. A survey in one union revealed that many members who left did so because they were unhappy with some aspect of the service they did or didn't receive. Complaints from members included there being too



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little contact with workplace representatives, not enough help given to members with problems at work, and only rare if any contact reminding them that their union exists to protect and promote their interests. No-one can blame our workplace activists. They are all volunteers, and many of them get little or no facility time to carry out their union duties. Too often they feel isolated while the resources available to them are often minimal at best.

A legacy to change

Many of the present generation of trade union leaders have inherited the result of decades of benign indifference and understand and accept the need for radical change. However, their room for manoeuvre is often limited by the outdated power structures they inhabit and the lack of a coherent narrative with which to inspire potential supporters towards a vision of what could be. Despite that some trade unions and individuals within trade unions are attempting to address these issues through increased emphasis on organising. But I think it is fair to say that although organising has become the lingua franca of the trade union movement it hasn't taken root in the prevailing culture of protecting the status quo. To analyse whether a trade union is serious about organising one can simply examine their operating costs budget alongside their membership income.

In most cases the institution has first call on all membership income. All organisations need to sustain the infrastructure that they require to fulfil their purpose. But when purpose has been overtaken to maintaining the institution, more and more of their operating costs become redirected away from their purpose and in the case of trade unions that means organising and workplace organisation. Trade union leaders at every level, from general secretaries to shop stewards, who are trying to promote an organising culture, often find they have to wrest resources away from their institutions. If they are winning, an increasing proportion of their operating costs will be spent on organising. Whether it's at a fast enough pace is another question, but at least they are beginning to move in the right direction. However the cult(ure) of institutionalism will fight for every penny and will use the internal governance structures to prevent these leaders progressing both in intent and influence. An organising union can be differentiated from an institutionalised one by how its resources are prioritised.

A changing society

Our founders shaped our organisations in response to the prevailing employment structures and the economic and social environment. Democratic structures and governance were based on the engagement of the membership and depended on members turning up at meetings, making collective decisions and voting on contentious issues and contested elections. When I joined my union members were still being fined for non-attendance, although a sixpence (2.5p) fine wasn't much of a sanction even then! These structures weren't conjured up from the ether. The values of collectivism and care and concern for others were reflected in contemporary working-class culture and the organisations that they created to deliver that ethos. I don't subscribe to the view that at some time in the past there was a golden era of mass membership involvement in trade union deliberation and governance, but these structures sufficed in that they reflected the reality of people's lives up to and after the Second World War.

The post war economic recovery and growth laid down the foundations of the modern global economy and Britain began to reap the benefit in the 1960s. The Asian Tiger began stirring; high streets were offering cheap, disposable goods from Hong Kong; Tesco started 'piling high and selling cheap'. Food was plentiful and available out of season. Washing machines, spin dryers, hoovers, cars, transistor radios and televisions were becoming common. All of these developments changed the lives of a working class that had experienced mass unemployment, poverty, hunger, deprivation and world war within a generation. However, although the lives of our members had changed irrevocably, we didn't blink an eyelid, mainly because economic growth, broad political consensus and increasing prosperity had provided millions of new members, while class memory of the recent past kept working people loyal to their organisations and engrained class solidarity retained their commitment.

Trade unions had never had so many resources and so much influence, and had roles in the economic as well as the political life of the country. In fact trade unions had never had it so good and our power was used to good effect, with rising wages, occupational pensions, annual holidays, sick pay and so on. All of these improvements in the quality of life were added to the traditional benefits of trade union membership and what had been won had to be protected and improved

on. As a result we had a strong and growing movement with enormous political clout and with hindsight we had reached our zenith.

A changing world

The influence of transnational corporate power in the global economy has left many nation state governments transfixed as capitalism rampages over the planet. The limp response is a race to the bottom. The constant unseemly scramble to deregulate and to boast about the flexibility of labour smacks more of the slave market than the labour market. As a rich country in a privileged continent the pursuit of happiness and fulfilment and a general improvement in the human condition has been cast aside to make more and more demands in the hopeless task of trying to slake the corporate thirst for ever increasing profit. If the government can't defend its citizens who can?

The trade union movement has always been a protective barrier, shielding workers from the power of capital. I believe that people at work have never needed a strong union movement more than they do now, and yet we aren't growing. In our changed world it is not so easy to separate work from the myriad other issues that the contemporary world confronts us with, and therefore we should consider building much stronger relationships with the campaigning civic community. It should not be too difficult for us to contemplate union national branches solely containing members who are also members and supporters of specific non-government organisations (NGOs). If we are to address seriously the imbalance of power between citizens, capital and state, trade unions and civic society have to form an alliance based on shared values that provides mutual support and the potential to be more effective. Amicus and the TGWU recently launched a consumer boycott of Peugeot in response to that company's threat to close its plant in Ryton, Coventry. How much more effective could that call be if we were already part of a civic coalition?

Government and our political parties have lost the respect of millions of citizens, which has led to an active disengagement from conventional political activity. People feel disempowered in the face of transnational corporations and compliant governments and have become disillusioned with party politics. In the wider context it is hardly surprising that people are turning away from conventional political activity and looking for alternative outlets for their political investments. This

is one of the consequences of people's realisation that in our fractured communities and globalised world, local and international networks are supplanting national ones. However, that doesn't mean that people aren't engaged in or wouldn't like to be engaged in political activity.

Millions of people who may not define themselves as 'political' marched against an unjust war, and are trying to make poverty history. Many passionately support the work of countless numbers of NGOs and become involved in single issue pressure groups. In other words they practise our values – they care about people and join with others to try and effect change. They know that individually they will not make a blind bit of difference to the negative effects of globalisation – and that is where a dynamic trade union movement has a major role to play. First, it can remind people of the record of success that the movement has in achieving progressive social and economic change through effective collective action. Second, it can point out that a strong union movement lends organising ability and resources to assist, work with and sometimes underpin single issue organisations. Third, it can open a wider dialogue with those outside union membership who share our values and, like us, care passionately about economic and social injustice. Then we all have a better chance of achieving our collective ambitions for change.

I would encourage those who are part of the voluntary civic movement, whether through membership of Greenpeace, Tools for Self Reliance, War on Want, Friends of the Earth or whatever, to join a trade union, not simply for support at work, but also because by doing so you make the entire civic movement stronger and better able to combat the power of the transnational corporations, international capital and a disconnected state. People don't join Friends of the Earth for what they can get out of it; they join because they identify with their policy objectives. We in the union movement need to make ourselves more open and accessible to potential members who may join to help advance a civic community agenda covering issues from environmental pollution to Fairtrade.

This returns us to the matter of structure. Energetic and committed individuals aren't going to join fossilised institutions. But they will join dynamic, effective campaigning organisations that can stand up to the power of international capital and the governments that connive with them. There continues to be a move away from disciplined political activity

that requires a commitment to and defence of a particular set of policies as enshrined in the party political structure and toward support for single issue organisations. This could be interpreted as a negative reflex action to the draining power of Parliament and government. National structures are becoming less relevant to peoples lives and the international more important in the face of the growing power of the transnational corporations and the reach of globalisation. Alongside this development is the growing feeling among many people that engaging in conventional political activity is pointless as politicians can't or won't respond to needs and concerns because they are powerless, incompetent, corrupt or acting out of self-interest.

A static union movement

Generations of British people have supported the role of trade unions as they recognised the need to be part of a collective organisation whose prime purpose is to create a balance of power in the workplace so that they aren't exploited, and are treated fairly and equitably while earning a living. Although there is no longer an homogenous working class the vast majority of people in Britain are working people whose main asset is the ability to sell their labour for an income. This provides them with the means either to survive or prosper. Most people have no other assets to maintain their standard of living or fulfil their material aspirations. In other words, without sufficient income from employment to sustain their lifestyles working people would depend on the state to some degree or other. It follows that all working people have a lot in common, whether or not they are conscious of shared interests or whether they identify themselves with a particular social class or not. If we are to re-energise the trade union movement we have to base our strategies on the prevailing cultures of working people and recognise that these cultures are many and diverse – a one size fits all approach is untenable.

We failed to change and stood still while our members started to enjoy the fruits of a developing welfare state allied to greater disposable income, which the union movement was in large part responsible for. Some of these changes heralded the beginning of long-term shifts in social and economic patterns of behaviour and obviated the need for traditional working-class institutions such as sick clubs. People's aspirations changed. Now they go on holiday to Florida not Folkestone, have a TV and now the internet at home, and they do not visit working men's

clubs. We have to catch up. In other words our members began to experience a new society – one that would have been beyond our founding members' imagination – while we stood still. These changes themselves have taken new directions. The rate of technological change has brought changing patterns of socialising and the present period of relative economic stability has enticed hundreds of thousands to buy property abroad.

All of these developments change people's perceptions and provide them with new experiences. Whatever our views of these developments they are a reality. It is through this complicated mix of poverty pay, second homes, job insecurity and rampant consumerism that we have to chart our course. Trade unions do not have a divine right to exist. If contemporary trade unionism does not respond adequately to the existing social and employment environment to become more relevant, then working people will create other forms of collective organisation in the same way that they created trade unions in the first place. Whether other choices could present an alternative to orthodox trade unionism or supplement it depends on the expectations and objectives of the people who might form or join them.

However, we should understand that if we continue to decline and are seen to be less relevant to today's complex and multilayered social reality, we may run the risk of people looking to other forms of a more narrowly defined collectivism that might be bereft of any ideological, socialist roots. This might be more in line with old style American 'business trade unionism', which people look to for simple 'insurance' rather than to bring social and political change. There are signs that the ongoing action to root out far right trade union entryism is being successful to the point that the BNP is considering developing its own workplace organisation. We should also be alert to the danger that fundamentalists could feed on community alienation for the same purpose. The all-embracing non-sectarian Big Tent of the British trade union movement is a precious legacy and all responsible trade unionists should be careful to advance any ideas for change within those parameters and under the auspices of the TUC.

