

# Trade union reform - change is the only constant

By [Conor Cradden and Peter Hall-Jones\\*](#)

The last thirty years has no parallel in history. Never before has there been such relentless social, political, economic and technological change. Trade unions around the world are struggling to come to terms with this change, much of which requires a profound re-thinking of union roles and practices. In this article, Conor Cradden and Peter Hall-Jones look at unions' attempts to reform themselves and to adapt to an environment where change is the only constant. We also provide a survey of [recent resources](#) for unionists who want to consider the issues in more depth.



## Backdrop to trade union reform

There are two central phenomena which are driving these changes. First there is the rise to dominance of neoliberalism, which has also increased the influence of international regulatory organisations such as the WTO, World Bank and IMF. Secondly, there is the wave of democratisation which began in Europe in the 1970s (Spain, Portugal and Greece) then swept much of Latin America, South-East Asia and, most recently, the former Soviet Union and Central and Eastern Europe. There can be little doubt that the era of authoritarian and military regimes is rapidly passing away.

## Peace or competitiveness?

These twin developments have had a major effect on government and employer approaches to industrial relations. The resolution of industrial conflict has become less of a policy priority in itself as governments have turned their attention to the international performance of national economies and as the 'threat' of communism has faded. At the same time, international competition has made cost-reduction increasingly important for management. The result has been a change in the focus of industrial relations policy. Rather than being a mechanism to avoid conflict, the aim of IR policy has become the enhancement of competitiveness.

With governments and regulations largely supporting this objective, management priorities have changed. Tight control over labour costs and continuous improvements in productivity have become non-negotiable objectives.

As a result, unions are being expected to justify themselves in terms of "added value" in the workplace. This added value is understood solely in commercial terms.

This combination of factors has made union work more difficult everywhere. There has been a range of responses, but as yet no single model of new unionism has emerged as a clear winner.

Union reforms can be divided into four principal types:

1. New structures;
2. New strategies;
3. New internationalism;
4. New union/management relations.

Let us look at each of these in more detail.

### 1 New structures

This is perhaps the most common type of reform. For many unions, particularly in the industrialised world, structural change has been an important weapon in the struggle to hold ground. Union mergers, for example, aim to benefit from economies of scale, to increase the influence of individual unions, or to respond to changes in industrial structure and membership composition. In some cases, the pursuit of similar aims may prompt more radical reform that changes the structure of entire union movements. The US labour movement is currently considering proposals for a reorganisation of this kind, while the Japanese Rengo is pushing for a new structure of industry-level federations.

In countries that have recently abandoned the planned economy, formerly illegal independent unions and "successor" unions have been obliged to work together in an attempt to establish an independent and democratic movement. Unfortunately this has proved to be difficult and, in many cases, the labour movement remains fragmented.

### 2 New strategies

Many unions have also made fundamental changes to their basic aims and strategies. Perhaps the best known of these reforms is the adoption of the "organising model", in which a union's purpose is understood to be the empowerment of workers to define and pursue their own interests. This is in contrast to the "servicing" model, where the role of the union is to deliver services to a passive and dependent membership. The organising model requires that unions foster activism and leadership amongst workers themselves, so as to form a "nucleus" around which recruitment can occur. This approach has been particularly influential in the US, the UK and Australia.

A different but complementary approach is "social movement" unionism, which emerged in the 1970s in countries such as Brazil, South Africa, Korea and Poland. This form of unionism goes beyond workplace struggles over wages and conditions

to encompass campaigns about the living conditions of the working class as a whole – housing and health, education, transport etc. Workplace structures are linked to the communities in which the workers and their families live, challenging governments as well as employers. As unions campaign on citizenship issues, strikes and other protests about workplace issues tend to receive stronger community support.

This social movement unionism is also beginning to take hold in the industrialised world. Arguments that unions should confine their actions to the workplace, leaving political action to political parties, are now seldom heard. Many PSI affiliates, for example, are active in campaigning for quality public services. The idea that unions should be more than mere interest groups, that they should play a major role in civil society as the voice of working people, is profoundly changing the nature of the labour movement.

