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Darlington, RR

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The State of Workplace Union Reps' Organisation in Britain Today

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For many years workplace union representatives have played a central and distinctive role in British industrial relations in defending workers' interests *vis-à-vis* employers and providing a vital link between unions at national level and the movement's 6.5 million members. Notwithstanding the changed economic, industrial and political context within which they operate today compared with past, Cohen (2006a; 2006b) has drawn attention to the shared set of unique assets which make lay workplace union reps and other activists ideally qualified to kick-start union organisation and renewal. These include: closeness to, and shared experience with, the members; networks of contacts within their industry or sector; deep commitment to the cause of trade unionism; roots in the community around their workplace; and above-average knowledge of, and interest in, labour movement issues, ideas and initiatives. Likewise Gall (2005a: 8) has commented: 'It is hard to conceive of any other substitute for the lieutenants of the rank-and-file who are the roots of the trade union movement'.

However McIlroy and Daniels (2009: 141) have recently suggested that the much shrunken bands of workplace union reps who have managed to survive the 'transformative decline' that took place during the Conservative years after 1979 and which has continued under New Labour, have been overwhelming outweighed by hostile employer forces and are highly unlikely to rescue the trade union movement from its current and long malaise. They claim workplace reps 'no longer negotiate to any significant extent' and have been 'decisively debilitated'. The traditions of rank-and-file organisation which generated critical resources in terms of activism, voice and democracy for British trade unionism, and

sometimes could act a significant supplement and counterweight to the activities of full-time officials and the official union machinery, have been qualitatively diminished across extensive tracts of employment. Likewise for Charlwood and Forth (2008: 20) the dramatic decline in the influence of lay reps over the management of the workplace can be seen as part of a wider pattern of declining collectivism and shifting ideologies of workplace governance: from governance regimes that were predicated on pluralist assumptions (in which shop stewards were powerful autonomous actors able to represent the interests of union members to management) to unitary systems of governance (under which shop stewards are often relegated to the role of managerial assistant).

To what extent are these recent self-proclaimed 'sober' assessments accurate or unduly pessimistic? This article provides a brief evaluation of the state of workplace union reps' organisation in Britain as we enter the second decade of the 2000s, exploring its weaknesses, strengths, and potential. The term 'workplace union rep' is used fairly broadly to cover different types of representative – with varying titles such as shop stewards, departmental reps, convenors, branch secretaries, and health and safety reps – who represent union members collectively and individually with management and have specific functions related to providing advice/guidance to members/employers.

Weaknesses

Clearly the changed industrial structure and wave of closures and redundancies in the areas of employment that were once bastions of workplace union strength, the unrelenting neo-liberal offensive under both Conservatives and New Labour governments, and the series of workers' defeats that occurred during the 1980s and 1990s, combined to inflict an enormous

toll on shop stewards' organisation, the legacy of which is graphically evident today in a variety of ways. To begin with, although it is impossible to collate completely accurate figures, the number of shop stewards and other workplace union reps appears to have continued its 25-year decline. During the 1970s there was a rapid expansion in the number of stewards – proportionately outstripping the rise in union membership - from about 200,000 to as many as 300,000 by the end of the decade, branching out from manufacturing to embrace both manual and white collar workers in the health service, education, local government, civil service and elsewhere (Clegg, 1979: 51-52). Although the total number of stewards grew further in the first half of the 1980s to reach 335,000 in 1984, not only was there a massive fall in the overall union membership in the immediate years that followed, but there was an even more precipitous decline in the number of stewards, with the numbers of stewards continuing to decline during the 1990s and early 2000s albeit at a less dramatic rate than previously (Charlwood and Forth, 2008). Recent estimates vary considerably from only 128,000 (Charlwood and Forth, 2008: 6) to 137,000 (WERS, 2004) on-site reps at workplaces employing 25 or more people, while the DTI (2007: 77), which utilises WERS 2004 data to include smaller workplaces, has estimated there are currently around 146,000 union reps in total. Meanwhile the TUC (Nowak, 2009) and BERR (2009) have reported there are as many as 200,000 lay on-site union reps, although this figure includes health and safety and other representatives (see below). Whatever the real overall figure it is considerably less than its previous high water-mark of 25 years ago, and likely to be further reduced by the impact of the current economic recession and jobs shake-out. Nonetheless we should note the overall figure appears to no lower than it was in the mid-1960s.[1]