Our internal governance mechanisms are out of kilter with contemporary culture. In the majority of cases branch meetings are either very badly attended or hardly exist at all. It is obvious that social interaction and habits, and political and class affiliations, have

changed beyond all recognition and yet some persist in maintaining the illusion that branch meetings are the foundation of membership engagement and democracy – they are not and haven't been for decades.

Most trade unions would purport to be driven by the democratic involvement of their members; that is after all where leadership legitimacy is meant to spring from. Rulebooks were written to enshrine bottom up control. However those same rule books have hardly responded to the enormous changes in social and economic conditions over the last hundred years. They have been regularly revised but our structures have remained essentially the same. I was a branch secretary for ten years up to 1988 and have attended hundreds of meetings and I can say without a shadow of doubt that attending branch meetings is not at the top of the list for most people's preferred night out. In other words branch culture and trade union process and procedures are no longer in synch with many contemporary workers' experience or cultures. The key factor is that working-class culture is no longer homogenous and trade unions therefore have to learn to deal with this complexity.

Although there have been moves to modernise, especially among some of the smaller unions such as Connect and Prospect, many still have structures that haven't kept track with the times. Massive change in every walk of life has left some rooted in an outdated stereotypical image of a Hovis advert of trade union members (mostly men) who work in large factories, who walk or cycle to work from their close and homogenous communities, and whose social activities are centred on their pubs and sports clubs. They rarely travel, have few leisure outlets and look to their mutual societies, sick and benefit clubs for support to get through the daily grind of their lives. The traditional branch structure was based on these past realities and these structures no longer serve the purpose of ensuring that an active and interested membership is in control of their organisations – when people have no influence over direction of an organisation they lose interest in it.

The challenge that we face and that strikes at the very core of trade union purpose is the growing weakness of workplace trade unionism. The 1998 Workplace Employee Relations Survey noted that 'the number of workplaces with high union density, and a wide and well established collective bargaining agenda had fallen from 47 per cent of recognised establishments in 1980, to only 17 per cent in 1998'. The same survey

showed that in 25 per cent of workplaces where trade unions were recognised there was no union steward present. Some estimates indicate that less than half the members of recognised unions now have a lay representative in their workplace. Thus we have not only lost and are losing members we have also lost and are losing the very lifeblood of trade unionism – workplace leaders.

It is my view that this is the inevitable outcome of trade union institutionalism's gradual domination of power and resources to the detriment of our founding and prime purpose – workplace organising.

Tony Woodley and the TGWU recognised this trend and as a result launched its '100% Membership' campaign in May 2004. Its objective is to stem this decline and reverse the trend as the essential first step toward re-creating an effective organising union by focusing the 'time effort and resources' of the union on rebuilding workplace organisation. We deliver our core purpose at the workplace and it is there that we do or die.

A woman's movement

There is not space enough in a pamphlet to address all areas of concern or indeed to do them justice, but it would be remiss not to mention the need for more women activists to achieve the highest levels of office and power.

An obvious weakness in our structure is the fundamental failure to correct the gender balance among our senior leadership. Despite the fact that over the last decades the number of women in trade unions has increased massively, women are nowhere near adequately represented in the positions of influence and leadership that could give our movement a wider dimension. There is no-one else to blame but ourselves. An essential part of our political and policy agenda is our constant battle against the 'glass ceiling' that women face in almost all occupations. We are left very vulnerable to counter criticism when our record is so very poor. I recognise that there have been advances in the middle rankings where more women leaders are present as well as the recent changes in leadership at Equity, Association of Teachers and Lecturers (ATL) and National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT), but this is too little and not fast enough. The GMB membership recently elected Debbie Coulter twice in succession to the position of deputy general secretary and Amicus recently

promoted Jennie Bremner and Gail Cartmail to become new assistant general secretaries. Some of these leaders are in unions with a large female membership and therefore that is the least we should expect. We should all be impatient at the rate of change and not be simply satisfied with the fact that there is some change.

I have witnessed women who have broken into full-time union positions become disillusioned with what can be very macho and competitive environments. Some adopt the prevailing culture and some leave while the rest are left to wrestle with the task of changing the situation. We desperately need to provide a forum for women, especially those who hold senior positions among our officers, to explain and implement what needs to be done to correct this weakness. They have the experience of the barriers they had to overcome, the conscious and unconscious prejudice they faced and the ongoing difficulties that women in the movement experience. I know that they can provide the answers and if we don't listen and act on them it will be our loss.

“Despite the fact that over the last decades the number of women in trade unions has increased massively, women are nowhere near adequately represented in the positions of influence and leadership that could give our movement a wider dimension”

The presence of women in trade union forums is hugely beneficial. I have often been in all-male environments and they can be very unedifying to say the least. Articulate and able women always improve the quality and range of discussion and introduce

dimensions that all-male environments often miss. But of course it is at every level that we need the active involvement of women, many of whom are put off by the macho image portrayed by the media of tub-thumping middle-aged men shouting and menacingly jabbing their fingers in the air. Our structures and cultures are not always immediately welcoming to women and represent some formidable institutional barriers. In order to be relevant we must be representative and that means that the movement needs to refocus on the feminine.

The movement could benefit if a women's commission was established to grasp this nettle and deliver the solutions that will fill this unacceptable

vacuum and make us whole and all the more stronger. This could be a standing or ad hoc committee resourced to bring in the best expertise and research to make substantial recommendations about how the union movement renews itself in terms of the influence of women and transforms its organisational ability to represent women at work. However a commission in itself would not be able to deliver change unless it was accompanied by the public recognition by men in leadership that some of their ambitions will be the casualties.

Is decline inevitable?

Has the union movement had its day? Is the combination of change factors identified above enough to dictate the slow but steady weakening of the trade union movement? Confidence in the future of the union movement doesn't come from pamphlets or speeches but the actual conditions of workers. It is reflected differently from in the past but the insecurity and anxiety of workers, at every level and section of the economy, is as great today as it has ever been. In this global and unregulated economy the pressure to compete seeps relentlessly into every workplace. The power of the employer in these ultra competitive markets puts every worker at a disadvantage. The economy itself is developing into a top heavy 'hour glass' with a group doing very well at the top but trapping many in a cycle of low wage and low quality of life at the bottom. The stress of life for workers and their families among this group is growing. For them opportunities to advance are diminishing while at the same time the demand for the trappings of a consumerised society means they end up working all hours to ensure their children have the right clothes.

Our beginnings as a mass movement started as a reaction to what was deemed by our 'betters' to be our lot and the inescapable consequence of economic development. We just have to peruse the contemporary media to see those same views echoed by the transnational corporations and their neoliberal apologists today. It doesn't matter whether you're a palm oil worker on a plantation in Indonesia, a car worker in Coventry, or a white collar worker seeing their job being outsourced to India, being sacked is the same in any language or culture. Yet trade unionists exist to demonstrate that all markets are artificial constructs and can be bent to help develop the good society rather than be allowed to shatter ambition and sunder aspiration and replace it with despair and hopelessness.

But it is not just a defensive agenda that can shape a new unionism – there is the hope of a ‘good work’ agenda too. The shift away from mass production, which many trade union structures are based on, to increased localisation of production and service delivery opens up the potential for workers to ‘give their labour’ and contribute in more meaningful ways. People don’t just want to be cogs in a business wheel but want the opportunity to be creative at work, to add real value. Companies and organisations need the latent potential of all their employees to help make them more enterprising. Concepts such as greater economic citizenship, as well as training and career guidance, unlock this potential by allowing workers to shape their working environment. Workers know best how to make improvements and revolutionise working processes – they need the structures and freedom to do this. The challenge of the ‘good work’ agenda is another that the union movement must rise to.

The response of our founding generations was to create a counter culture that centred on community, care and collective action. The friendly societies, the co-operative movement, funeral funds and sick societies were all the manifestation of the conviction that there was another way – that the consequences of the market weren’t inevitable. Indeed, after a century of mass centralisation of production we are returning to many of the more localised and specialist features of the economy that gave rise to the early self-organising principles of the movement. There is the opportunity to ‘go back to our future’ in a world where people can and will be able to take control of their own lives, but only if unions escape the mass, deferential era of the past.

The self-help organisations of the past valued dignity and understood respect and accepted that everyone had a role to play, to be included rather than excluded. We now have a similar opportunity. We are presently experiencing the ideal environment for our values to be restated, reconfirmed and recognised as being as relevant now as they were then. We also have the advantage of being a more literate and learned movement with a huge range of resources, technical, intellectual and presentational skills and knowledge. Our potential to be more authoritatively assertive in our leadership and ability to comment on contemporary society is enormous. People are desperate for direction on how to wring a better and improving quality of life out of this disjointed society, which puts profits and consumerism above life, leisure and love, and I believe that a reinvigorated

trade union movement can be a major part of the answer.

What will kill the movement off is a reluctance to change by seeing change as any enemy of our values rather than the means to ensure that our goals of liberty, equality and solidarity thrive in the workplace and beyond in this century as they did in the last. The rest of this pamphlet suggests some of the ways the union movement can be renewed to face the threats and opportunities set out above.

Part II: Platforms for union renewal

Will Thorne, the founder of the union that became the GMB, was an economic migrant. He walked from Birmingham to London to seek a better future for himself and his family. Will Thorne, Ben Tillett, Tom Mann, John Burns, Eleanor Marx and others were inspirational organisers who found common purpose and started to build on the existing working-class culture by agitating among and in the community. They worked within the contemporary and prevailing social and economic structures. Their task was to convince working people that they had the power to fight back if they could find the courage to combine forces. They had to inspire and lead and they did a bloody good job and generations of workers, including this one, owe them and their contemporaries a great debt of gratitude.

