

Is there a future for community-based trades unionism in Britain?

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Trades Union Councils and the 'New Unionism'

Academics have made a significant contribution to the debate over how to revitalise trade unionism in the UK and beyond. This paper seeks to add to this debate by addressing the local dimension to revitalisation and, in particular, by exploring whether established institutions such as Trades Union Councils might be an effective vehicle for advancing a strategy of 'community unionism'.

Trades Union Councils (formerly Trades Councils) are representative structures at the local level and are comprised of delegates from union branches who meet on a monthly basis to discuss matters of common concern to trade unionists. Trades Union Councils are also affiliated to the national Trade Union Congress (TUC) and to its regional councils thereby making them an established part of the institutional structure of trade unionism. Some Trades Union Councils are extremely active: Battersea and Wandsworth in particular has been highly successful in raising the funds required for employing organisers and campaigning effectively around local political issues. Such developments suggest that Trades Union Councils may be in the process of regeneration thereby becoming effective vehicles for trade union renewal.

Such an argument is advanced by Wills (2001; 2002) and Wills and Simms (2004) who have championed Battersea and Wandsworth as a model of 'reciprocal community unionism'. This argument reads like a 'new' model of trade unionism for so called 'new times'. Apparently 'old' forms of nationally focussed class politics are no longer applicable in globalised post-industrial societies which require unions to adopt the moral politics of the New Social Movements (NSMs).¹ From this perspective, 'community unionism' translates into a practice of unions forming progressive local alliances with a variety of local civil society actors. Having advanced such a strategy in both academic and union circles, Wills (2006) has, more

¹ A critique of new forms of 'social movement unionism' based on such an analysis is provided in Mathers (2007).

recently, questioned whether this is anything more than a strategy of 'agonised liberalism' which reflects the weakness of the political left. That self-criticism notwithstanding, the implication is that 'old' forms of union organisation such as Trades Union Councils are at risk of becoming 'industrial relics' and so need to revitalise - or stand aside and let new networks of activists take on the task of advancing community unionism.

This chimes with the message coming from the TUC. The former Director of the 'New Unionism' project, Frances O'Grady, has declared that 'Community unionism offers a way forward, not as a substitute for workplace organizing, but as a complement to it. ...We all share a belief in active citizenship, inclusiveness and the drive to deepen democracy... community unionism needs to learn tolerance for our differences, build sustainable links and focus on the real interests we share...' (O'Grady 1999: 12). The message is that effective community unionism can contribute to unions' industrial or numerical strength by helping to recruit 'new' workers and in particular Black and Minority Ethnic workers concentrated in low paid service jobs. Community unionism can also contribute to restoring unions' political and moral legitimacy by developing new alliances with local civil society actors around new issues, such as a living wage.

The TUC launched its 'community unionism' initiative by inviting leading figures from the US union movement to outline practices occurring on the other side of the Atlantic. This promotion of the US approach to revitalising local union politics encouraged us to investigate the US model and to ask to what extent it is transferable to the UK?

The US model

Developments in community unionism in the USA have been driven by external and internal factors. While the dynamics of neoliberal restructuring have pushed unions away from established forms of business unionism and towards social movement unionism (Robinson 2003) enacting such a shift has been tied up with the machinations of intra-union politics. Launched in 1996, the 'Union Cities' initiative to revitalise local union politics was a product of the election of the 'New Voice' leadership as well as of several newly elected local leaders. Central Labor Councils (CLC), which are the US equivalent of Trades Union Councils, were central to the AFL-CIO strategy. The revitalisation of some CLCs that occurred through 'Union Cities' was often achieved by significant internal struggles against established conservative forces. Less representative, but more activist organisations such as 'Jobs with Justice' also played an important role in bringing local unions into campaigning alliances and

migrant workers provided an impetus for change from below. However, change has been driven more from the top and has touched a limited number of CLCs which are still generally subject to chronic under-affiliation and underfunding (Ness and Eimer 2001; Fantasia and Voss 2004). This is a pattern that we see replicated in the UK where affiliation to Trades Union Councils remains voluntary. However, this can be accounted for by different factors which indicate that there are important historical and political 'path dependencies' in the UK which act as constraints on the adoption of the US model.

History

Returning to the UK, the work of Wills and Simms (2004) shows a tendency to read off the decline of Trades Union Councils from the structural and spatial development of the capitalist economy. This downplays the role of political struggle in influencing the role and vibrancy of Trades Union Councils which have long been associated with forms of political radicalism that have resulted in persistent conflicts with the higher echelons of the TUC.

After calling the first Trades Union Congress in 1868, the Trades Councils were subsequently expelled from it in 1895 in a struggle between 'Lib-Labs and socialists' (Fraser 1999: 95). It was only after the marginalisation of Trades Councils and the de-radicalisation of the TUC (Hobsbawm 1984: 559) that national unions finally overcame their suspicion and jealousy towards Trades Councils and encouraged local branches to affiliate (Webb and Webb 1920a). However, Trades Councils became a battleground for Fabianism and the more radical doctrines of syndicalism, guild socialism and communism. They played a leading role in the General Strike after which they were subjected to various kinds of bureaucratic constraints and became increasingly subordinated to regional councils comprised largely of union officials.

