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Title	Organising, militancy and revitalisation: The case of the RMT
Authors	Darlington, RR
Publication title	Union revitalisation in advanced economies: Assessing the contribution of union organising
Publisher	Palgrave Macmillan
Type	Book Section
USIR URL	This version is available at: http://usir.salford.ac.uk/id/eprint/10103/
Published Date	2009

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Organising, militancy and revitalisation: the case of the RMT union

Ralph Darlington

Introduction

Given that the decline of British unions over the last two decades has barely been arrested or reversed – with recent membership growth limited and overall union density still falling slightly – serious questions have been raised about the adequacy of present union organising strategies and the need for alternative approaches (Carter 2006:415). Yet much of the academic industrial relations debate hitherto has been somewhat simplistically reduced to a dichotomy between ‘partnership’ and ‘organising’. The partnership approach – avoiding strike action wherever possible and trying to rebuild membership and influence through collaborative relationships with employers - has been subject to critique for providing managers with the opportunity to take advantage of union moderation to restructure employment at the expense of workers’ terms and conditions of employment (Fairbrother and Stewart 2005, Kelly 1996, 2001, 2004). However, the limitations of the more robust and widely-viewed more credible organising approach have also been highlighted, including the principal concern with merely short-term membership recruitment and retention, the ‘top-down’ approach to union building, and the failure to link organising to a more fundamental attempt to revitalise and renew trade unionism (Carter 2000, 2006, Gall 2005, Heery *et al.* 2000). The paradox is that many unions in recent years, supported by the TUC, have in practice pursued elements of both strategies simultaneously, often involving an essentially accommodative form of unionism, albeit without much success.

By contrast, an alternative pathway to the quest for union growth and revitalisation has been provided by the National Union of Rail Maritime and Transport Workers (RMT). The RMT has combined a distinct version of the organising approach with an explicit rejection of partnership and accommodative forms of unionism in favour of the mobilisation of members through strike action, alongside a politically engaged form of left-wing trade unionism. Yet such an approach has been much neglected by academics and practitioners alike, despite appearing to be more successful in terms of basic measures such as growing membership levels, collective bargaining gains and the vibrancy of union organisation (Darlington 2001, 2007, 2008, 2009).

While there is no single organising ‘model’, but rather a variety of organising approaches which different unions have adopted in contrasting contexts (de Turberville 2004, Simms and Holgate 2008), the central political and strategic deficiencies of much UK organising activity are threefold. First, there has been the principal concern of many unions with merely short-term individual membership recruitment and retention. Of course it is true that Unite (T&G), unlike some others, has long stressed that organising should not be based solely on growing membership, but by building strong workplace union organisation and shop steward representation that relates to workers’ specific grievances and mobilises their collective strength. However, even this more ambitious approach is not necessarily enough to ensure that a union’s presence, once obtained, is sustainable or effective in influencing managerial decision making so as to materially improve workers’ terms and conditions of employment (Simms 2007). The nature and extent of workplace union power, and the ability and willingness of grassroots members to engage in collective resistance and struggle so as to extract concessions from management, is likely to be a crucial factor in the equation (Bagdigannavar and Kelly 2005, Taylor and Bain 2003). Moreover the strong historical association between strike waves and periods of rapid and large union growth, notably

between 1910-20, 1935-43 and 1968-75, underlines the manner in which unions have in the past been built through conflict and struggle, as opposed to partnership and compromise (Clawson, 2003, Cohen, 2006, Kelly 1988, 1998). Yet the organising approaches adopted by many unions, including Unite (T&G), have not placed the inter-relationship between combativity and union membership growth/effectiveness at the centre of their strategic and tactical approach.