These organisers built general trade unionism from the bottom with nothing but their vision about what could be, fuelled by their application and conviction that it could only be achieved by organising. They opened up trade unions to the mass of working people against all the odds, in spite of the opposition of the contemporary trade union establishment and the employers, not to mention the political establishment of the most powerful nation state that the world had ever seen, Victorian Britain. Their efforts and achievements remain an inspiration to those who seek to build a more dynamic and brighter future by rediscovering the imperative and reinvigorating zeal of organising that is the essence of trade unionism and which transports our message. And that message has as much relevance and resonance today as it had in the 1890s, if not more so.

We have to recognise that our national structures are no longer as relevant to our members’ lives as they

once were. In the days of tripartism and comprehensive national collective wage bargaining, national office played an essential role. That's no longer the case. This provides us with the opportunity to deconstruct the 'head office' model and strip it down to effective and efficient support for essential leadership and strategic roles. In every aspect of our lives the 'national', while still relevant, is becoming less so as it's being squeezed by the 'global' at one end and the 'local' at the other. Therefore we have to reflect that in our structures and our understanding of the continuing fundamental role we can play in society. Our resources have to go two ways: some down to local organising and some up to global organising.

Unions in the workplace

To get back to organising trade unions have to invest more trust and confidence in local activists and activism. Many unions will tolerate local initiatives as long as they don't have a price tag and they have control over them. Many regional structures don't necessarily provide the freedom of activity that is required to release the latent power and potential of local activism. An institutionalised structure's main purpose is to command and control the membership. There may be a rule book adherence to membership democracy but to be effective this has to be accompanied by an ideological and organisational desire to realise the latent power contained within the membership. Trade union leadership is not about being in a position of power, it's about empowering and inspiring the membership to harness the power of collectivism and community action. Trade unions grew strong because of membership ownership and control, and because they were close to their unions not only organisationally but also by place. Resources need to flow back to the roots to revitalise and allow collective endeavour to flourish on behalf of working people.

Refocusing our organisational structures under the authority and legitimacy of a move back to organising priorities in our communities would of necessity have to be accompanied by accountability and monitoring. Local organisation would have to have a benchmark to measure up against before appropriate resources are made available. Once agreed, a definitive organising contract between the union and the membership with aims and objectives should come into play. The most effective democratic trade union structures are those centred on the workplace, where active engagement is employed out of a combination

of self-interest and accessibility. I do not believe that whatever structure that might be developed there would be an explosion of democratic activity, but there would be more involvement and the development of a stronger feeling of ownership and engagement in a move to more workplace focus. Self-interest and collective interest are not mutually exclusive. People wouldn't join trade unions if there was nothing in it for them but they see that being part of a collective at work is in their self-interest. It follows that the closer trade union governance is to the workplace and to the members the stronger trade union organisation is and the more likely that more members would become engaged.

Where possible all governance and decision making should be as close to the workplace membership as is practical. Accessibility is the key. Members shouldn't have to overcome barriers to prove their democratic credentials in order to gain involvement in the governance of their own organisations. To avoid doubt, let me be clear. However open a structure is, it is nearly always a minority of its membership who take responsibility for its operation. That is my direct experience after a lifetime of activity in the voluntary sector. The key determinant of democratic legitimacy is the size of the minority and the fact that everyone gets a real opportunity to become involved. In turn a larger proportion of the minority can reflect the make-up and wider views of a membership much more effectively than any clique.

Our workplace structures should be as flexible as possible in order to reflect the different methods of work organisation, production and service delivery in our constantly evolving economy. Members could be given choices about the shape of union structures within their workplaces or companies. That way we could mirror our members' everyday employment environment. Reflecting these structures doesn't mean that we necessarily agree with them, but it may help our workplace organisation become more effective and relevant to the workers who inhabit them.

Equally we could offer membership more closely tailored to individual needs or wishes. When other membership-based organisations such as roadside rescue companies recruit, they often offer a menu to choose from to suit the potential member.

In order to reinforce the sense of collective interest employees in large companies could be put in membership silos. These 'national branches' could have their local workplace organisation made a part of

a national 'silo' and have dedicated representative and negotiating functions. A proportion of membership income would be allocated for organising. If the members wanted they could re-brand their organisation, for example GMB Asda. Workplace branch meetings should be as localised as possible at department or shift location and operate on the basis of 'open forums' so that we start to move away from the paralysis that procedure engenders and invite involvement and engagement. For those in small workplaces or with a scattered membership, different strategies have to be applied. For this to happen structures have to be flexible in order to meet the needs and wishes of the membership and not for the interests of the membership to be made to bend to the needs of the institution. If we are successful in devolving resources and organising for local community-based activity (and therefore growing power) we will open up to people their ability to effect change.

Thousands of small victories represent incremental change but as importantly they also provide practical demonstrations to people that collective action can be effective in and outside the workplace and this realisation develops their political awareness. This would also be the route for making a contribution to the development of active popular support for progressive left policies and making the stand against corporate power and state indifference, which needs to happen if we are to redirect our society with an informed, politicised and empowered civic movement.

We have a great story to tell. The trade union movement is a living testimony to the power and effectiveness of collectivism. We should use collectivism as the narrative for empowerment and change. This is the stuff of raw politics. It isn't complex. It is rarely dramatic. It is hard work based on effective, resourced, bottom up organising informed by a passion for social and economic justice.

Unions in the community

Localising our organisational structures would offer the opportunity to review the way we organise in our communities. 'Community' is a word very much in vogue and people have strong and varied ideas on what it means. I am not about to add to the debate other than to say that its best left to the people in the community you want to organise to decide their own priorities. That would require us to be more imaginative and flexible in structural and organisational responses.

One of the options is to create an organising and communications centre in the place of a traditional branch or trade union office. This type of centre would provide the traditional trade union servicing and employment advice. But it could also choose to provide learning and communication resources, tax and benefit advice, occupational health monitoring and healthy living advice. It could let space to local authority services giving housing advice and to community groups. It might choose to set up a nursery for working parents or go into partnership with trade-union-friendly legal firms. The possibilities are endless but with the local trade union and community activists leading we can be confident that whatever service is provided for or housed in the centre it would be what that particular community identified as a need.

In return trade unions would achieve credibility, added authority within the community and ready access to the community network. The 'bush telegraph' would keep trade unions informed about the problems the community experience not least in unorganised workplaces. Trade unions would have to continue to earn support and respect but they would have a location, role and 'place' in their community; in time people would turn to 'their' union, rooted in their organisation, their daily experiences and their specific culture, and then we would get the chance for our new beginning. This twin track approach would enable distinct but not separate roles, in the workplace and the community, made possible by the discipline and resources generated by organising and informed by collectivism and care for each other.

I know that various community initiatives and many activists in union branches and centres for unemployed workers are attempting to provide what their communities need but are constrained because many simply don't have the influence or resources to develop. The creation of well-resourced organising and communication centres would enable a cross-fertilisation of ideas and experience as well as bring mutual support and strengthen democratic



engagement. This kind of model might also offer public sector trade union branches, which already have vibrant and dynamic workplace organisation, the opportunity to expand their organisation into their communities. Unions in different communities may want to develop their own local structures specific to their particular circumstances. Flexibility and the ability to respond to different needs are essential to a responsive and democratic organisation.

Unions in the global economy

Historically trade unions followed the development of industry and the economy. We began by organising in the villages and the towns, then regionally and finally nationally, following the development of the companies or industries whose employees we organised. We learnt from bitter experience that having any unorganised workplace in a company invited the employer to divide and rule and that the way forward was to get all the workers to recognise collectivism and solidarity as the only effective response. As capitalism developed and employers acquired more surplus, companies broke through the nation state boundaries and went international while we remained at home. We now have a lot of catching up to do.

As an internationalist movement informed by collectivist humanitarian values, there is much communication and the occasional opportunity to take solidarity action in support of brothers and sisters in another country. However, international co-operation centres mostly around political and rather than organising activity. Governments have long recognised the limits of the nation state and that we have been living in a changed world, and as a consequence ceded authority to international and global bodies – the European Union and the United Nations are but two examples.

We in the trade union movement have not followed the developments in international political relations and corporate behaviour and structures as closely as we might have done. We are of course an internationalist movement and solidarity is at the core of our purpose. However, solidarity is but the midwife of organisation and organisation is the only path to power and justice for workers. And organisation requires resources. Trade unions are as reluctant to cede authority as most other organisations are, and they are very reluctant to apportion resources to global organising. But if we are to establish an effective international organising

strategy we have to recognise the need to develop to the next level, just as our local trade unions recognised the need to become regional and our regional unions became national over a hundred years ago. This is just another step, albeit delayed, in that process – but it's a step we must take if we want the power to challenge the transnational corporations.

Derek Simpson of Amicus has begun to develop a vision of a pan European union that would ignore national boundaries and sees this as part of a necessary response to globalisation. Amicus has also signed international strategic alliance agreements with other unions to provide more effective protection and solidarity action against global corporations. Global organising requires the power to initiate action in workplaces in different countries to secure acceptable terms and conditions for workers who share the same employer, as well as to have any chance at all of defending jobs inside the transnational corporations. There are some good examples of effective international action. The TGWU worked with the American Service Employees Union (SEIU) to improve workplace standards, training and employee development in the First Group Bus Service in the UK and the USA. The campaign 'Driving up Standards' joined 26,000 UK employees with their US counterparts to assist them to win recognition in the US. International organising requires time, effort and resources but should become a central and complementary strategy to our efforts at local organising. The local and the international arenas are equally important to us to demonstrate effectiveness if we are to help people gain control of their, jobs, lives and environments. Whatever the challenges we should bear in mind that what we should be seeking to do is simply to extend our collectivist principles.