### **3 New internationalism**

One of the most distinctive new forms of collective organisation is international trade unionism. The increasing influence of international trade and financial regulation, on the one hand, and the increasing power of multinational corporations, on the other, points to a clear need for union action at a global level. Three developments in particular come to mind. Firstly, and closely related to social movement unionism, is the emergence of international co-operation and cross-border unionism. One example is the "strategic organising alliance" established in 1992 between a US and a Mexican union. This alliance runs workers' centres, educational, solidarity and cultural projects, an on-line monthly magazine, etc.

Secondly, there is the emergence of global framework agreements between multinational companies and global union federations. Detailed regulation of employment relationships is obviously impossible on this scale, but agreements can specify minimum standards and basic workers' rights, formalise commitments to codes of practice and labour standards, and establish monitoring procedures that involve trade unions.

A third promising development is the unification of the labour movement at the international level. At the end of 2004, the ICFTU and the World Confederation of Labour (WCL), along with several national union federations currently affiliated to neither organisation, agreed in principle to unite at the global level. By the end of 2006, the world's workers should be speaking with an unprecedented unity.

### **4 New union/management relations**

Unions are frequently obliged to choose between straightforward opposition to management plans and what might be called critical co-operation. At different times and in different settings, there may be compelling reasons for either approach. Strategies of militant opposition, for example, may be the only real possibility for independent unions in circumstances where basic rights and liberties are denied to workers, or where fundamental employment rights are not respected.

However unions' strategic choices often reflect more than a tactical analysis of the immediate situation. They also bear the stamp of deeply held assumptions about the employment relationship. Militancy in this sense involves the assumption that the interests of workers and those of employers are necessarily in conflict. This view is characterised by the barest acceptance of the legitimacy of management and an adversarial approach to bargaining.

Those unions which are more inclined towards a partnership approach, on the other hand, assume that workers and employers can usually find some common ground on which to build solutions and develop relationships.

#### **Is there common ground?**

When it comes to determining the appropriate response to contemporary "globalised" management, these opposing orientations have radically different implications. But are militancy and partnership necessarily at odds?

The PSI position is that: "Trade unions... must demand to be treated as genuine social partners in all major social and economic planning and decision-making. Nothing less." This demand applies to the workplace as well as to the corridors of power. Furthermore: "Governments have to choose: either they want workers and their unions as part of the deal or they want them in united opposition." (...) If the "government is hostile to these principles, it must be made clear that the government has chosen to throw away a chance for a redesigned society and has asked for conflict."

#### **The key to successful reform**

There is no simple formula for union reform. The old industrial relations priorities have disappeared, but alternative models are still being developed. We are faced with an untidy set of ad hoc, pragmatic practices. Their effectiveness and their transferability between countries are uncertain and union strategies must be developed by affiliates in their own national context. Yet there are some conclusions we can draw from recent history:

- Fragmented, multi-union structures are a serious impediment to effective organisation. Although care must be taken to ensure that no distinctive voice is lost, the restructuring of movements into larger, industry-based unions must be a key objective.
- An active approach to organising is essential. While maintaining and reinforcing existing areas of strength, unions must also direct their attention beyond traditionally unionised groups of workers to those sectors where union organisation has historically been weak and to the informal economy.
- Union involvement in action beyond the workplace is essential to the maintenance of the vibrancy and attractiveness, as well as the effectiveness, of the labour movement. This is at least as true for those countries where democracy is well-established as it is for those where authoritarian regimes are still in place, or are a recent memory.
- International co-operation and solidarity between unions at every level is an increasingly important element in the success of the labour movement. Unions must generate the capacity to engage in this kind of action, whether this means cross-border co-operation between local union branches, or intervention in economic and financial governance institutions via unified global union federations.

A closer look reveals a common thread in all four of these conclusions: the key is unity.

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## Resources

There is a great deal of interest in union reform and renewal, and a great deal of academic work on the subject. In what follows we have tried to focus on the best of recent books and papers on the subject. They are divided up into the same areas we looked at in the article above. Below this you will find a bibliography of recommended texts, including all those we have mentioned.