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[1] All figures are approximate essentially because the unions do not collate and/or make publicly available the numbers of reps they have. As a result survey evidence is often reliant primarily on managerial figures/estimates, and such figures often tend to exclude reps who deal exclusively with health and safety and other issues.

What about the nature of shop stewards and union reps themselves? According to WERS 2004 lay union representatives are present in only 13 per cent of workplaces with 10 or more workers compared with 17 per cent in 1998. Even where unions are recognised, only 45 per cent of workplaces have an on-site union rep, representing a decline from 55 per cent in 1998 (Kersley *et al*, 2006: 124), precipitated by the continuing trend towards privatisation and outsourcing in the public sector, a continued decline in the size of workplaces, and the decentralisation of bargaining (TUC, 2007). There are notable differences between the public sector where representation is more resilient (67 percent of employees in workplaces with on-site representative), and the private sector where reps are far fewer and concentrated in large workplaces (17 per cent of employees in workplaces with on-site representation) (WERS, 2004; DTI, 2007: 19-20). The majority of union reps work full-time, are over 40 years of age (the average age is 46), and male (56 percent). Although there has been a sharp increase in the number of female reps (from 38 per cent in 1998 to 44 per cent in 2004), there is an under-representation of black and ethnic minorities (just four per cent are non-white), The characteristics of union reps tend to vary by sector, although in general they tend to reflect the gender of the employees they represent (Kersley *et al,* 2006: 144-77).[2]

The problem of stewards' bureaucratisation appears to have remained pervasive in many areas. in the wake of the Donovan Commission's recommendations there was a massive expansion during the 1970s in the number of full-time shop stewards permitted by their employer to spend all of their time on union duties, leading to an increasing bureaucratisation of workplace union organisation, notably in larger workplaces in which a

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[2] For example the gender imbalance among RMT workplace union reps is representative of the overall make up of the workforce in the transport sector. Where there is a more diverse workforce, such as in companies like London Underground, there is correspondingly a more diverse mix of union reps. Similarly the gender make up of RMT reps varies in accordance with the striking differences in the gender make up of different sectoral areas within the transport sector. For example, there are fewer female reps in engineering grades than in clerical grades which correspond to the fact that women are underrepresented in engineering grades whereas many more women work in clerical grades (RMT, 2007).

distinct hierarchy of convenors and senior stewards often utilised a restraining and disciplinary role to control their 'unruly' members in ways in which management could be the prime beneficiary (Hyman, 1979; Cliff, 1979). Significantly, despite the decline in the number of stewards since 1984, there has not been any substantial change in the degree of practical support stewards receive from employers; the proportion of workplaces with one or more stewards in which at least one of these stewards is permitted to spend all of their working time on union activities has remained relatively stable. According to WERS 2004, which principally collects detailed information about senior representatives, about 13 per cent of union reps are full-time: which would give a (probably somewhat inflated) figure of 16,000-18,000, with most (85 per cent) working in the public sector, particularly the health sector. Some of these incumbent convenors, senior full-time stewards and branch secretaries, particularly those representing large constituencies and union branches, continue to be somewhat remote from, and inaccessible to, their members (Darlington, 2009d). However, we should also note some one in ten union reps are estimated to receive no paid time at all to carry out their duties, and even when they have the right to take time-off many are unable to do so because of lack of cover/workload relief (TUC, 2005; 2007: 18-24; McKay and Moore, 2007).

