Trade Unions as Human Rights Actors

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Relevance

- Cross-movement coalitions
  - Alliance with other movements as a path to union renewal
- Labour rights as human rights
  - Reframing union purpose through a discourse of rights
- Human rights actors
  - Identifying and assessing institutions that give effect to rights
Method

- **Case Study of Amnesty International UK Trade Union Network (TUN)**
  - History of TUN, 1979-2009
  - AIUK archives
  - Interviews with past and present members; AIUK officers
  - Observation of meetings & conferences
Findings

- **Affiliation**
  - Unions as collective members of AIUK, which pay a subscription & participate in governance

- **Benefits**
  - Extensive union participation
  - Sustained participation

- **Controversy**
  - Challenge to union affiliation: politicisation of AIUK
  - Restricting union influence
    - Voting rights; Consultative role of TUN

- **Weakness**
  - Shallow participation
  - Cyclical pattern of activism
    - Dependence on key activists & AIUK officers
Findings

- Focus of union human rights activism
  - Human rights of trade unionists
    - Campaigning for jailed trade unionists
    - Campaigning for kindred workers
      - Educators, journalists, printers, performers
  - Support for general Amnesty campaigns
    - Death penalty; torture; arms control; migrants
    - Campaigning within the trade union movement
  - Broadening of Amnesty agenda (full spectrum)
    - Gender and LGBT rights
  - Absence of a proactive labour rights policy
Findings

- **Trade union methods within AIUK**
  - Adoption of Amnesty repertoire
    - Letter writing; greeting cards, petitions, inquiries, delegations
  - Limited use of industrial repertoire
    - Isolated cases of direct pressure on employers
- **Labourism**
  - Lobbying government through Labour Party
- **Union networks**
  - Diffusing campaigns via global unions & labour NGOs
Findings

- **Spillover**
  - Lack of transfer of rights discourse into core union activity
  - Lack of transfer of AIUK methods into core union activity
  - Pattern of interaction between AIUK and unions
    - Trade union human rights activists
    - International departments of TUC & major unions
  - ‘Solidarity coalition’
Conclusion

- Trade union human rights activism
  - Cross-movement activity
    - Based on affiliation not coalition
    - Expressive not instrumental function
  - Discrete activity
    - Limited feedback or spillover into core union work
    - Responsibility of enthusiasts, specialists and dedicated function within unions
  - Mediating activity
    - Enforcement of human rights, principally though not exclusively of workers and trade unionists