Proposal for workshop paper

Workplace representatives in service sector organising campaigns: roles and tensions

This paper examines the roles of workplace representatives in union organising campaigns in UK service sector jobs. The research uses evidence from five longitudinal case studies (1998 – 2005) that were selected because they are the kinds of jobs that unions need to target if they are to undergo any degree of expansion in membership. Specifically; a call centre providing a service for deaf telephone users (CallOrg), a government funded business to business service provider (BusinessOrg), a casino (Casino), a large charity providing support, information and campaigning for people with physical disabilities (CharityOrg) and a low-cost retailer (RetailCo).

The research followed the successful organising campaigns from the very early stage of union involvement through to recognition for collective bargaining, and in some cases beyond (1998 – 2005). The central research question addressed in this paper relates to the relationship between workplace representatives and union professionals (officers and organisers). This is important because in the UK context – and within the organising literature more broadly - the success or otherwise of the sustainability of union representation in these organisations rests on the engagement and activism of workplace reps.

The paper draws on literature relating to ideas about union democracy (amongst many others; Lipset et al 1954, Martin 1968, Fairbrother 1984, Fosh and Heery 1980, Bramble 1995), the ways in which collective interests are framed and presented (Kelly 1997, 1998, Simms 2007) and the broader purpose of union organising (Heery 2002, Charlwood 2002, de Turberville 2004) to argue that the approach taken by many UK unions to organising activity in general, and renewal more broadly, is deeply problematic and risks alienating many of the kinds of workers that they are seeking to recruit, engage and represent.

References


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Formal and informal union education in the promotion of union democracy and activism

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In a diversifying labour force, traditional models of unionism find it increasingly difficult to sustain unionism and workplace activism. Bureaucratic forms of unionism have trouble adapting to the growing demands of a varied membership, and increasing reliance must be placed on the workplace level and democratisation of unions if they are to reverse the decline in membership and activism that has generally occurred across industrialised countries. But increased power at the workplace by the union, and increased power within the union, cannot be exercised by members if they lack the requisite skills and confidence. For this, effective union training is essential.

This paper draws on several years of research by the authors on a range of matters relating to union organising, growth and education to focus on critical issues for union education and training, particularly in relation to workplace delegates (also known in some contexts as workplace representatives or shop stewards). It draws on qualitative research involving focus groups with delegates and quantitative research from five surveys of delegates and organisers over a period of nine years. The key issues we investigate are: what is the relationship between formal and informal union education? In what ways does union training shape delegate activism? What matters most in union education? What aspects of union education succeed, or fail, in achieving union objectives?

Our data come from four quantitative sources in Australia plus a qualitative source, including:
- the Australian Workplace Industrial Relations Survey, undertaken in 1995, involving surveys at 2000 workplaces with 20 or more employees - we draw upon the 1138 workplaces where the largest union also had a delegate;
- a survey of 852 workplace delegates from the Finance Sector Union (FSU), conducted in 2000;
- a follow-up survey, also of FSU members, undertaken in 2001, in which 102 delegates answered questions after completing delegate training;
- a survey of 379 organisers from 13 unions undertaken in 2003;
- a survey of 2350 current workplace delegates from 8 unions in 2003 and 2004;
- interviews with 60 workplace delegates (the ‘focus groups’) undertaken in 2004.

Amongst our findings are that:
- education is more important than tenure as delegates in explaining activism;
- building confidence is critical to activism, and higher skill improves activism principally because of its effect on confidence;
- successful recruitment behaviour depends on developing confidence and skills across a range of delegate competencies, not just in relation to recruitment skills;
- the usefulness of training (for those who had undertaken some) was an important aspect of the impact of training on confidence, with less useful training reducing the impact of additional training – a poor rating on the usefulness of training more than offset the positive aspects of training on confidence;
- delegate activism will be influenced by both the breadth of training (the quantity) and the specific type of training. However, because the organising approach is based on
developing particular skills at the workplace, some forms of training (related to mobilising activism amongst members) will be more important than others;

- training in campaigning and developing networks have more influence on membership growth and union success rates than does training in recruitment;
- training boosts delegates’ confidence, which in turn boosts their activism;
- analysis of the types of training and background characteristics of activists indicates that the link between training and activism is unlikely to be due to reverse causality;
- post-training contact with organisers is strongly related to commitment and hence activism;
- formal training is important, but unions should not overlook what happens when organisers train delegates ‘on the job’.
- there are positive correlations between almost all indicators of training and measures of union democracy. On the one hand, training increases the ability of delegates to participate in the activities and decisions of the union. On the other hand, democratic unions are more likely to respond to the needs of delegates and members by making training available. Training and empowerment of delegates and activists creates new power sources within unions. This is not always a comfortable position for those who hold power under existing structures.