The severe weakening of workplace union organisation today compared with the past has been reflected in the way that many stewards/reps, whether full-time or otherwise, spend less time than previously on collective bargaining issues such as wages and conditions and more time on representing individual members in relation to welfare work, grievances and disciplinary cases. Even though many stewards have undoubtedly displayed an extraordinary level of commitment to holding together workplace union organisation (spending on average 6.3 hours a week on union duties), some of them have also, as a result of often feeling beleaguered and defensive in relation to employers, become fairly cynical

towards their members, reflected in an unwillingness to make attempts to mobilise them into taking action. The seeming paralysis of the shop stewards network within the car industry - where representation is firmly based in companies such as Vauxhall, Land Rover, Jaguar, Toyota, Nissan and Honda – to resist wage freezes, lay offs and redundancies during the current economic recession has underlined the atrophy of organisation. Meanwhile one of the weaknesses of union organising campaigns in recent years, given the characteristic lack of integration with bargaining agendas, has been the limited extent to which some lay union reps have been involved, with the most bureaucratised reps effectively operating as a barrier to union recruitment and renewal initiatives in some contexts (Waddington, 2009).

This bureaucratisation and conservative process within workplace union organisation has been reinforced by the continuing relative low level of workers' collective struggle, lack of rank-and-file confidence vis-à-vis management, the decline in the number of on-site stewards (with some reps effectively covering a number of different geographical work locations), the increase in the ratio of union members to stewards (from 1:25 in 1984 to 1:37), longer tenure of office (eight years on average) and 'ageing' of union representation overall. In the process stewards have tended to be much more dependent on full-time union officials compared with the relative independence of the 1970s. Even though there has been clear signs of a slight increase in strike activity during the 2000s, compared with the persistent and increasing decline recorded in the 1980s and 1990s, the continuing relatively low level of struggle (and its limited and often short-lived nature) has not recreated the forms of 'rank-and-file' organisation that could exert pressure on the official union apparatus and/or provide an alternative leadership in the fashion that existed in the past (Darlington, 2009d).

But despite such weaknesses, it is important to also recognise some of the strengths of workplace union organisation.

Strengths

One notable limitation of survey evidence (such as WERS) on the state of workplace union organisation is that it is inevitably fairly broad-brush stroke and fails to capture the dynamics, complexities and variations that exist on the ground. Alas, compared with the 1980s, or even the 1990s, there has been very little supplementary case study material that could provide a richer portrayal of the nature of workplace social relations and trade union organisation. While the case study material that has been published tends to confirm the overall decline in workplace union strength, it has also provided important, albeit often neglected, evidence of continuing resilience and even combativity in certain areas of employment, notably within the public sector, but also within parts of the private sector as well (for example see Beale, 2003; Danford *et al*, 2003; Darlington, 2001; 2009a; 2009b; 2009c; Dundon, 1998; McBride, 2004; 2006; Taylor and Bain, 2003).

Against the general picture of decline, the extent and the value of the activities of workplace union reps (who are now located in a far wider range of areas of employment than in the 1970s) have been underlined by the development of a variety of other workplace union 'representative' roles. For example, the TUC (2008) has estimated there are around 150,000 health and safety reps appointed and supported by trade unions in the workplace. They are now universally acknowledged as a key factor in making workplaces safer, although how effective they are very much depends on the strength of union organisation more generally. There are also nearly over 22,000 union learning representatives (ULRs) who

promote training and development in the workplace, with potential (albeit not unproblematic) spill-over effects on membership recruitment and union activism (Munroe and Rainbird, 2004: unionlearn, 2008; Mcllroy, 2008). The proportion of such ULRs who have never held a union position has risen to over 35 per cent, with reps also more likely to be women, to have a broader BME representation, and be younger than union reps as a whole (TUC, 2007: 9). There are also growing numbers of union equality reps who promote diversity in the workplace and attempt to tackle discrimination, and environmental reps who focus on energy and efficiency issues and others related to climate change (BERR, 2009). Even though many of the above representative roles tend to be occupied by individual shop stewards who wear more than one hat, there has still been the emergence of new wider layers of union reps who have taken on responsibilities with relation to their members and management. In addition many union reps are at once active in workplaces and social networks, with 20 per cent reporting that they spent up to five hours per week on community activity and organisation (TUC, 2009).