The International Trade Union Federations (now more commonly referred to as Global Union Federations or GUFs) are discussing with their affiliates and among themselves how they can work together globally for the benefit of working people throughout the world. The IUF has brought together a number of its affiliates who are working collectively to organise the major contract catering companies. This initiative is unique not least in that each of the unions involved (from Australia, Canada, Germany, Ireland, Spain, the UK and USA) have signed an agreement that commits them to paying 20 per cent of each newly recruited members' union contribution back into an international organising fund to maintain an income stream to take this initiative into other countries. It is too early to say whether this will be

successful but it illustrates the fact that the international movement understands that if it is to challenge the power of the transnational corporations it can only do so by assisting affiliate unions to expand their national organising capacity through international co-operation. GUFs are discussing with each other what strategies they can adopt to enable them to assist organising in countries with traditions, economies and cultures as different as Indonesia and the USA. The success of any of these initiatives depends on resources, and national unions that recognise this are helping fund work which they believe to be crucial to the future of trade unions everywhere. If international organising is to be able to help grow national unions, more resources will have to be released either by unions taking their own initiatives or by them increasing their funding to their respective GUFs.

If they are the levels at which unions must effectively organise, what is the new union agenda they must fight on?

Part III: A new union agenda

Trade unions are a force for good in society and have been ever since those first courageous individuals sought to challenge the power of the employer by combining into groups. Throughout our tremendous history we have been at the forefront of every major progressive social, economic and political advance right up to the present day. We have developed leaders who have gone on to serve at every level of community and political organisation from parish council to the cabinet and all points in between. We have provided opportunities for education and enlightenment for working people from the days of the socialist cycling clubs to the Workers' Education Association (WEA) and the TUC postal courses and today's learning reps. We are centred on the most graphic manifestation of active citizenship – voluntarism. We are the biggest voluntary organisation in the country. We are one of the most enduring and successful institutions in the history of Britain. We have been central to the formation of a democratic society, the welfare state, universal health care and education. When the state belatedly gave us a legal status under the Health and Safety at Work Act, we delivered. Trade union safety reps have reduced fatalities and saved countless people from serious accidents and disease – so many its impossible to quantify.

By doing so our representatives continue to make a massive contribution to GDP and save the NHS and the benefits system billions of pounds and all at no cost to the state. This is a collective service provided for the good of all and delivered by a committed volunteer force. Through trade union legal provision we have provided a service to millions of citizens, which many could not have afforded, again at no cost to the state. Our trade union education provision has opened access to education, learning and development to hundreds of thousands of working people.

Our movement is founded and dependent on the army of volunteers that the media traditionally sneers at – workplace reps. All workplace reps – shop stewards, safety reps and learning reps – give of their time freely without material reward to provide the interface between the employed and the employers and their agents. Thanks to their daily efforts 99 per cent of all workplace problems are resolved before they are given breath. For all their efforts these many thousands of workplace leaders do not receive nor seek recognition or reward. They do it because of a sense of duty and because it is the right thing to do. Our society has yet to recognise what a massive contribution these men and women make to our country's well-being. Many trade union members do, however, and that is why they identify not with their union but with their workplace reps, who are the first people they'll turn to for advice and support. These workplace leaders are the people who give life and credibility to our movement and their voluntarism is the core of our collective strength. They are the ones who are delivering on our prime purpose. We must redouble our efforts in the support, identification, training and development of workplace leaders so that we continue to build a corps of informed, confident and competent workplace representatives. It follows therefore that we should focus an increasing proportion of our resources on these leaders and workplaces. Maybe we should do more work to integrate the efforts of health and safety reps, stewards and learning reps and try and build them into more effective workplace union teams in order to maximise their efforts and leadership. We should also seek ways to direct this invaluable source of collectivism and duty into the communities where we are largely anonymous. This represents another major challenge for the present generation of trade unionists.

If we are to grow stronger then we have to have the courage to break out of our self-imposed traditional boundaries and take trade unionism to a new level.

We have to migrate towards developing a coherent proactive political strategy that confronts and articulates the anxieties about the big questions that require practical responses, which conventional politics and politicians cannot or do not want to face.

The environment

The environment should be at the top of this list. The trade union movement took root in a much simpler society. The transition from an agrarian economy to an early industrial one was one in which humankind was either struggling against or harnessing the elements in a largely sustainable use of resources. The accumulation of capital generated by wool production following the Enclosure Acts was the catalyst for the industrial revolution to go full steam ahead. The industrial revolution witnessed the beginning of the unsustainable exploitation of resources. Charcoal, a sustainable resource, was replaced by coal. Extracting coal from underground was to become the enduring symbol of humankind pitted against the natural world in an alien environment and marked the beginning of the unsustainable economy.

It was however still largely a time of innocence of human endeavour. Britain was still overwhelmingly rural, there remained a balance between people and the environment and there was still a rhythm to life dictated by the seasons. Any adverse effects were local and science had little awareness of the consequences of industrialisation. It was not until many decades later into this revolution that was to change the world that concerns began to develop. The early unions came into being in response to the exploitation of labour on the grand scale that capitalism demanded and had no concerns other than to obtain dignity and justice for workers. There are now other pressing collective concerns and the environment should certainly be a top priority for all of us in the movement.

To its credit the leadership of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) has been consistent in its advocacy of a balanced sustainable energy policy ranging from investment in clean coal technology to renewables. A coherent sustainable national energy policy can only be achieved by a government that recognises, understands and is committed to a sustainable economy. Commonsense demands that this must involve clean coal energy. We have enormous reserves of coal, which would help us achieve self-sufficiency in energy. We have the technology to develop and deliver clean coal energy

and export that technology to China and India, which in turn would make a tremendous contribution to addressing global environmental concerns. We should push for a solar panel on every roof, insulation in every wall, the collection, storage and use of grey water, local energy generating schemes and a compost container on every street corner. We have to use our leadership and help initiate a debate about the need to reduce consumerism and energy consumption, and popularise and enable all forms of recycling. Equally we could promote more labour intensive organic farming and encourage people to consume regionally produced food in season. This would increase domestic agricultural production and help to stimulate the rural economy – and we should push for improved conditions for agricultural workers within it. We should build popular support around the rail and transport unions' campaign for a massive increase in investment in the rail network, an increase in the frequency, security and staffing of services, the integration of rail services with bus and tram development, and a lower and more accessible fare structure.

We should build alliances with the proponents of carbon neutral and energy efficient house building and add them to our coalition with Defend Council Housing, and strengthen the case for the building of social housing under democratic control. This would make council housing an exemplar for the industry as well as providing sustainable housing stock.

Unions are involved in several initiatives on the environment, from the Trade Union Sustainable Development Advisory Committee to Unison's work with the New Economics Foundation on sustainable communities. However, as with much of our work we lack a narrative in which to present and communicate these endeavours. We have to convince people that the power of the transnationals and the reach of corporations into every aspect of our lives is not inevitable and can be regulated and controlled and that human priorities take precedence over the market. These are just a few areas that would generate masses of jobs while trying to deal with the real danger of the environmental crisis.

Social justice

Most of this debate is avoided by politicians as it would require the use of tax. We need to achieve the impossible and rehabilitate tax as the citizens' contribution to a safe, sustainable, just and content society. Tax giving should be portrayed as an

expression of self-esteem as well as self-interest. An ability to contribute should be recognised as the act of a good citizen attracting credit. Instead of measuring success by the level of income someone earns, it should be measured by the proportion of income that person contributes towards developing a safer, more efficient, sustainable and just community.

This could be part of a narrative that we in the movement could articulate by concentrating on the foundation stones of a fair society: the adequate provision of housing, transport, the utilities, education and health, enveloped in a sustainable economy and environment and anchored in a participative and responsive democracy under the control and direction of the people. The Labour Party has never been in more need of a dynamic, energised and intellectually confident trade union movement to carry this message. It should not be forgotten that the trade unions saw off the Social Democratic Party and kept the party alive during the wilderness years of 1979–1997, when it would have otherwise collapsed. However, although we proved our worth as defenders of the Labour faith and nursed the party through its sickness, we failed to provide leadership and direct it with new ideas when it returned to government. We worked to an agenda centred on demands and although those demands were fundamentally important we didn't supplement them with ideas and a vision of what could be. We identified what we were against and had only a narrow narrative of what we were for. As the Labour Party begins to flounder again we have the opportunity to rectify that omission and forge a stronger relationship based on the simple but firm ground of increasing democratic control of every aspect of our lives.

We should guide the Labour Party away from the politics of the soundbite, the illusion of targets and the con of commissions and task forces and toward the politics of the concrete. We should direct it away from a government that idolises the private sector and puts its energy, resources, determination and commitment into war towards one whose outcomes are recognised as being for the benefit of all.

We have remained loyal to our founding principle of solidarity, our commitment to collectivism that finds

its expression in concern and care for all those who suffer any disadvantage. To us solidarity in the fight for justice is unconditional, the call to arms that is always answered. We recognise this as a moral code that is based on our common humanity and concerns, which enables us to reach common conclusions. This should be our agenda. The party doesn't need to keep seeking a new agenda. We've already got one and it is enduring, but in order to deliver that agenda we need to be strong and growing and able to build effective coalitions to champion it.

An expanding agenda

The bulk of the UK trade union movement was built on the consequences of the industrial revolution and the fact that this island became the workshop of the world. With globalisation and the continuing development of Brazil, Russia, India and China (BRIC), the world is now the workshop. In acknowledging that fact we also have to be honest about the circumstances in which we can protect jobs and communities and those where we can't. We need to move away from purely reactive responses and toward more proactive ones. This will be a difficult and challenging process. Being reactive means that in protesting redundancies and closures we always command the moral high ground, and rightly so. But more often than not we and the people we are defending lose. We should also consider the harder option and accept that with the rate of innovation in every scientific, engineering and technological field, the ever-changing patterns of consumer behaviour and the pace of economic development, we will be constantly faced with changes that will result in job loss and shift. Rather than remain the irreproachable gallant losers we may have to show more leadership. To make that reality more palatable we have to be ready to identify and promote alternative tactics and policies. Would we not serve our members better by examining how we can best assist in creating jobs while at the same time identifying policies that would need us to be more proactive in a wider political agenda?