The central plank of the TUC agenda for Trades Councils was set out in 1935 by Walter Citrine who regarded them as agents of local recruitment campaigns. This was a top-down approach 'as the TUC sought to use Trades Councils to increase their profile, membership and influence' (Wills 2002: 54). It was also indicative of the TUC 'policy of containment' of Trades Councils which operated mainly in this period by measures aimed at detaching 'political' from 'industrial' functions (Stevens 1997: 7).

By the 1950s, Trades Councils were still 'important organisations' (Stevens *ibid*: p. 7) with 15,000 affiliated branches totalling more than 2.5 million members (Flanders 1968).

However, by this time Trades Councils had largely become the tools of nationally established policies (Clinton 1977) and it was the rise of national collective bargaining and the national political influence of the TUC through the Labour Party which, from the 1950s onwards, resulted in Trades Councils becoming largely discredited and left to decline.

The crisis of Keynesianism in the 1970s was met by an attempt by some Trades Councils to co-ordinate and generalise resistance and by so doing re-orientate themselves as part of a broader socio-political movement and some Trades Councils also managed to develop a local class politics around the defence of jobs and the welfare state in the face of Thatcherism. However, the defeat of the labour movement left Trades Councils as perhaps the last vestige of political radicalism and some became 'forums for the politics of political illusion' (Fairbrother 2000: 78). Subsequently, the number of Trades Councils dwindled from 418 in 1982 to just 138 in 2002. Such a reduction begs the question of whether Trades Union Councils are shrivelling in a barren wilderness of political irrelevance or whether there exist practices that indicate green shoots which, if nurtured, could flourish into a general renewal of local trade unionism.

Green shoots of recovery?

Our investigation of the current situation in the UK involved a postal questionnaire sent to all 123 Trades Union Councils over half of which were returned. This was followed up by 10 interviews with officers in selected case study councils.

The overall picture was one of very limited rejuvenation. There has been some increased activity in some areas around opposing the British National Party and the emergence of younger leaderships in certain councils. But Trades Union Councils, on the whole, are lacking in affiliation and delegate participation and are led by officers who are largely white, male and increasingly elderly. This is a reflection of the wider crisis of unions which has been exacerbated by the dominant strategy of mergers which has reduced the number of branches which could affiliate and send delegates to the councils.

There is also little sign of activity around the TUC agenda in that almost no councils play a role in organising and recruitment or have campaigned for a living wage. However, Some Trades Union Councils *are* still active to varying degrees, but around an agenda that resonates more with 'old' class politics than with 'new' moral politics. They engage

significantly in supporting unions in disputes and have also been campaigning around such issues as public service reforms and the war on Iraq.

Unsurprisingly, there has been rising conflict in some areas between Trades Union Councils and local Labour Parties. However, this is by no means uniform as in some of the 'old' labour heartlands, the link still seems strong. There is also some sense amongst officers that Trades Union Councils are regarded as too political or too left wing by national and regional bodies. There is a strong belief that national initiatives to develop community unionism have not involved Trades Union Councils.

Different trajectories for 'community unionism'

The different role played by Central Labor Councils and Trades Union Councils in the development of community unionism is not merely a product of current leadership orientations, but reflects different political histories which have shaped recent developments. We can see, therefore, how there are distinctly different trajectories for the development of community unionism.

Robinson (2000; 2003) argues that social movement unionism in the USA has been forming against business unionism which is a largely exclusive and uncritical form of trade unionism. Fantasia & Voss (2004) show how CLCs were distinctly conservative and bureaucratic institutions representing the narrow interests of the building trades. These interests seem to have been challenged effectively and in a reasonably widespread way by community unionism developing as a more inclusive and critical phenomenon.

In the UK, community unionism is emerging in the midst of a still dominant social democratic form of trade unionism. This is (or was) a more inclusive and a somewhat more critical form of trade unionism than business unionism in the sense of possessing an ideology of labour as a movement with a societal project. However, social democratic trade unionism is in crisis. While mobilising in multi-organisation single issue campaigning may develop a more autonomous union movement there is the danger that it could produce a depoliticised form of community unionism that further undermines the material and political power of trade unionism.

This analysis suggests that community unionism, in the form encouraged by the TUC, is largely in tune with its overall strategy of realigning trade unionism with 'Third Way' social

democracy. Trades Union Councils continue to express a critical agenda that suggests a radical form of community union politics, but largely lack the capacity to mobilise effectively around this agenda. This is partly due to a marked bureaucratisation that limits the participation of the declining base of activists. Where campaigning does occur it is somewhat lacking in the vibrancy shown by other examples of 'community unionism'.

Trades Union Councils have, however, displayed a willingness to make alliances with community organisations to engage in campaigns which have led to conflict with existing political allies. While there has been no fundamental questioning of political orientation there is some indication of a return to a more autonomous community politics of the early years of Trades Councils. This matter is tied up with the wider question of the political orientation of the labour movement in the UK which has seen an increasing questioning of institutionalised union politics. The question of whether Trades Union Councils can be effective vehicles for renewing trade unionism is therefore ultimately bound up with the possible exit routes out of this crisis. While the TUC is encouraging community unionism as a localised form of 'Third Way' social democracy, the current orientation of Trades Union Councils is more suggestive of an alternative route of reviving their tradition of 'radicalised political unionism' (Upchurch *et al.* 2009).

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