Second, there is the 'top-down' approach to union building which often characterises organising activity, with paid or lay full-time officers either substituting themselves for the engagement of members or stimulating activity in a form of 'managed activism' (Heery *et al.* 2000). In the process, in some unions organising has become a bureaucratic and technocratic initiative that merely enhances the power of union leaderships (Carter 2000, 2006, Gall 2005). Again the Unite (T&G) approach of encouraging steward leaders who can take responsibility for building union membership through collectively-driven issue-based organising has been an important counter-tendency in some respects. Nonetheless, arguably crucial to the success of any organising approach has to be the strengthening of membership control over decision-making at every level within the unions themselves, with the need for much deeper democratic and participative union structures than currently exists so as to facilitate such a genuinely responsive member-led movement. As Schenk (2003:248-249) noted, there is an important link between union growth/power and union democracy: the more members have a genuine say in their union the greater their involvement in decision-making, the higher the potential for a membership interested in the issues of the day, and consequently the more vital the union is likely to be. Thus democracy and an empowered membership can develop the capacity and confidence to build a stronger union. And unions need this increased power to fulfil their members' needs for better pay and working conditions as well as to pursue the goals of social change. In turn, advancing workers' basic needs and aspirations, further activates members and attracts non-unionised workers. Therefore, a necessary pre-requisite of a successful organising approach has to be deep-rooted membership self-activity and self-determination, something which is often sorely missing within the organising approach adopted by many unions.

Third, the interdependent links between grassroots resistance and mobilisation and membership involvement and democracy, have led some commentators to advocate the need for a fundamental revitalisation and renewal of trade unionism at workplace level and beyond. The problem with the organising approach adopted by many unions, it is argued, is that without wider ideological motivation, lay union activism has become increasingly isolated and internalised. The narrow historical focus on immediate workplace concerns has been accentuated at a time when trade unionism's withered roots suggest the need for a more external orientation on other social movements outside the workplace, and a broad political agenda, which could supplement the depleted resources of trade unions. From such a perspective 'social movement unionism' has been promoted (Fletcher and Hurd 1998, Schenk 2003) as a way of expanding the activity and appeal of trade unionism, with the potential result of the 'ideological rebirth of trade unionism as a social liberation movement' (Gall 2005:25).

So, given these deficiencies of much current union organising activity, how and why has the RMT's alternative approach been so relatively successful, and to what extent has it overcome such limitations? Clearly any evaluation of this needs to go beyond the single measure of growing union membership (Behrens *et al.* 2004, Kelly 2005, Stirling 2005) to embrace other dimensions such as stronger workplace organisation, increased levels of membership activism, depth of union democracy, greater combativity, success in collective

bargaining, and broader political objectives and engagement. Arguably, on the basis of such a range of measures, the RMT scores fairly well, but while some, writing in an official capacity on behalf of the union, have been quite fulsome in their praise for such efforts (Berlin, 2006, Gall 2006, 2007), there are still important limitations and ambiguities which need acknowledging.

This chapter critically evaluates the relationship between union organising, militancy and revitalisation by specifically examining the role of the RMT within two of Britain's relatively strike-prone industries, the mainline railway and London Underground networks.¹ Methods of research include extensive tape-recorded semi-structured interviews with a range of strategically placed RMT informants at different levels of the union, analysis of documentary industrial relations and trade union material, and personal fieldwork observation. The paper provides evidence of the RMT's success, and examines the key components of its union organising and strike mobilisation approach, combined with a number of other important broader contributory factors. It also explores some crucial limitations and problems with the approach, before concluding with some broader generalisations about organising, union activism, militancy, revitalisation, politics and leadership.

Union membership growth and bargaining gains

Although RMT organisation on the railways and London Underground survived Thatcherism and the 1980s without suffering any crushing strike defeats, the imposition of privatisation and Public-Private Partnership (PPP) respectively in the 1990s and early 2000s were fairly traumatic developments. They impacted negatively not only in terms of the fragmentation of bargaining, more flexible working practices and loss of jobs that resulted, but also in terms of the strength and vitality of union organisation. On the railways in 1993, in the wake of two 24-hour network-wide all-grades British Rail (BR) strikes in protest at the threat posed by impending privatisation, there was the ending of the union subscription check-off facility for the RMT (although not for ASLEF). This plunged the union into a financial crisis and, combined with the subsequent impact of privatisation and widespread voluntary redundancies, resulted in the union's total membership shrinking from 117,783 in 1990 to a low of 55,037 by 1999 - a loss of 62,746 or 53.3 percent. The ending of BR's 1956 *Machinery of Negotiations*, with its previous national, regional and local-level collective bargaining arrangements, scrapped an entire stratum of senior union officials and led, initially at least, to a widespread sense of disorientation. Likewise on London Underground, the 1992 imposition of the *Company Plan*, involving completely new contracts of employment, working arrangements, and collective bargaining structures across the network, represented a serious defeat for union organisation with the loss of some 5,000 jobs between 1993-1994 (Darlington 2001:10). The subsequent introduction of PPP further undermined the strength of union organisation, notably with a marked decline in membership on the privatised maintenance side. Yet paradoxically, subsequent years have seen a relatively successful revitalisation of RMT membership and organisation on both the railways and London Underground. At this stage we can note just two important features of this achievement.