We could offer the government, academia and business an opportunity to join us in developing an employment forecast facility that would serve as an early warning system to job threats as well as identifying future job growth prospects. At present



“Many of today’s great-grandparents are amazed at the levels of affluence experienced by their grandchildren and great-grandchildren”

when jobs are lost existing state resources are deployed on launching lifeboats to rescue the distressed, when we should be building new vessels of opportunity. We should be proactive in making recommendations to government for intervention in training provision, research and development and providing wider and more accessible employment opportunities. More generous grants and tax breaks should be made available to stimulate growth in new and developing sectors to achieve economies of scale and make new products more affordable. Plans should be put in place so those workers who are at risk of losing jobs experience as smooth a transition as possible into new employment.

This would necessitate government recognising that the hands-off approach to the economy is no longer sensible in the real world and that a responsible government would enable the state to intervene in the interests of the well-being of its citizens. Politicians won't take a blind bit of notice of any ideas or demands unless we have the power and authority to go beyond the current limit of maybe having a say in who the next leader of the Labour Party might be. The active support and involvement of thousands of communities which we would be actively organising around the country would provide a power base that would solicit an altogether different response. Growing organising power would mean that rather than traipsing to No.10 for another set piece, the politicians would have to court an energised and effective trade union and community movement.

Never in our history have so many people in Britain been so materially well off. Many of today's great-grandparents are amazed at the levels of affluence experienced by their grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Our founders' immediate policy objectives weren't hard to define: shorter working hours, higher wages, the relief of poverty, improved education and health, safer workplaces, affordable housing and so on – and they remain central to our purpose. However, with increasing affluence and the satisfaction of basic human needs and aspirations many people are now trying to look beyond materialism and are opening up another battleground between labour and capital.

People at work want more control over their lives. Co-operating with capital is a means to an end for them and conflict at work is inevitable when they exert that desire for control. A recent example was the 2003 Gate Gourmet dispute when the GMB, TGWU and Amicus took up the cudgels on behalf of a largely

female workforce and took action against proposals that would interfere with family and home life. Time is the new money and contentment is the new ambition for many. People at work are developing their own collective bargaining agenda and ultimately it poses a challenge to deferred gratification in post-industrial economic development. If not now when? is the question in many people's minds.

Many workers now want the choice about work-life balance, about working not just to live but also to find satisfaction, happiness and earn self-esteem. Once the basics of life – food, shelter, health and safety – have been secured, people's aspirations move on and they want better education, improved housing, and more time to think and appreciate life. At this stage of our economic development there is evidence that those sections of the population who have reached that level are now seeking a better balance between the need to earn and the desire to enjoy. That enjoyment can take many forms, for example spending more time relaxing with loved ones, being involved in sport and leisure, enjoying the arts, participating in education for education's sake or travelling. This is not true of the many who are struggling to keep family and home together and who are up against the odds, but it demonstrates that the experience of working people is wide and varied and we need an action agenda that covers the concerns of all. For many the size of the wage packet is not the be all and end all it once was.

Our ever-changing society means that the workplace is fast taking second place to the living space. Working people's lives used to revolve solely around the workplace but now they spin in ever-increasing concentric circles. Rather than get giddy and left behind we have to rotate with them. There is still a huge democratic deficit on the issue of workers' control over their work. In twenty-first-century Britain workers in every sector and at all levels are still generally considered to be too untrustworthy to get on with their work without high levels of supervision. The command and control ethos in the average British workplace is redolent of the traditional military chain of command. 'Lions led by donkeys' may be too pejorative a metaphor, but too many workers experience resentment and frustration at unnecessary supervision and lack of opportunities to put their ideas into practice. The simple fact is that people like to be left alone to get on with their work. The collective common interest exerts a powerful peer group pressure for everyone to make a fair contribution and not swing the lead.

Unfortunately we have virtually no input into the processes that dominate a third of our lives. This is still the case although numerous studies and our own collective history and experience have shown that if we want to improve productivity, efficiency and service provision then investing in the education, training and development of employees and giving them more responsibility, control and self-management at work will make them more fulfilled. They will then produce the goods more efficiently. There is an enormous amount of untapped creative intelligence within every workplace. Heavy-handed management methods lead workers gradually to withdraw their use of creative intelligence, their goodwill and their co-operation. All of which has an adverse effect on productivity.

The nature of work is a political issue and we need to put the whole question of democracy at work centre stage of our policy programme. As citizens we want to be empowered in our neighbourhoods and communities and we want to carry that same democratic right into our workplaces. This I believe is a contemporary issue not least because of the constant technological developments seeking to remove the 'human' aspect of work. Whether you are a supermarket worker, middle manager, cleaner or carpenter you seek more control over your work. The more control, the more self-esteem and satisfaction and the greater the efficiency and productivity. Those societies who strive to democratise the workplace will ultimately achieve better economic performance and social cohesion.

Local organising and coalition building

Single issue pressure groups weren't as common during the creation and growth of general unionism. Today's trade unions sometimes engage with or support the work of pressure groups but usually this is in areas where trade unions believe that the pressure group in question has more expertise or it is politically expedient to engage with it, albeit temporarily. It is my view that it would help trade union organising if trade unions were to build more coalitions with groups that share our values of collectivism for the common good. This would be a very fruitful two-way street – unions using their political influence and their resources to assist groups in the community who are fighting back on behalf of the people they wish to organise in the workplace.

This is especially true of the millions of unorganised workers in the service sector, many of whom have no

experience or knowledge of the benefits of trade unionism. To be an effective power in the land trade unions can no longer stand isolated with declining power bases in diminishing workplaces.

I do not for one minute advocate the slightest move away from the essential trade union emphasis on maintaining and building workplace organisation, which would be the last redoubt in the face of any future anti-democratic coalition of state and corporate power. However, in order to maintain and build on the trade union bulwark for democracy, we need to seek alliances with those that advocate on behalf of the disenfranchised, the powerless, the dispossessed and the oppressed in favour of efforts towards equality and greater quality of life for all of our citizens wherever they live and whoever they work for and in whatever circumstances. This would require trade unions to accept that in some circumstances we should provide resources and share, and sometimes cede, authority in some areas of activity in recognition that other organisations are better structured and equipped to operate in the community than we are. That is the essence of coalition building – enacting tactical decisions to support the strategic objective of growing power on behalf of working people.

We have to break out of our remaining strongholds and build alliances before we become too weak because of lack of effective organising. This would need trade unions to review and renew our purpose, to become lean organising machines and to move away from unnecessary and ineffective structures – to stop looking inwards, getting excited and mesmerised by internal institutional issues while the world passes us by. We should be looking outwards towards an exciting, demanding and enthralling new chapter that would make our founders proud.

A good example of effective coalition building is the Citizens Organising Foundation (COF), which joined with unions and community groups in various campaigns through its London Citizens Network (LCN). COF is in the process of building networks in a number of cities, but it started in east London through the establishment of The East London Communities Organisation (TELCO) and developed the 'Living Wage' campaign. The 'Living Wage' is presently set at £7.05 per hour and represents a level of pay and conditions that would enable a full-time worker living in London to provide for themselves and their family. The TELCO campaign for cleaners in east London hospitals led Unison to join forces with TELCO.

The coalition helped bring about an increase in wages from £5 per hour in 2003 to £7.48 per hour in 2006. The campaign included a mobilising march of 600 local people in support of 'their' cleaners. In Canary Wharf and the City of London, London Citizens linked up with the TGWU and as a result cleaners at Barclays, Deutsche Bank, HSBC, KPMG, Lehman Brothers, Lovells, Morgan Stanley, PricewaterhouseCoopers and the Royal Bank of Scotland all received wage increases. Most of them got the 'Living Wage', as well as 28 days' paid holiday. Organising is continuing until these workers receive full sick pay.

The Association of University Teachers (AUT) branch at Queen Mary College joined with TELCO with support from Unison, the student union and the Geography Department to campaign on behalf of the cleaning staff. The campaign included a video letter, a march and a demonstration to lobby the College Council, which resulted in talks being held leading to an agreement to work toward the 'Living Wage' by the end of 2007. London Citizens has now established 'assemblies' in south and west London as well as Birmingham. For a small, under-resourced organisation they certainly punch above their weight.

These union and community coalitions have made a real difference to workers' lives, resulting in higher wages, better conditions and dignity and respect at work. This has been achieved with fewer resources than a traditional trade union approach would take. The purpose, determination and dedication that London Citizens apply to their work is very impressive and produces resonance within the communities they assist to empower. They have credibility and relevance with some of the hard to reach workers we should be aspiring to organise.

Although this is only a small beginning, London Citizens and these unions have demonstrated the effectiveness and massive potential of trade union and community coalition building. The organisational governance of London Citizens is based on open and democratic assemblies. They are lean (too lean they might complain!), light and can respond quickly to opportunities and challenges. If the trade unions are the Heavy Armour, LCN and their like are the Light Infantry and we could do worse than be humble enough to understand what we can learn from them and from many other effective, small, community-based organisations and start building sustainable relationships for the benefit of workers and communities.

Another example of how a union can join with other organisations to defend and empower working people against corporate power and the indifference of politicians and the state has been set by the GMB.

The GMB joined up with Friends of the Earth, Banana Link, the New Economics Foundation, War on Want and the Small and Family Farming Alliance, among others in Tescopoly. This coalition alerts communities to the activities of the Tesco supermarket chain. One of the campaigns involved defending Queens Market in east London, which had been threatened with demolition to make way for yet another supermarket. A New Economics Foundation survey found that the market generated £9 million of food supply to the local community at half the price available in the supermarkets. The market not only provides an essential economic service to workers but is also an integral part of the community, so its survival was important to the whole community's quality of life.

So far in this pamphlet I have set out a case for change, the platforms on which we could organise and the responsibility of the movement to go beyond its members and address wider challenges. The final section explains how this might be achieved.

Part IV: A new union architecture

As long as there is strong workplace organisation and an informed and active membership governing and directing unions there will always be a strong trade union movement.