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Proposition 97.3

Délégués dans la mondialisation: plus experts, mais de quoi

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Quelles contraintes la mondialisation impose-t-elle aux représentants des salariés sur les lieux de travail s’ils veulent échapper à des risques perceptibles de marginalisation ?

Une réponse envisage l’évolution des tâches des délégués vers plus de technicité. L’insertion d’un nombre croissant de lieux de travail dans de vastes conglomérats d’entreprises, l’éloignement des participants au capital et des règles des marchés, l’externalisation des normes de gestion des ressources humaines supposent de leur part une connaissance plus approfondie des rouages de l’économie et de la gestion. Les délégués reçoivent une aide essentielle dans cette perspective lorsque les règles institutionnelles de la représentation prévoient l’accès à l’information, des mesures de formation pour les délégués ou la présence des délégués dans les instances de gestion des entreprises. On résume parfois cette évolution sous le terme de professionnalisation des tâches de représentation. Dans cette logique, la transformation des institutions est privilégiée par les acteurs centraux dont la capacité d’intervention elle-même dépend des délégués de terrain.

L’observation empirique de cas de représentation dans divers pays européens amène à soumettre cette hypothèse à une lecture critique. Même dans les systèmes où l’information est disponible, la présence dans les lieux stratégiques garantis, l’acquisition des compétences favorisée, les délégués connaissent de sérieuses difficultés. Par contre, on observe l’implantation ou la pérennisation de représentants lorsque des délégués peu aptes à mobiliser la complexité de moyens institutionnels privilégient le rapport au groupe qu’ils se proposent de représenter sur le rapport aux questions que cette représentation les amène à affronter. Sur des sites de travail on observe des conflits entre des délégués qui privilégient la proximité avec les salariés vs ceux qui favorisent l’expertise technique, entre ceux qui s’investissent dans la production d’une identité pour le groupe représenté vs ceux qui s’insèrent dans la logique entrepreneuriale, etc.

L’hypothèse des intervenants est que la mondialisation n’agit pas comme un phénomène causal univoque sur les situations de représentation et leur évolution. Les transitions générationnelle, les relations entre sexes, les insertions des délégués dans des espaces communautaires inégaux influent sur l’exercice de la représentation autant sinon plus que les transformations concomitantes liées à la mondialisation. Dans cette logique, l’apport essentiel des acteurs centraux consiste en une aide à l’exercice de fonctions de discernement de la part des délégués dans la constitution de leurs relations à leurs mandants.
Proposition 97.4

Contre vents et marées : la personne déléguée au cœur de la vie syndicale

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La force de l’action syndicale repose sur l’habileté des syndicats à l’échelle locale. La personne déléguée est au cœur de cette dynamique. Mais quel est le portrait de ces personnes déléguées et quels sont les facteurs qui contribuent au renforcement ou à l’affaiblissement de la représentation en milieu de travail?

Afin de répondre à ces questions, nous avons effectué une étude auprès de 1 105 personnes déléguées des syndicats dans le milieu scolaire au Québec. Cette étude nous fournit un regard sur les établissements scolaires à travers les perceptions des personnes déléguées. Il en ressort un portrait contrasté des milieux de travail caractérisés par de fortes pressions sur les conditions de travail et un fort engagement à l’égard du travail lui-même. Comment les personnes déléguées et les syndicats s’organisent-ils pour naviguer avec ces aspects contradictoires dans leurs milieux de travail? Notre met de l’avant le rôle clef des personnes déléguées dans le renforcement de la vie syndicale dans les établissements scolaires.

Même si la plupart des personnes déléguées évaluent positivement leur expérience en tant que délégué, leur capacité d’influence et l’existence de difficultés à assumer leur travail syndical sont plus variables. Cette expérience nous conduit à classifier le vécu des personnes déléguées en trois catégories : d’abord, un sentiment d’appropriation est généré par la capacité d’influence ressentie par les personnes déléguées qui ne rencontrent pas de réelles difficultés à assumer leur travail syndical; ensuite, un sentiment de contrôle précaire issu d’un certain pouvoir d’influence combiné toutefois à des difficultés à assumer leur travail syndical; enfin, un sentiment d’impuissance en raison de leur faible influence et de leurs difficultés à assumer leur travail syndical.