First, the union has succeeded not only in stemming the relentless decline in membership it has experienced, but also, unlike many other unions, in recruiting substantial numbers of new members in recent years. Membership increased during the period 1999-2007 from 56,037 to 75,939, a rise of 37.3 percent (see Table 1). Membership levels had already started

¹ The vast majority, over 60,000, of the RMT's membership, work either on the railways or London Underground.

to improve slightly in the late 1990s and early 2000s, as the union began a process of reconstruction, involving a new direct-debit dues system which helped to recover lost ground amongst some lapsed members. But the election of Bob Crow as general secretary in February 2002 undoubtedly marked a significant turning point, with membership growth quickening its pace, rising from 59,277 in 2001 to 75,939 in 2007 (an increase of 28.1 percent). Even though the absolute numbers are not large, it means the RMT is one of the fastest growing unions in Britain. In the process, the union has successfully secured new forms of representation amongst contract cleaners on London Underground (2004) and won new union recognition agreements at Heathrow Express (2007) as well as railway infrastructure companies McGinley, Renown and Grant Rail between 2004 and 2006. Overall there remains a relatively high level of union density on both the railways and Tube (although it inevitably varies between companies and amongst different groups of workers), an important bellwether of potential union capacity and influence.

Second, the RMT has provided verifiable evidence of its ability to deliver substantial material improvements in members' pay and conditions, something which has been achieved invariably through the threat and/or use of strike action. Thus, the union has won numerous above-inflation pay rises, as well as the 35-hour working week on many sectors of the railway network and London Underground (plus an annual 52 days leave entitlement on the latter). It prevented attempts by Network Rail (2004) and other rail companies (2006) to end final salary pension schemes for new starters, and it contributed to bringing the return of infrastructure maintenance in-house in Network Rail (2003), stopped the privatisation by Network Rail of Merseytravel maintenance staff (2005), prevented Metronet on the London Underground from outsourcing maintenance staff to Bombardier (2005), and forced Transport for London to agree to take over and bring back in-house the failed Metronet contract (2007). In addition, there have been many other forms of collective bargaining success, including the industry-wide campaign by railways guards on train operating companies to prevent the introduction of driver-only operations that would erode guards' safety responsibilities (1999-2007). Compared with the setbacks experienced by many other unions in recent years, such gains have been impressive.

Strategic orientation

Any explanation for how and why the RMT has been able to obtain such membership growth and collective bargaining gains has to start by examining two features of the union's strategic orientation, namely, its distinct organising initiative and strike mobilisation approach.

Organising initiative

A nationally-coordinated union organising approach, backed up a small but energetic London-based "Organising Unit" was set up shortly after Crow's election in 2002. But unlike other unions, which have employed specialist teams of paid 'organisers' trained through their own or TUC academies and sent out into the field to kick-start campaigns on the union's behalf, the RMT's 'Organising Unit' has focused more on mobilising the energies and participation of the union's reps and activists themselves to recruit new members. At the same time, organising has been conceived not merely in terms of recruiting new members, but with an emphasis on the development and creation of active, self-sufficient and sustainable reps as the foundation of the union in the workplace, able to provide effective representation.

Thus, the 'Organising Unit' has played a central role in encouraging the process of recruitment and organising, with a tremendous amount of resources made available, notably hundreds of thousands of pounds and a continuing supply of new recruitment and publicity material. Numerous different specific company/grade leaflets (for example, aimed at drivers, signallers, track workers, Network Rail, Virgin and so on) as well as general agitational literature have been produced, in each case stressing the need for an all-grades industrial union. The union has provided specially produced special RMT shoulder bags stuffed with recruitment and organising materials such as brochures, stickers, pens, baseball caps, flags and whistles, aimed at making the union highly visible. It has produced training material aimed at helping new reps to address potential members about the virtues of membership at induction sessions for new employees. DVDs have been manufactured to help inspire existing, new and potential members by highlighting the campaigning, fighting, democratic and participative nature of the union. A union call centre has been established to phone around and re-recruit lapsed members, and a new residential training centre was opened in Doncaster (in October 2006) to provide company-specific training courses for reps (15-20 per week) on paid release from work.