To ensure that we have a future based on our strengths we have to reduce the corporate structure of trade unions to the bare minimum commensurate with an efficient and functioning lay member democracy. We need to de-construct institutionalism and direct more resources towards the support of workplace reps and the development of workplace organisation and leaders and the millions of the unorganised.

Contrary to some views I believe that a practical, participative membership democracy is not incompatible with the centralised and efficient use of the resources generated and owned by the membership. I appreciate that every organisation, however small, needs a structure, but George

Woodcock's words still ring true: 'Structure is a function of purpose.' And whereas I have an idealistic objection to Robert Michels' 'Iron Law of Oligarchy' I recognise that it has an obvious rationality at its core. However, if an organisation that has become an institution starts failing then there is a need to readjust the emphasis back towards the ideological and organisational impetus that gave it birth and made it successful in the first place.

Trade unions have dealt with the acquisition and use of power on behalf of working people and the only source of that power and its legitimacy is mass membership of working people and real democratic accountability – not institutional self-interest. I refute the doomsayers' view that leadership among working people is diminishing. Every workplace has leaders and the challenge for an organising union is to identify, recruit and develop them. But the culture of institutionalism does not welcome new, unpredictable, independent and dynamic individuals. By definition leaders want to get things done and therefore represent a challenge to the status quo. They do not want to attend endless meetings and get bogged down by process. An organising union actively seeks and encourages leaders and their energy and clears away any obstacle that might impede them in their organising efforts.

Embracing new technology

Communications and information technology (CIT) makes a lot of our challenges easier to meet. We can use it to mobilise, organise, communicate, involve and educate our members, and to deal efficiently with money and resources. Many CIT savvy local activists have had their own branch websites for many years. Unison, the Communication Workers Union (CWU) and others are getting more of their branches online. We need to speed up development and use this capacity to its maximum. All unions could start by pooling members' email addresses and mobile phone numbers for the purpose of establishing a national database, via the TUC, which could grow into a powerful campaigning tool.

The employment profile of non-members is very varied. One category of non-member includes those who are self-employed or work in consultancy type employment. Workers in this group might be looking for professional support and advice on tax, insurance, contract law, as well as occupational health and safety and the other core trade union services of advocacy and representation. They may well be unaware of the

relevance and value of collectivism to their lives. The membership needs of this group are going to be different from those of others who are not trade union members. For example those working on short-term contracts or employed by agencies may well have numeracy and literacy difficulties or English as a second language. They are paid at or near the minimum wage, often have difficulties with housing and health, and require benefit advice. People in either of these groups may be portfolio working for completely different reasons.

I am not suggesting that these two scenarios reflect the experience of a majority of people at work in Britain today but they do illustrate that the 'one size fits all trade union membership' is not as relevant as it once was. The 'hour glass' analogy that some commentators have identified is illustrative of today's reality. The homogenous working class no longer exists. However, the vast majority of people at work share a community of needs in their daily efforts to wring a better standard of living for themselves and their families as well as economic and social justice from a society becoming increasingly centred on consumerism and the insatiable appetite of corporate profit. The future of our trade union movement depends on whether or not we can meet those needs. There could be a virtual branch for self-employed or contract-based members, which they could access through their membership.

The same process could be used in organising campaigns for those at the bottom of the economy. We have yet to realise comprehensively the potential of the ever-developing CIT. Many migrant workers are daily visitors to internet cafés and depend on email and the web for keeping in touch with their families and conducting their affairs. For much less than the price of bus fares to and from branch meetings members could have meaningful engagement with and ownership of the organisations they pay to maintain. The mobile phone is now the communication tool of first choice and text 'alerts' are a useful means to direct people to further information on websites, as the CWU is currently doing in its campaign against the privatisation of the Post Office. Union structures could apply a combination of both options and voting; people could be involved either in person or through the web.

There are some very good examples of this in the national and international movements. Labourstart has established itself as the premier international information and campaigning web-based organisation

for trade unions worldwide, and has volunteer contributors who write information articles about campaigns, struggles and developments. Trade unionists around the world provide their email addresses to keep informed. This large and developing web community can be activated within hours. The recent victory of security workers in Indonesia was helped enormously by the level of international trade union support. Included in that were the 6,400 emails from Labourstart subscribers.

Unions could start pooling members' email addresses and mobile numbers for the purpose of establishing a national database, which could grow into a powerful campaigning tool. There would be some objections and obstacles to setting up such a database but its very existence would draw voluntary responses from activists who would want to support it when they recognised its potential.

While union governance structures need to change radically so do the working environments of the staff and officer corps. Most full-time officers have a traditional office and a secretary. Many of them now have mobile phones – generally the most sophisticated piece of IT equipment available to them, although there are huge differences between trade unions, gender and generations. However, many officers have never had training and some have never had the opportunity to become administratively self-sufficient. A trade union structure based on workplace organisation and organising does not need traditional offices or daily access to secretaries.

Today's union payroll is bigger than it was in the 1970s yet it is not uncommon to hear complaints from full-time officers (FTOs) of being overburdened. The reason for this is that in the same period there has been a massive decline in the number of workplace reps and therefore FTOs have been pulled into workplaces to carry out what are essentially shop steward functions. The flow of resources to workplace organisation would enable stewards and other workplace leaders to provide more, if not all, of the servicing function. Most officers understand that where there is effective and efficient workplace organisation members receive a

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direct service and have little or no need to contact 'the office' or the officer. One of the objectives in releasing more resources to the workplace would be gradually to transfer servicing demands away from the officers to workplace leaders. The ever increasing numbers of trade union learning reps and workplace learning centres are constantly developing potential leaders among union membership.

Officers with more time and appropriate CIT support would find themselves able to become much more active in organising in non union sectors and companies. Many officers are not computer literate let alone comfortable with constantly expanding CIT capacity. Officers

equipped with satellite navigation, laptop or notebook, internet telephony and a mobile phone would be able to manage their duties much more effectively. More investment in CIT training should become a priority. Also CIT competent officers need a lot less administrative support and reliance on secretarial backup. In many cases officials who have a secretary have one because of their perceived status rather than because of any organisational necessity. Therefore assessment of need should be the criteria and those secretaries who are no longer required for administrative duties should be offered organiser training. During my time as an official many of the secretaries (all women) I came across had more knowledge and a greater empathy with the membership than some of the officers (mostly men).

The TUC trade union reps' email list (unionreps@tuc.bocc.co.uk) is a fine example of using CIT to provide a direct service to workplace reps. It informs and enables workplace leaders to share information, experiences and successful strategies at the touch of a button. If access is easy, people will get involved through self-interest. To develop that self-interest into an understanding of the prevailing power structures and concern for and on behalf of other members is part of the organising agenda and the process of political education. All papers, documents, decisions, balance sheets and accounts should be made available to the membership over the web. Openness and transparency should be the watchwords of any organisation that purports to have democracy as a core value. The era of the blog is with us and some

leaders are enthusiastically embracing this opportunity to keep the membership informed of their activities and what their union is up to. Billy Hayes of the CWU and Judy McKnight of Napo are two high-profile trade union bloggers who are using this new communication tool to help break down disengagement and distrust.

We should aim to increase our organising productivity and maximise our resources to support that same goal. Equally the work of former secretarial and support staff could be directed to frontline or workplace engagement, following appropriate training. The more committed and trained people there are in the field directed by a clear and unambiguous organising agenda the more able we will be to meet our challenges. If the officer corps were trained in CIT staffing levels and office space could be reduced at national, regional and local level. Offices could be sold and/or unused floor space could be leased. The first option would release more cash to help fund organisational changes and the second reduce operating costs.

Many union officers and staff were active members of their unions before they became full-time employees and probably were among the more vociferous members. Understandably the transition to employed status brings new responsibilities and undue interference from officers in the governance and deliberations of a union has to be avoided. However, there should be a space to provide opportunities for officers and staff to bring their creative intelligence to bear on contemporary issues and challenges within the movement without incurring the wrath of the leadership.

Many of these full timers have a lifetime's commitment to trade unionism and by dint of their role are closer to the membership than the leadership. Their collective experience and intelligence represents an enormous resource, which could be tapped more extensively.

Putting collectivism into practice

Because of the competitiveness inherent in the UK trade union movement we have never fully realised the benefits of effective institutional co-operation between unions. That has also been reflected in how we have used our resources and deployed our services. Competitiveness demands that each union claims to provide better services than other unions. This of course precludes unions co-operating to

provide the best services collectively. If we are to identify the resources we need to be radical, then we have to develop some basic housekeeping rules to get ourselves in order. All trade unions have to procure similar goods and services from stationery to carpets and from cars to computer systems.

We should pool our needs and form one procurement agency to buy on behalf of the whole movement. In time we could offer the service to other voluntary organisations, community groups and NGOs that shared our values. The enormous buying power of the agency would secure enormous savings, which could be used for our organisational objectives. Equally CIT hardware and systems could be standardised, which would assist communications and the exchange of information. The deals that could be made on internet telephony, mobile phones, BlackBerry devices, laptops and so on would assist the efficiency of the movement and would also aid the process of amalgamation if that was an organisational objective. I cannot see any good reason why we shouldn't start moving towards that goal. Equally all unions provide a similar range of services – legal, health and safety, research, pensions and so on – yet we have never combined to provide them centrally.

Trade unions are rightly proud of our legal service provision. This essential service could be combined, put out to tender and two or three trade-union-friendly large companies and/or a co-operative of smaller companies be selected to provide an even better and wider range of services for our members. The same could be done for pensions departments. The movement would have overall control of these services, which need not be located in London but based in the countries and regions of the UK.

The 'back office' operations of unions mirror each other – admin, computer, personnel, research and so on – and could also be shared and provided under a common agency. This could represent a further opportunity and role for the TUC. Again the objective would be to create better service provision and make operating cost savings. Clearly standardising all service provision throughout the movement is no small task and would take time, but if we are to establish organising as our prime objective then we have to realise the resources to do that. The price of membership in the UK has always been relatively cheap and our members have become accustomed to these levels of subscription. We should consider arriving at a common tariff of subscriptions and then increase it annually. This would be more

acceptable if we were able to provide better and wider services as a result.