Meanwhile, despite the considerable weakening of workplace unionism over the last 30 years, and the conservative and bureaucratic tendencies to which shop stewards' organisation has been subject, arguably the institution of shop stewards still provides the most effective and democratic means of organising rank-and-file workers, and remains qualitatively different from full-time union officialdom in its potential responsiveness to rank-and-file pressure (Darlington, 2002; 2009d). Even though the balance of power remains significantly in favour of the employers, they still feel considerable constraints on the 'right to manage' in many workplaces. Shop stewards and other lay union reps are still able to resist, amend or undermine management initiatives on some occasions and win concessions and gains on others. They still remain the backbone of the union movement in dealing with workers' grievances, standing up to management and attempting to preserve/advance their

members' pay and conditions of employment. Ironically the decentralisation of organisational structures and shift towards more fragmented collective bargaining arrangements has helped to revive workplace networks in some areas, such as further education colleges, local government and the civil service (Kimber, 2009: 57-8). A similar process has occurred on the railways and London Underground, where union activists were forced to adapt to the radically transformed bargaining arrangements ushered in as a result of privatisation and part-privatisation respectively, with a re-engagement and closer relationship between union reps and the membership encouraged by such broader changes (Darlington, 2001; 2007).

It is true that a 'top-down' approach has often characterised union organising activity, with full-time organisers either substituting themselves for the engagement of members or stimulating activity in a form of 'managed activism (Heery *et al.* 2000; Carter 2000; 2006; Gall 2005b). Nonetheless, in some unions there has undoubtedly been considerable effort put into attempting to support and strengthen self-activity in the workplace as the key to rebuilding shop stewards' organisation. For example, between 2005 and 2007, public services union Unison put nearly 2,000 stewards through its 'One Step Ahead' programme 'designed to engage longstanding reps and to build teamwork in branches around organising and recruiting'. In PCS there has been an active encouragement of many new workplace activists, involving the training of an extra 3,000 reps as part of an impressive increase in the union's membership from 265,000 to 300,000. Unite's organising strategy has combined membership recruitment with an emphasis on the rebuilding of a shop stewards' movement. Campaigning for the development and creation of active, self-sufficient and sustainable reps as the foundation of the union in the workplace, able to provide effective shop stewards representation through collectively-driven issue-based organising in workplaces, companies and industrial sectors, the union has enjoyed some

notable successes in sectors such as aviation, and the meat processing industry. In the latter case this has led to a lay-led meat industry combine committee with 50 delegates representing more than 18,000 workers (Graham, 2006; 2008).

An important feature of the RMT's organising initiative has been the attempt to invigorate new activists - to motivate not merely the union's workplace reps and branch officers, but also a much broader layer of grassroots members, some of whom are not even integrated into formal union structures. Thus, in addition to the 2,000 registered collective bargaining and health and safety reps, the union has managed to build up a data base of another 1,200 'ambassador' activists who have independently demonstrated a willingness to help recruit and build the union in their workplace. A great deal of effort has gone into nurturing such union activists, supporting them with materials, advice, and training, and regularly communicating with them via text messages and email. Such a broadly-focused and activist-based organising strategy has not only paid enormous dividends in terms of recruiting new members, notably in areas from which the union had atrophied or been driven out of by privatisation, but also in building and strengthening workplace union organisation and energising a wide layer of activists (Darlington, 2009a).

Other useful initiatives have been taken by the TUC. In 2002 there was the launch of what has been a highly successful UnionReps website, providing a system of electronic discussion boards for reps to discuss their work with each other, involving over 14,000 registered users. In 2008 there was the launch of the TUC 'Activist Academy, which is aiming to train 1,000 new lay organisers over a three-year period with the aim of increasing the involvement of unions reps and activists in building stronger workplace unions by recruiting new members and activists and running issue-based campaigns.