Nonetheless, the main organising effort has come from the union's *own members* on the ground, and this has been manifest in a number of ways. Thus, each of the union's regions has held periodic 'organising weeks' to recruit new members and build the strength of local organisation. Planning meetings have identified recruitment targets using information gained from branch development plans and regional councils, with efforts then concentrated in specific areas with local reps and activists (some on paid leave) approaching workers in the targeted companies with a view to recruitment, usually through a 'one-to-one' approach. For example, the North West RMT regional council during one organising week in 2006 successfully recruited catering workers at a mainline station, infrastructure workers based at three depots, and cleaners at two stations. In the south west, a local organising committee covering train operating company First Great Western studiously went through membership lists, identified weak points of organisation and successfully recruited nearly 200 members in just two months. Likewise across the country individual branches have engaged in local recruitment and organising efforts, paying particular attention to encouraging prospective union reps to stand for election with the aim of build long-term structures that can strengthen workplace union organisation.

Of major significance has been the emphasis placed on recruiting new members beyond the traditional railway core groups (of train drivers, guards, signallers, track workers, station staff) to previously neglected groups of workers. Eurostar provides a vivid example of this broad-based recruitment and organising drive. In 1994, when the new company was formed, there were only twenty union members based at the main engineering maintenance depot. But with an increase in employment at the depot, the expansion of the Eurostar operation to other sites and the internal organising efforts of local activists, union membership increased c.700 members to embrace the majority of the new and varied workforce, skilled and unskilled, manual and white collar, male and female. Thus, RMT membership now includes maintenance staff at the company's two engineering depots, depot-based cleaners as well as on-board cleaners (employed by private companies), Eurostar customer service staff, including many female bi-lingual staff and *bureau de change* employees, security staff (employed by Chubb Security), call centre employees, and clerical staff and IT professionals.

Meanwhile, two groups of unskilled, poorly paid and vulnerable workers specially targeted on the railways in recent years have been catering and cleaning staff. At mainline railway stations, the union has been able to win new members from amongst the growing numbers

of catering staff under a sole union recognition agreement with franchisee Select Service Partners (SSP) UK Rail. The union has also put considerable effort into recruiting and building union organisation amongst train catering staff, often employed by a variety of private catering companies sub-contracted to the different train operating companies. Likewise cleaners, many of whom are immigrant workers, have been successfully targeted, including both those employed to clean railway stations and those who pick up litter on-board trains employed by private companies. On London Underground, there has also been a vigorous 'Living Wage' organising campaign aimed at cleaners employed by privatised companies, which involved network-wide strike action in 2008 and the recruitment of hundreds of new members (albeit this has involved some inter-union rivalry with Unite (T&G) who have also been actively recruiting cleaners).

One important feature of the RMT's organising initiative has been the attempt to invigorate new activists - to motivate not merely the union's regional officials, 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. An 'Organising Unit' officer explained:

The big change we're making is that we're focusing much more on people who are not reps ... They're the people who don't go to the branches or regional council, but from our point of view they're a representative of the RMT in the workplace because they're the ones who often go around encouraging people to join. They've been really energised by what's been happening with the organising strategy.

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.

Strike mobilisation

The second crucial ingredient to the RMT's organising approach has been the explicit rejection of social partnership and accommodative forms of labour unionism in favour of resistance and strike mobilisation as a path to the reinvigoration of union organisation. As one Bristol railway train driver explained:

One of the reasons why people join the RMT is because in the post-Thatcher age, with the rise of managerialism, workers feel as though they need a badge of pride, sort of two fingers at the bosses. I think part of that identity is that people with no politics at all, who have never voted in their life, who don't have a parent who is in the Labour Party or on the left or anything like that, the ordinary worker wants to be a member of an organisation that they see as standing up to management. The badge of identity for an RMT member is being prepared to take strike action. They might not have always voted for strike action, but they know that being in the RMT means being prepared to take strike action. And that's different from other unions who seek to achieve by negotiation.