Key to the purpose is the objective of reducing any operating costs that do not have an audit trail in order to develop our organisation as opposed to maintaining institutions. All the proposals I have outlined have the double attraction that not only do they reduce costs but they are also a practical manifestation of our collectivism.

Our sense of collectivism and solidarity and belief in progressive principles means we should consider a universal sliding scale of membership subscription similar to that which Unison operates. This sliding scale could be based on a percentage of income contained within a maximum and a minimum. Such a system would gel with our sense of fairness and would reflect the wide range of incomes among our members in our 'hour glass' economy.

Redesigning the architecture of the movement

If individual trade unions were to undergo transformation would they be any more successful in organising, growing and representing than other trade unions? This is where we have to face another challenge.

The British trade union movement is still locked in the deadly embrace of duplication and competition, which will slowly but surely deny us a future. The traditional response to failing trade unions and attempts to avoid duplication and competition is to amalgamate. Amalgamation clearly offers the opportunity to avoid duplication and competition among the merger partners, but the merged trade union still finds itself in the same competitive environment. Amalgamated trade unions often create a hybrid structure to satisfy institutional sensitivities of the partners, or the dominant partner imposes its structure and simply accommodates the incomer. What results is that two failing institutions have simply bolted together structures that are part and parcel of the reasons of failure.

I believe amalgamation can be a successful strategy but it has to be based on some clear preconditions:

- that there is a demonstrable benefit to the members
- that a new structure is developed that enables the new trade union to be fit for purpose

- that it is centred on workplace and community organising
- that it invests heavily in the identification and development of informed, competent and confident workplace leaders
- that it enables the resources of the union to be re-invested in organising and the members, not the institution
- that a substantial proportion of the operating budget is dedicated to organising
- that the union doesn't spend more than its income during a financial year.

There are other considerations but these represent some basic building blocks. The question of how the trade union movement is organised is fundamental to the question of whether we will be able to continue to be effective advocates on behalf of people at work in the twenty-first century. There is an enormous contradiction at the heart of the movement which questions a fundamental principle in which we all profess to believe: collectivism. I do not know of any trade unionist of any political persuasion that doesn't cherish our adherence to unity of endeavour. Yet we have allowed ourselves to be dogged from the very beginning by competition and this inherent contradiction has to be resolved if we are to grow stronger.

I believe this is part of the reason we are in decline – duplication of effort and waste of resources, poaching of members, mutual suspicion at every level, sometimes outright hostility. To what end? If competition has been instrumental to our decline could a renewed commitment to collectivism revitalise our vision and our purpose?

The response to our need to bring some order to our structure has been the process of amalgamation and transfers of engagements. Notwithstanding the fact that there have been mergers that have rationalised the architecture of the movement, for example Unison in creating a major public sector union, the fact of general decline in membership demonstrates that mergers on their own are just part of the answer. While they provide short- to medium-term strategies for two or three unions they do nothing to address the challenges facing the whole movement.

If we were to apply collectivism to the question of movement structure we might arrive at a very different solution. If we continue this wasteful process of competition it will continue to erode our resources and undermine the organisational and political effectiveness of the movement. We have a decision to make. We can either accept the basic concepts and values of capitalism – which is competition in an open market and devil take the hindmost – as a strategy to preserve individual institutional security, or we can abide by our originating values of co-operation and collectivism and face the organising challenge together by regulating our behaviour and putting the interests of working people above individual ambition and institutional self-interest.

Single union environments

In order to grow and prosper the movement should consider agreeing to work within distinct spheres of organisation and influence. In other words distinct categories of employment or economic sector could become the preserve of one or, by agreement, more unions. No-one should underestimate the enormous challenge that such a proposal might create but I believe the issue needs addressing as a matter of urgency.

My early experience as a young shop steward was on multi-union construction sites. As an official I was often involved in the same multi-union scenarios. Mostly there were good inter-union relationships and comradeship. However, having up to five officers from different unions at the negotiating table always struck me as being a nonsense. Thankfully those types of situations do not arise as often as they used to, but where there are two or more unions present in any workplace there is always a risk of duplication of resources at the very least, and outright hostility and institutional competition at worst. Working people want a strong, purposeful and professional union in their workplace. Most are not bothered what union is representing them, or what it is called so long as it is effective. If collectivism was to become our rediscovered guide we could work toward single trade union environments or SITUEs.

SITUEs would eliminate duplication and competition and allow unions to concentrate all their resources and energies on organising in their identified area of the economy without distraction. The SITUE structure, along with previous proposals for shared procurement, service delivery, back office functions

and so on, could provide the TUC with a supplemental but crucial role as a procurer, regulator and arbitrator. Such a role would enable the TUC to play an effective, proactive part in assisting all affiliates to organise and grow.

The TUC continues to play an important role as the authoritative voice of the British trade union movement, which draws strength from the fact that the TUC unites all affiliates under one non-sectarian umbrella. Unlike many other national movements it has no competitor institution. This is an enviable position and should not be under-valued or taken for granted. The TUC is also ideally placed to provide infrastructure support to affiliates to enable them to concentrate on organising, not least because it remains respected and trusted by affiliates large and small.

The new structure would require a central regulatory authority, developed under the authority of the TUC, which would examine the claims of unions to exclusivity in a particular area, make assessments and issue recommendations. It would in effect act as a clearing house. Prior to submission unions would be encouraged to 'swap' membership. For example two unions with local authority membership may agree to membership transfers between two local authorities, A and B. As a result one would gain exclusivity rights in A and the other in B and two SITUEs would be created. Such an arrangement would benefit all concerned and allow unhampered concentration in organising the non trade union employees in both authorities.

Similarly private sector unions could come to agreement, company by company or sector by sector, in order to concentrate their resources effectively. In some sectors of the economy some unions are stronger in different parts of the country and a similar understanding could take place to allow geographical SITUEs. Applications for SITUEs would be accompanied by medium- and long-term organising plans over a defined period. These plans would include appropriate costings and identified resources. On acceptance of the application the union would be granted free rein until the end of the defined period (say 2–3 years) and its performance would then be subject to review in order to establish whether organising targets were being achieved and if the members were getting good service. If it was apparent that this wasn't the case, the union would be given advice and support and the period would be extended in order to have the opportunity to improve or lose exclusivity.

Such a structure would provide the movement with a self-regulatory structure based on organisational outcomes while avoiding accusations of monopoly. If two or more unions believed it would best serve the interests of the membership and develop organising if only one union was operating within a company that had several locations, or indeed within an entire sector, they would need to take certain actions.

First they should establish whether the respective memberships would be agreeable to a SITUE. Next they would have to decide which union would remain and which would withdraw. This stage would only be achievable if the departing union was offered a similar set of circumstances elsewhere.

If all these conditions were met a SITUE would have been achieved. If however a union wanted to create a SITUE but couldn't get an incumbent union(s) to agree, they would have to take another route. They would need to develop an organising and strategy proposal and put it before the CRA. In this event any union(s) resisting the SITUE would need to put a counter proposal before the CRA to enable it to make an assessment and issue a ruling.

However I believe that in practice this proposed regulatory structure would open up so many opportunities that unions would make realistic assessments about their respective positions. Indeed in some (many?) cases unions would privately be pleased to divest themselves of minority membership responsibilities and be able to re-allocate resources. Therefore I believe very few cases would go forward for adjudication. As part of this process each union would also be required to identify sectors and employers with no, low or weak organisation and submit an organising plan. This would ensure two things: there would be a balance of rights and responsibilities; and the movement would begin to develop organising strategies for the whole of the economy, including those where we have thus far failed to make an impact.

There may be some circumstances where one union might want to agree to a SITUE but be concerned about a short- to medium-term reduction in membership income. In this eventuality a mechanism could be agreed whereby the departing union is guaranteed a level of income from the union in the SITUE – again this process would be overseen by the CRA.

A proposal for a structure for the implementation and regulation of a SITUE is given below. In all circumstances the process would have to be informed by two guiding principles. The collective interests of the membership where a SITUE is agreed and the collective benefit to the movement would need to take precedence over all other considerations.

If a SITUE is created existing membership of another union would not be a liability and would not be discouraged. However, by agreeing to a SITUE other unions would, de facto, undertake not to put time and resources into the SITUE unless it was for the purpose of individual representation of an existing member if so requested.

Over time the presence of other unions would reduce and disappear. In the circumstances where a majority of members declared for a SITUE it would be self-evident that it would be in the collective interest to transfer membership. Notwithstanding that, every consideration should be given to members who wish to retain their own union membership. Members transferring would not lose benefit rights and would have continuity of membership. If during a period of SITUE members became dissatisfied they would have access to internal union procedures. If they remain dissatisfied they would have recourse to the CRA if they had the support of at least 50 per cent of the total membership. They would have the right to state their case before the CRA and in that event the appellant membership would receive advice and administrative support from the CRA.

The TUC would be responsible for establishing the CRA. It would have two main functions. The primary one would be as the authoritative body responsible for directing, administering and authorising the process of change. The secondary one would be to adjudicate in the event of disputes. The TUC's CRA role would enable it to play an effective role in assisting all affiliates to organise and grow.

I believe that this proposal would enable the movement to make decisions about the effective rationalisation of resources, in order to focus on growing the movement through increasing the membership in organised areas as well as being able to organise better in companies and sectors of the economy where we are weak or non-existent.

Membership of the Full Council and Disputes panel **The CRA Full Council would be composed of:**

- the TUC General Secretary and an independent labour lawyer as joint chairs
- the TUC Executive Council
- labour lawyers, industrial relations academics, ACAS
- the Secretariat – provided by the TUC.