Meanwhile there have been a number of disputes in recent years in some important areas of employment that have underlined the strength of workplace union organisation and the ability of shop stewards/reps to mobilise their members. For example, during the 2002-3 national firefighters' dispute and 2005/6 Merseyside FBU strikes; 2005 British Airways baggage handlers' strike in support of Gate Gourmet colleagues; 2006 Shell tanker drivers strike; 2007 Royal Mail national dispute and 2009 London strikes; 2007-9 campaign over the sacking of Manchester mental health union rep Karen Reissmann; 2008 London buses strikes; 2008 Unite and Unison local government workers strike; and local and national strikes over the last 6-8 years by PCS civil servants, NUT teachers, UCU university and college lecturers and others (Kimber, 2009: 46-55). On the national railway network there have a significant number of local and company-wide disputes in which the role of workplace union reps has been absolutely crucial to the process of collective mobilisation; likewise with London Underground strikes on Metronet in 2007 and network-wide in 2009. Among electricians in London, Newcastle, Edinburgh and Sellafield, there have been unofficial strikes led by shop stewards that have won huge increases in pay and major improvements in working conditions. Despite the reactionary 'British Jobs for British Workers' slogan, the importance of the strike action that flared up in 2009 by over 10,000 workers across 20 construction sites at power stations and oil refineries across the country, in protest at the sub-contracting system, has been that it was based on a combative shop stewards and activist network across the construction industry.[3]

Indeed in all of these disputes workplace union reps and activists have been crucial to the process of industrial and political mobilisation, taking up and articulating members' grievances and sense of injustice, suggesting means of redress, and organising collective forms of union organisation and action.

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[3] For accounts of these different disputes see the *Socialist Worker* archive at: www.socialistworker.co.uk

Potential

Finally we can consider the potential for rebuilding the strength of workplace union reps' organisation. In 2007 a National Shop Stewards Network was initiated by the RMT with the aim of attempting to revitalise the unions at the grassroots and building a fighting trade union movement. Lively national conferences of hundreds of workplace reps/activists, and a number of regional meetings, have been held, and there has been limited support generated for disputes. But the problem such an initiative has faced is that unlike the massive expansion of the shop stewards' movement in the 1970s which was based on rising trade union struggle and political radicalisation, the current relatively low level of strike activity inevitably places a material limitation on what can be achieved. Thus the two crucial basic, albeit often ignored, ingredients for the rebuilding of a strong workplace union reps' movement are struggle and politics.

First, the ability and willingness of shop stewards/reps to encourage collective membership resistance and struggle, including the threat and/or use of strike activity, so as to defend workers' conditions and extract concessions from management, is an absolutely crucial factor in the equation. On one level this can be seen by looking back in time. Thus the strong historical association between high levels of nation-wide strike activity and periods of rapid union growth and powerful shop stewards' movements in Britain, notably between 1910-20, 1935-43 and 1968-74, underlines the manner in which unions have in the past been built through conflict and struggle, as opposed to partnership and compromise. Likewise, on a more micro-level, the experience of the RMT over recent years provides clear evidence of a direct relationship between union militancy, effectiveness in 'delivering' collective bargaining gains, membership growth and the development of strong workplace union organisation (Darlington, 2009a; 2009b; 2009c). Thus the RMT's strike mobilisation

approach has boosted the self-confidence of workers and their sense of collective power, attracting considerable numbers of new union members, and contributed to the health and vitality of workplace union reps' organisation generally. Such an adversarial stance, and the benefits it has bestowed, stands in marked contrast with the more accommodative forms of trade unionism adopted by many other unions as part of their own organising approach, which has left often workplace union organisation to wither on the vine.

At the very least the historical record suggests there is no justification for assuming that the present weaknesses of shop stewards' organisation will necessarily be either permanent or irreversible. In other words, not only could the balance of class forces be reversed at some stage in the future - with the revival of trade union confidence, mass workers' struggle, and an upsurge of union membership and activism - but even the most bureaucratised shop stewards' organisation could potentially either be forced into leading action itself or be bypassed by an influx of new blood into the union movement and the replenishment of shop-floor union leadership with the recruitment of a new generation of activists and reps.