Not surprisingly employers, government and others have condemned such strike activity. For example, the London *Evening Standard* (29 June 2004) has commented: 'They are throwbacks to the pre-Thatcher days of militant trades unionism ... with an easy formula of impossible demands followed by immediate threats of industrial action as a device to bounce managers into making concessions they cannot afford.' Nonetheless, over the last decade in many different sections of the privatised railway network and London Underground, the RMT has balloted in favour of and/or engaged in 24-hour and 48-hour strikes on numerous occasions, on issues such as pay and working conditions, pensions, and the effects of privatisation. On London Underground between January 2000 and August 2008, the RMT balloted for industrial action on 31 occasions, engaging in strikes on 17 different occasions. On the railway network during the same period, the RMT balloted for industrial action on 56 occasions, engaging in strike action on 32 different occasions. Many of these actions have been more than one-day strikes and more than single one-day strikes.² Per thousand members, the RMT has probably organised more ballots for industrial action and more strike action than any other union over the last 8-10 years (although this has also been encouraged by the large number of separate bargaining units created in the wake of privatisation and PPP on the railways and Underground respectively). Almost every single one of its ballots has returned overwhelming majorities in favour of action amongst those voting. As one RMT member was reported as remarking: 'The union never loses a strike ballot because we trust the union and we don't trust the management' (*Evening Standard* 27 February 2006). Even though South West Trains guards in March 2003 and Network Rail signalling staff in May 2008 both voted against strike action, the union has won majorities for industrial action in at least 82 different ballots on the railways and Underground during the period 2000-08.

Building support for ballots for industrial action and the very process of strike mobilisation itself has provided the RMT with an important focus and opportunity to recruit new members who can be encouraged to vote and join the strike. It also obliges the union to regularly gather and update information about existing members, so that employers are less able to challenge the validity of ballot results in order to gain court injunctions (which could then force the union to call off the strike). Although strike ballots have sometimes been used as a form of sabre-rattling within the bargaining process, strike action has often been held with devastating high-profile public effect. For example, a 48-hour strike by 2,300 Metronet infrastructure workers on London Underground in September 2007, to secure guarantees over jobs, conditions and pensions, shut down the vast majority of the network, inconvenienced 3m people and caused an estimated £100m of damage to London's economy (Darlington, 2008, 2009). A Metronet RMT rep explained the dramatic impact on union membership and organisation:

The strike ... helped to boost the morale and confidence of workers ... [W]e recruited literally dozens of new members across the board, mainly operational staff ... When we had our first strike ballot after PPP we had 1,500 members and in the recent dispute we balloted 2,500, so over a 2-3 year period we have gone up by 1,000 people. ... It has resulted from a lot of hard work, going round, one-to-one contact, checking membership lists, pinning down people who were in our areas and identifying non-union people ... We produced lots of our own branch literature, newsletters, branch minutes out to everyone, and anytime anyone got any

² Figures have been compiled from a variety of published and unpublished sources emanating from the Office for National Statistics, employers, the RMT, newspaper reports and elsewhere. See Darlington (2007, 2009).

information it was from us, with an RMT logo on it ... People generally believe we're the only players on the block and the only ones worth joining.

[W]e've [also] had lots of victories over recent years and there is nothing like success to bring more success. ... So if you keep winning things, even if you're not winning big things, but continually winning, it gets more and more people involved and they see it is a worthwhile endeavour. ... And we have far more reps and activists now; in fact, we have more people wanting to be reps than we have reps' positions, which has got to be a good thing because it means you have proper elections.

Other significant advances in membership and union organisation, albeit less dramatic, have occurred in a number of different parts of the railway and London Underground networks, particularly where strike action has been threatened and utilised as a means of leveraging concessions on pay and conditions from employers. For example, a one-day strike in 2004 by Eurostar customer service staff increased membership from 40 to 220. Likewise, strike mobilisation successfully forced employers to grant union recognition in some areas. In other words, the RMT's strike mobilisation strategy has been important in boosting the self-confidence of workers and their sense of collective power, which in turn has both attracted new union members and reinvigorated existing members who see the union is prepared to fight and can demonstrably 'deliver'.