### General reading

Two recent edited collections which between them cover a very wide range of issues and national situations are Kelly & Frege (2004) and Jose (2002). The ILO's International Institute for Labour Studies, the publisher of Jose's collection, also regularly publishes new papers and discussion documents, all of which are available on line (<http://www.ilo.org/public/english/bureau/inst/>).

Ebbinghaus (2002) gives a useful overview of the situation in Europe. Kelly & Willman (2004) is just one example of the many works that deal with the British situation. For accounts of the experience of Russia and the countries of Central & Eastern Europe (CEE) see Cox & Mason (2000) and Kubicek (2002). Casale (2003) provides a useful summary of the current institutional position in the CEE countries, while Weiss (2004) focuses particularly on the prospects for the integration into the European Union IR system of the CEE states that have recently joined the EU. The situation in Argentina, Brazil and Chile is discussed by Cook (2002), while further consideration of the Brazilian case is to be found in Guidry (2003) and Seidman (1994). Kurvill & Erickson (2002) discuss developments in seven Asian IR systems, and Ding et al (2002) and Zhu (1998) focus on China.

Although they deal with the British case, Willman et al (1993, 1995) and Kelly & Willman (2004) are both useful sources on union organization and administration. Kahmann, Marcus (2003) is also well worth a look.

Recent examples of significant mergers include the formation of the giant Ver.di union in Germany – the largest independent trade union in the world (see [http://www.verdi.de/0x0ac80f2b\\_0x00d500e4](http://www.verdi.de/0x0ac80f2b_0x00d500e4) for an account of its aims & structures in English, with links to the same page in several other languages) – and the new Swiss union UNIA ([www.unia.ch](http://www.unia.ch)). The UNIA site provides a large amount of useful information in English as well as German, French and Italian.

Bronfenbrenner et al (1998) and Heery et al (1999) summarise the organizing model and discuss its use in the UK and the USA. The websites of the AFL-CIO, the British TUC and the Australian ACTU provide more practically-oriented advice and information. The ICFTU has produced a campaign kit on organizing women workers (<http://www.icftu.org/www/pdf/u4w-campaignkit-en.pdf>).

Seidman (1994) describes the emergence of social movement unionism in Brazil and South Africa, while Johnson (1994) is likely to be of particular interest to PSI affiliates.

Nissen (1999) and Alexander and Gilmore (1999) are useful sources on cross-border unionism.

As of November 2004, 34 Global Framework Agreements had been established. Details are available on the ICFTU website at: <http://www.icftu.org/displaydocument.asp?Index=991216332&Language=EN>.

Although not written purely from a union perspective, one of the best and most sophisticated arguments for the partnership position is to be found in a paper published by the Irish National Economic and Social Forum (NESF 1997). This is a tripartite body whose role is to provide background research and policy analysis which forms the background for national-level bargaining.

Wahl (2004) provides an excellent reasoned and non-sectarian statement of the anti-partnership position. Kelly (1998) provides a distinctive economic argument for oppositional or militant union strategies.

## What does the Organizing Model involve in practice?

Edmund Heery and his colleagues from Cardiff University have suggested that the organizing model involves the following list of practices:

- reliance on planned organizing campaigns, in which the union researches targets and sets clear and timed objectives which are subject to periodic review;
- reliance on paid "lead organizers" to oversee organizing campaigns and foster activism amongst the target workforce;
- involvement of activists in the development and running of campaigns through a representative "organizing committee";
- the use of "mapping" techniques to identify all members of the workforce and rank them systematically in terms of their propensity to become active in the union;

- the identification of issues and grievances around which a campaign can be developed;
- the use of "actions" to mobilise the workforce, which can range from badge-wearing and the signing of a petition through to street theatre and protest strikes;
- use of "one-to-one" recruitment in which trained, volunteer recruiters seek to persuade non-members to join either at the workplace or through "house calls";
- reliance on the principle of "like-recruits-like", such that recruiters have the same demographic and occupational identity to those being recruited;
- the demonstration of union effectiveness in the course of the campaign by publicising concessions from the employer;
- the identification of levers, allies and pressure points which can be used to discourage employer opposition and press for union recognition; and
- the development of community support so that the campaign extends beyond the workplace to embrace community, political and consumer organizations

Source: Heery et al (1999)

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