Of course this does not mean just waiting for explosions of resistance to revive shop stewards' organisation. The recent inspirational sit-ins at Visteon, Prisme and Waterford Crystal, could hardly have been organised and sustained without the commitment not only of their respective shop stewards, but also from hundreds of other workplace reps and activists across the country who delivered practical solidarity. The workplace meetings, marches and rallies, picketing support and financial collections for the Visteon dispute became one of the most militant and sustained rank-and-file campaigns for many years. It tapped into a network of reps/activists for whom solidarity worked both ways: not only was it essential to those fighting, but also to helping to build the organisation of those who may

fight tomorrow. Thus the value of linking up workplace activists horizontally across companies, sectors, industries and class into 'ramparts of resistance' that can block the smooth passage of capitalist requirements and help revitalise the trade union movement (Cohen, 2006a: 4). Such activists can play a central role in helping to increase union membership, encouraging membership participation, and rebuilding shop-floor confidence.

Second, there is the question of politics. Fairbrother (1990; 2000) has consistently viewed the potential for union renewal as essentially an internalised and isolated form of workplace organisation, separated from wider, political forces. Yet the strength and militancy of the First World War shop stewards movement, the rebuilding of stewards' organisation in the 1930s, and the powerful stewards' movement of the 1960s and 1970s, did not develop in a political vacuum. In the first case the role of revolutionary syndicalists and socialists, and in the second and third cases the role of the Communist Party was crucial to providing the political cement that bound together militants in different unions and industries. Gall (2005a) has lamented the way in which - compared with the 1970s when there was a meshing together of a wide layer of reps with membership and activity within constituency Labour Parties, the Communist Party and various Trotsykist organisations (with union activists who were not members of such organisations nonetheless often in their political orbit) - one of the most important weaknesses of the contemporary union movement concerns the decline of politically-motivated union lay activists.

However there is some evidence in certain sectors of a new generation of union activists who have been politically radicalised over the last few years by the impact of neo-liberalism and privatisation, discontent over continuing work intensification and job insecurity, disenchantment with New Labour, and the inspiration of the anti-capitalist and anti-war movements, all of which have recently been heightened with the economic

recession and political fall-out over MP's expenses. On the railways and London Underground, for example, this has produced a network of left activists, undoubtedly less politically and organisationally cohesive than in many other industries where the Communist Party previously had a base, but with as much credibility and ability to influence a wide layer of workers and lead shopfloor struggles. Of course, in many respects the particular nature of the transport industries in which they are employed, and the politicisation of industrial relations they have experienced, has contributed to sustaining such a development. However we should note a number of other unions have seen anti-capitalist and left-wing activists play a significant role at leadership level, notably within Broad Left and grassroots bodies (Smith, 2003; 2005; Upchurch *et al*, 2008; Kimber, 2009). This is true inside PCS with the election of Mark Serwotka and the influence of the Left Unity group; in the UCW with the rank-and-file activist paper *Post Worker*; in Unison with the United Left; and in the UCU Left group. Such developments point to the potential for political radicalisation among a wide, albeit minority, of union reps and activists, at least in certain unions and areas of employment.

Some left-wing union reps have undoubtedly been worn down by holding basic union organisation together in an era of defeat. Therefore there will be a need for a new layer of political militants, motivated by ideologies of social justice, who are able to take up not just immediate shop-floor issues concerned with resistance to pay freezes, redundancies and the effects of the economic crisis, but also broader political questions about the crisis of political legitimacy and the unions' links with the Labour Party. Such 'political trade unionism', which combines the strengthening of networks of solidarity with the development of a serious and credible political challenge to New Labour from the radical left, can help over time provide the impetus necessary to give workers the confidence to wage trade union struggles and rebuild workplace reps' organisation.

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