Further factors contributing to organising success

Whilst the RMT's organising and strike mobilisation approaches have been crucial ingredients to building the vitality of union organisation, a number of other objective and subjective contributory factors need to be recognised. First, a highly significant contextual industrial relations factor has been the operational vulnerability of the railway and underground networks to strike action, with the RMT's strategic position, both industrially and within society more generally, obviously providing it with enormous potential bargaining power. Even localised one-day strikes limited to individual train operating companies or one Tube line have impacted significantly, while on a more dramatic scale the prospect of an *industry-wide* railway strike has threatened to affect a complete shutdown of the network to commuters, as the RMT's planned 24-hour strikes over the defence of final salary pension systems in 2004 and 2006 vividly demonstrated. The nature of both transport industries, with their tightly integrated service networks which are not easily substitutable by other means, provides an important source of workplace bargaining power in which stoppages of work can have much greater and immediate impact than many other industrial sectors. Moreover, unlike many public and private sectors elsewhere, both rail and underground have experienced massive expansion in terms of capital investment and passenger and freight traffic. In 2007, with an estimated 3m people using the national rail network every weekday, rail travel had reached its highest level for almost fifty years, with a projected increase of 30 percent by 2015. Likewise on the Underground, passenger journeys have increased by over 25 percent over the last 15 years.³ This buoyancy has undoubtedly contributed to boosting the RMT's bargaining leverage and confidence *vis-à-vis* employers, as well as providing union recruitment opportunities within an expanding workforce in many areas.

³ Network Rail (2007) *Business Plan 2007*, Transport for London (2006) *A Rail Strategy for London's Future*, Transport for London, *Annual Report and Statement of Accounts 2006-7*.

Second, it is of significance that the RMT is a relatively small, clearly defined and specialist 'industrial' union that organises across the transport sector (including not only the railways and Underground but also freight haulage, parcel delivery, rural bus services, licensed taxi firms, and the maritime and offshore oil industries) to include and embraces *all* grades of employees and different occupations, including skilled and unskilled. This industrial unionism and inclusive all-grades nature of the RMT has provided it with a clear core motivational identity in day-to-day organisational and political practice, encouraging a high degree of attachment and loyalty to the union, even amongst diverse groups of employees who might otherwise be members of other unions. On the railways such industrial unionism, and its related strategic and coordinated national forms of organisation, has been crucial to helping the union respond to the challenge of fragmented company-level bargaining and the spatially uneven pattern of industrial relations. As one Arriva Trains activist explained:

When people work on the railway they develop some kind of chemistry, there is camaraderie ... people will interact from all the different companies, the platform staff will talk to the guards, and everyone talks to each other whoever they're employed by. Through that communication the trade union forms a big part - it's the union that gels everyone together in the railway industry irrespective of the company you work for.

At the same time the RMT has been able to offer members a strong occupational identity *within* the broad transport sectors in which it organises, for example with separate national committees for traincrew and shunters grades, signalling grades, engineering grades, catering grades, station staff and associated grades, etc. Such intra-organisational structures have helped to increase the profile and autonomy of such occupational groups, and in turn bind them together within an all-grades industrial-wide form of identity and organisation (Wilson 2007).

Third, also of crucial significance has been the role of national leadership, primarily the general secretary, in transforming the RMT, with a change in the leadership being both cause and effect. Bob Crow has noticeably stamped his oppositionist leadership style towards the employers and the 'new' Labour government on the union and helped to shape strategic and tactical issues, with a consistent stress on so-called 'old-fashioned' virtues of collectivism, solidarity, resistance and activism. As one activist noted:

Since his election victory, Bob Crow has taken a lead in encouraging a fighting trade union platform, supporting strike action where necessary, refuting social partnership, and breaking with the Labour Party, and so on ... Bob's election was a breath of fresh air, because the whole cautious approach that the union had had, which had done us no good whatsoever, [was overturned]... overnight we had a figurehead who - rather than trying to block activists on the ground - wanted to take on an employer, who would actively encourage it. He would look at reasons to go into dispute rather than reasons not to, which was totally opposite to what we had seen beforehand ... I think that in itself has encouraged people to join us, because they can see that there is somebody there who does want to do something for 'me'.

Of course, managerial belligerence in the wake of privatisation and PPP has also helped to encourage such a militant union stance, with a high proportion of strike ballots and strikes essentially reactive and defensive protests against perceived managerial attempts to drive through efficiency gains, worsen conditions of work and undermine collective union organisation. In the process, there has been Crow's high-profile public face – with name recognition among the union's membership very widespread – regularly responding with press releases, radio interviews and television appearances. His open antagonism towards

employers has contributed to the process of union confidence, activism, mobilisation and recruitment.