Nos résultats révèlent que l’expertise et les compétences des personnes déléguées sont au cœur d’une meilleure vie syndicale et d’un plus grand sentiment d’appropriation du délégué dans les milieux scolaires. Pour ce faire, la mobilisation des réseaux internes et externes renforce l’action syndicale sur le plan de l’établissement. Les ressources internes mettent l’accent sur l’importance de la cohésion syndicale, d’un solide réseau interne, de la présence d’assemblées ou de réunions syndicales et de personnes déléguées dans les milieux de travail. Quant aux ressources externes, les résultats de notre étude consistent sur la participation aux instances, le recours aux services spécialisés et à l’information ainsi qu’à la présence d’un réseau externe. De plus, les valeurs syndicales associées à une vision élargie du syndicalisme sont davantage garantes de pouvoir syndical. Autant de pistes de renforcement syndical liées à la mobilisation des compétences et des ressources de pouvoir pour faire face aux changements dans les milieux de travail.
How Do Union Members Perceive the Presence of Union Organisation in the European Workplace?

Jeremy Waddington

Throughout most European countries trade union membership and density are in decline. Recent estimates suggest that trade unions within the European Union represented 25.1 per cent of the employed workforce in 2006, whereas in 1980 39.1 per cent of the workforce was represented by trade unions (EC 2008). Trade unions in Europe now represent a smaller proportion of the European workforce than at any other time since 1950. In consequence, the status of trade unions as social partners is threatened and their capacity to represent entire national workforces is questioned. Compounding the issue of representation is the loss of political influence by trade unions as right-of-centre governments ignore or downplay the interest of labour and are more likely to exclude trade unions from institutions of macro-economic policy formulation.

Although there is no agreement on the relative effects of the forces that promote trade union decline, it is generally accepted that external influences such as macroeconomic context, the changing composition of the labour force, management resistance and workplace practices, and state policy have had adverse effects on unionisation (Mason and Bain 1993). In addition, issues internal to unionism are viewed as contributing to the decline, included among which are inadequate recruitment programmes, whether inadequacy is measured in terms of resources allocated or practices implemented (Kelly 1990); union failure to deliver benefits effectively for employees (Bryant and Gomez 2005); and the failure to reform union policy and government to ‘fit’ with the interests of new members (Dølvik and
During the period of decline, unionists have gradually turned their attention to the question: how might unions adapt to new circumstances? This research examines the content, implementation and outcome of processes of adaptation within a range of European trade unions.

Following initiatives taken in the United States, unions initially based in Anglo-Saxon countries and latterly unions based in continental Europe turned to the organising model as a means to reverse membership decline and to encourage the participation in union affairs of members from hitherto under-represented groups of workers. In essence the organising model is an approach to union membership and union renewal that encourages local union activity, greater local self-reliance and a collective identity (Russo and Banks 1996). Proponents of the organising model argue that increased recruitment and self-sustaining workplace unionism may result from organising around local or workplace issues, with which members and potential members are likely to identify (Clark 2000). Associated with the organising model is a range of techniques intended to promote union activity among members rather than them remaining as passive recipients of service and support. Among the techniques employed in organising are person-to-person recruitment based, as far as is possible, on the assumption of like-best-recruits-like, the mapping of workplaces to locate members and non-members, strategic company research, the identification of workplace grievances, and the targeting of particular groups of potential members (Sherman and Voss 2000). Unions tend to employ different elements from this range of techniques (Heery et al. 2003), with the practical consequence that variants of the organising model are in operation. Central to most organising initiatives, however, is a direct form of unionism where relations between union and members are paramount.
and ‘bottom-up’ processes within unions are highlighted and the top-down’ practices associated with business and servicing unionism downplayed.

Unionists that implement the different variants of the organising model acknowledge that it is at the workplace that the majority of unionists join unions and experience unionism (Waddington and Whitston 1997; Waddington 2007, 2008a, 2008b) and, therefore, that it is at the workplace that the primary organising effort is required. This research examines aspects of workplace relations in a range of European trade unions. Based on a large-scale questionnaire survey covering trade unions based in more than ten countries, the research shows that while members emphasise the importance of a workplace union presence, they also acknowledge that there are insufficient workplace representatives and where workplace representatives are present they are overworked and unable to support existing members. This finding raises questions about how union revitalisation may be brought about, the nature of form of workplace unionism and the deployment of resources at workplace level.
References