The Disputes Panel would be composed of:

- joint chairs
- three Executive Council members
- one labour lawyer, one industrial relations academic, one ACAS nominee
- the Secretariat.

Procedure

1. Unions would be invited to examine their areas of membership, identify their realistic prospects and make decisions about the transfers of membership that they consider would ultimately benefit the members and their organisational efficiency.

2. Members be consulted and balloted if necessary.

3. Unions would negotiate and if they come to agreement submit the transfers to the Full Council for approval and registration. The Secretariat would be available for advice to assist agreement if requested.

4. The Disputes Panel would be available to listen to claims for a SITUE in companies where unions have not been able to come to mutual agreement. The Council would have the authority to defer compliance with a Panel decision if a union was able to demonstrate that its immediate compliance would threaten its organisational stability.

5. An independent appeal system would be available, nominated from an approved panel.

6. In the event of a successful appeal the matter would be referred back to the Full Council with recommendations.

Conclusion

In this pamphlet I have put forward some ideas about how the movement could meet some of the challenges that face us. None of them are intended to be prescriptive and none of them are exclusive. They are intended to contribute to the debate that has to have as its outcome a stronger, more powerful and more effective movement.

I recognise that many innovative initiatives have and are being taken and that much hard work is going on at every level. I also recognise that leaders at every level rarely have the time to read, reflect, consider, develop and broadcast their own ideas on contemporary trade unionism. It is my contention that we remain strong but we are also failing and one of the reasons for that is because our efforts aren't collective efforts. They are efforts on behalf of individual trade unions and not on behalf of the movement.

For the trade union movement to grow we all need to grow together. Individual success won't protect and promote the interests of working people let alone the political power we need to mobilise on their behalf. If we ally a practical commitment to collectivism to an acceptance that our unions are a means to an end and not ends in themselves, then I believe the need to change our behaviour and structures becomes self-evident. The suggestions I have put forward are a combination of the practical and the philosophical. The practical ideas are simply designed to deliver the following outcomes:

- maximise the efficiency of service delivery
- provide more accessible and flexible engagement for members' activity in governance and the workplace
- provide stronger international structures designed to stand up against the transnational corporations
- provide more effective and enduring alliances with NGOs and civic and community groups
- release more resources for organising and growing the membership in every union
- build stronger workplace organisation
- construct a stronger political power base.

The philosophy underpinning these practical suggestions is simply one of collectivism and solidarity. I don't think that this constitutes a very radical agenda, rather it combines our founding principles with an acceptance that change is our constant companion. However, I do believe that we are at a watershed and we either recognise our responsibility to act or the movement will continue to weaken.

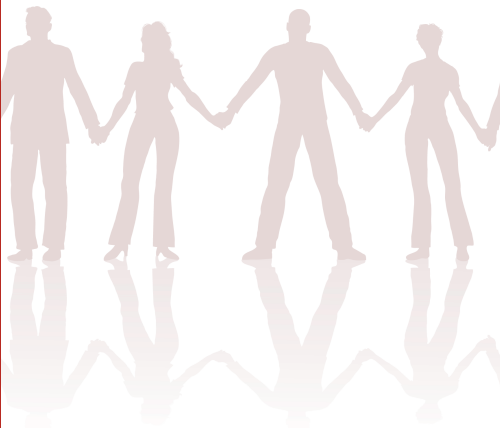
As no trade unionist wants the latter, the challenge for us all is clear. I look forward to a future that will witness a strong, energised, exciting and dynamic trade union movement, which continues to be an effective guardian for working people and the determined agent of social and political progress.

About the author

Kevin B. Curran has been active in the Trade Union Movement all his adult life and has represented and negotiated on behalf of working people at most levels from the shopfloor as a steward to the Warwick Agreement as a general secretary.

He is a committed European and Internationalist and now works for the International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers' Associations (IUF).

Kevin is 52 and has been married to June for 29 years; he has an adult son and daughter. He lists his interests as trees and wood, running and reading, 'allotmenting' Crystal Palace F.C. and enjoying the company of friends and family.



Useful contacts

Compass is an umbrella of organisations and individuals who believe in greater equality and democracy. Listed below are some of the organisations who have been involved with Compass or who think are operating in an interesting and complimentary space.

Active Citizens Transform (ACT)
info@actnetwork.org.uk / 020 7278 5788

Amicus
35 King Street, Covent Garden WC2E 8JG
/ amicus.theunion.org

Catalyst catalystforum.org.uk /
catalyst@catalystforum.org.uk / 020 7733 2111

Centre for Reform
cfr.org.uk / info@cfr.org.uk / 020 7631 3566

Citizen's Income Trust
www.citizensincome.org / info@citizensincome.org
/ 020 8305 1222

Citizens For Europe
new-politics.net/campaigns/ citizens-for-europe
/ james@new-politics.net / 020 7278 4443

Comprehensive Future
comprehensivefuture.fsnet.co.uk /
mtulloch@poptel.org

Co-operative Party
co-op-party.org.uk / p.hunt@party.coop
/ 020 7357 0230

CWU
cwu.org / info@cwu.org / 020 8971 7200

Demos
demos.co.uk / hello@demos.co.uk / 0845 4585 949

Electoral Reform Society
electoral-reform.org.uk / ers@reform.demon.co.uk
/ 020 7928 1622

Fabian Society
fabian-society.org.uk / info@fabian-society.org.uk
/ 020 7227 4900

Fawcett Society
fawcettsociety.org.uk / info@fawcettsociety.org.uk
/ 020 7253 2598

Foreign Policy Centre
fpc.org.uk / info@fpc.org.uk / 020 7388 6662

IPPR ippr.org / info@ippr.org / 020 7470 6100

Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust
jrrt.org.uk / info@jrrt.org.uk / 01904 625 744

Labour Party
labour.org.uk / info@new.labour.org.uk / 08705 900 200

Labour Students labourstudents.org.uk /
labourstudents@new.labour.org.uk / 020 7802 1234

Local Government Association
lga.gov.uk / info@lga.gov.uk / 020 7664 3000

Make Votes Count
makevotescount.org.uk / info@makevotescount.org.uk
/ 020 7928 2076

NUT nut.org.uk / 020 7388 6191

NEF neweconomics.org.uk / info@neweconomics.org
/ 020 7820 6300

New Local Government Network
nlgn.org.uk / info@nlgn.org.uk / 020 7357 0051

New Politics Network
new-politics.net / peter@new-politics.net /

New Statesman newstatesman.co.uk /
info@newstatesman.co.uk / 020 7730 3444

Opinion Leader Research
opinionleader.co.uk / enquiries@opinionleader.co.uk
/ 020 7861 3080

POWER Inquiry powerinquiry.org /
info@powerinquiry.org / 0845 345 5307

Progress progressives.org.uk /
office@progressives.org.uk / 020 7808 7780

Renewal renewal.org.uk / neal@renewal.org.uk

Save the Labour Party savethelabourparty.org /
gribo@onetel.com / 01254 388 474

SERA sera.org.uk / sera.office@btconnect.com /
020 7263 7389

Socialist Educational Association
socialisteducation.co.uk / mghorne@bigtoot.com

Social Market Foundation smf.co.uk /
020 7222 7060

Soundings lwbooks.co.uk/journals/soundings/
contents.html / jonathan@jrutherford.demon.co.uk /
020 8533 2506

TELCO telcocitizens.org.uk / neil.
jameson@londoncitizens.org.uk / 020 7375 1658

TUC
tuc.org.uk / 020 7636 4030

The Smith Institute smith-institute.org.uk /
info@smith-institute.org.uk / 020 7823 4240

Unions 21 unions21.org.uk /
info@unions21.org.uk / 020 7278 9944

Unison unison.org.uk / 0845 355 0845

About Compass

Compass is the new democratic left pressure group, whose goal is to both debate and develop the ideas for a more equal and democratic society, then campaign and organise to help ensure they become reality.

We organise regular events and conferences that provide real space to discuss policy, we produce thought provoking pamphlets and we encourage debate through online discussions on our website. We campaign, take positions and lead the debate on key issues facing the democratic left. We're developing a coherent and strong voice, for those that believe in greater equality and democracy as the means to achieve radical social change.

We are:

- An umbrella grouping of the progressive left whose sum is greater than its parts.
- A strategic political voice – unlike thinktanks and single issue pressure groups Compass can and must develop a politically coherent position based on the values of equality and democracy.
- An organising force – Compass recognises that ideas need to be organised for and will seek to recruit, mobilise and encourage to be active, a membership across the UK to work in pursuit of greater equality and democracy.
- A pressure group focussed on changing Labour – but recognises that energy and ideas can come from outside the party, not least the 200,000 who have left since 1997.

The central belief of Compass is that things will only change when people believe they can and must make a difference themselves. In the words of Gandhi

'Be the Change You Wish to See in the World'

compass
DIRECTION FOR THE
DEMOCRATIC LEFT

Compass
FREEPOST LON15823
London
E9 5BR
t: 020 463 0633
e: info@compassonline.org.uk
w: www.compassonline.org.uk

Joining form

Please contribute generously. Compass relies on individual members for funding. Minimum joining rates are suggested below. To join Compass simply complete and return this form to Compass, FREEPOST LONI5823, London E9 5BR. Please pay by standing order if at all possible so that a regular income can be counted on.

- | | |
|---|----------|
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| <input type="checkbox"/> Organisation (i.e. CLP; think-tank; NGO) | – £42.50 |

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NAME _____

ADDRESS _____

TELEPHONE NO _____

EMAIL _____

LABOUR PARTY CLP _____

- I'm not eligible to be a member of the Labour Party (i.e. you're member of a different political party) and I would like to become an Associate Member of Compass (with no voting rights).

Standing Order Instructions

Please pay immediately by standing order to Compass' account, Lloyds TSB, 32 Oxford Street, London W1A 2LD (a/c 02227769, sort code 30-98-71) the sum of £27.50 / £12.50 / other £ (please delete as appropriate) and then annually, unless cancelled by me in writing.

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