Fourth, the RMT has maintained a highly democratic form of union structure and organisation, involving a relatively high level of activism, which in turn has also contributed to the union's organising success. In this respect, the reform of union government that occurred in the wake of Crow's election was highly significant. As a consequence, there is now election (rather than appointment) of all national and regional EUOS (who are subject to re-election after five years) and a directly elected lay-member Council of Executives (whose members must relinquish their post after three-year terms of office). In addition, central decision-making powers lie in the hands of the lay national grade conferences and the Annual General Meeting (with delegates excluded from attending for more than a three-year successive period). All of these internal democratic procedures have helped to stimulate devolved activist engagement. Meanwhile, one of the paradoxes of privatisation of the railways, with its fragmentation of organisational structure and collective bargaining, has been that it has encouraged new and wider layers of union rep and activist than existed under the old form of centralised national negotiations. As a consequence there is a large milieu of assertive and combative lay workplace reps and activists at different levels of the union, who have played a crucial role in advocating and winning support for the mobilisation of union members in collective action against employers. Such activists have clearly been important in 'framing' issues, pitting them in antagonism to management, 'mobilising bias' (Batstone *et al.* 1977, 1978) to win strike ballot votes, and displaying leadership and organising skills.

Fifth, there is a significant layer of left-wing political activists inside the RMT who also appear to have been crucial to the task of building union organisation and industrial and political mobilisation (Darlington 2001, 2007, 2008, 2009). Such a left-wing tradition has developed in part from the ideological and practical activities of unofficial caucus groups established on both the railways and tube from the late 1980s and early 1990s. These sought to revitalise the union's internal democratic structures and to directly challenge the moderate industrial and political leadership of the incumbent general secretary, Jimmy Knapp, and the EUO grouping around him, in particular for failing to mount sufficiently robust opposition to the impending privatisation of the railways and subsequent part-privatisation of the Tube. Such networks meshed together leading union officials and activists, members of left-wing groups and much broader layer of independent non-party industrial activists, and played a highly influential leadership role, with an industrial strategy of militant opposition to management informed by a left-wing political agenda.

One important fruit of the left's rising influence and the combative mood of the union's members in the wake of privatisation/PPP was the huge majority in support of Crow's election in 2002, following Knapp's death. Crow, who had been a supporter of the left caucus (as well as a former member of the Communist Party and Socialist Labour Party), was elected on a platform of creating a 'fighting trade union' that would campaign to roll back privatisation, and his victory was a manifestation of a new found sense of militant solidarity in the face of the perceived 'betrayals' of 'new' Labour. Despite a sustained media red scare campaign, electoral victories for the left at different levels of the union and Crow's overwhelming re-election in 2006 have further confirmed this trend. As a consequence, although it no longer has any formally organised grouping as such, the RMT has had a wide loose network of prominent left figures (from Crow and EOUs to Council of Executive members and lay union reps and activists on the ground) with fairly explicit left-wing political values, ideology, motivation and commitment, who from the early 2000s have been

increasingly influential in shaping the union's rejection of social partnership in favour of the use of strike ballots and mobilisation of members as the means to win concessions. This has made it easier for an internal union culture of militant oppositionalism directed towards employers and 'new' Labour, combined with robust collectivism and assertive style of leadership, to pervade the union (especially on the Underground).

The influence of the left inside the RMT was most decisively demonstrated in the crucial role it played – following 'new' Labour's refusal to accept the union's loyalty pledges of re-nationalisation of the railways, scrapping of part-privatisation of London Underground and repeal of anti-union legislation - in encouraging the union to progressively reduce the number of its members affiliated to Labour, cutback its affiliation fees and permit support for other political parties to the left of Labour such as the Scottish Socialist Party. This resulted in its expulsion in 2004 from the party it had helped to set up 100 years earlier. In January 2006, following an initiative from the union's left elements, the union hosted a conference open to union activists from other unions to discuss 'The Crisis in Working Class Political Representation' which made clear the gulf between the union and 'new' Labour over privatisation, employment laws, the war in Iraq and other matters. In the meantime the union has taken the initiative to sponsor the launch of a National Shop Stewards' Network, viewed as the first step to revitalising the grassroots of unions and building a 'fighting union movement'. Finally, the RMT has taken some important steps to broaden the agenda of labour unionism by making common cause with a range of social movements, including high profile support for the Stop the War Coalition and Unite Against Fascism, and participation at the anti-capitalist European and World Social Forums. All these initiatives have been well supported by left activists in the union's different regions and branches, and have marked a limited but notable attempt to reorient the union as a social actor towards a broader political agenda.

Limitations and weaknesses

Despite its undoubted successes, there remain formidable limitations and weaknesses in union organisation on both the railways and Underground. Some of the internal and external organising constraints involved are common to other unions (Heery and Simms 2008), while others are more distinctive. To begin with, the fragmentation of the industry into numerous different segments has presented formidable challenges to union organisation. As one activist commented:

In the past under BR, you had a union branch in Carlisle which dealt with the one set of BR negotiations affecting all the different grades. But once you had privatisation and fragmentation then there were something like 20 companies operating out of Carlisle and so the union branch struggles just to get through the correspondence.

Inevitably, there is considerable unevenness in membership density between individual companies and different specific grades within companies. On the railway network, drivers, signallers and guards are some of the best organised, industrially sophisticated, and highest paid of the RMT's membership, with perhaps a stronger sense than others of their own grade cohesiveness and special interests. But the union has had varying results when it comes to organising less well paid grades of staff - such as station and booking office staff, infrastructure workers, cleaners, catering staff, and some of the fleet maintenance depot operatives. For example, whereas density among Network Rail signal staff is about 90 percent, amongst privatised 'permanent-way' track workers it can be as low as 20 percent in some companies.

Differences in levels of membership and organisation in different sections of the rail network generally can be explained by a variety of potential factors, including the nature of the job, workers' strategic position, degree of collective relations, and extent of employer opposition. For example, the highly sophisticated HRM strategy adopted by Virgin Trains on the West Coast line, with its attempt to recruit a new, young and company-loyal workforce, and to effectively undermine existing union organisation through the provision of alternative voice mechanisms, combined with the very wide dispersion of the workforce geographically, has posed a significant challenge. Likewise, South West Trains have attempted to frustrate union organising by preventing reps from attending induction courses for new employees at its large Basingstoke depot (although they continued to provide facilities for ASLEF and TSSA). But an additional contributory factor to the state of organisation is the level and quality of activism on the ground. For example, membership among the traditionally well-organised guards section at Waterloo station fell dramatically in recent years from about 70 percent to 40 percent arising from internal personal and organisational divisions, before being addressed.

The rail infrastructure sector has proved particularly difficult for the RMT. After privatisation, with the separation of the running of trains from ownership of the track, a split between operations and infrastructure, a relatively well-functioning integrated service was transformed into a highly fragmented business. Although in 2003 Network Rail took over direct ownership of infrastructure maintenance (thereby bringing 18,000 workers back 'in-house'), it still utilises the services of four private renewals companies who in turn subcontract out work to hundreds of other companies engaged on track work, involving many thousands of workers only a minority of whom are unionised and many of whom are casually employed. Even in Network Rail, where it is a lot easier for the RMT to operate, the process of reorganisation and absorption that has taken place has resulted in a patchwork quilt of different terms and conditions of employment that has undermined the process of union collectivism.

Amongst some low-paid groups, notably catering and cleaning staff, there is also the perennial problem of turnover undermining the stability of organisation. With reference to station catering workers, one Manchester Piccadilly rep explained:

The big problem you have - and we have recruited a lot of them from Burger King, Costa Coffee, all of them - is the turnover. You can go through a recruitment exercise and sign a load of them up, but go back another two months later and they're not there anymore.

Another obstacle has been the existence of deeply-rooted inter-union rivalries, notably with ASLEF who enjoy a higher level of membership amongst train drivers, with the consequence that the RMT have often been carved out of train operating companies' drivers' bargaining forums. Such divisions have been compounded by inter-union disputes over competitive recruitment tactics, with the RMT sometimes adopting a self-defeating hostile 'red union' approach to ASLEF. Furthermore, the RMT is now faced with the threat posed by Unite, which in 2007 announced a 'memorandum of agreement' with ASLEF and heralded the future of 'an arrangement in which [its] resources and influence nationally would work alongside ASLEF's enormous influence within the rail industry', with the sum of £15 million to be spent on future organisation and recruitment. Inevitably, the RMT has been concerned that the two organisations may, indeed, be moving towards merger, further threatening its influence in the future.

But in addition to these broad constraining factors, there have also been some limitations with the RMT's approach to union organising and revitalisation. With regard to strike mobilisation, it seems that new members have only been recruited when the union appears to be winning significant gains. But when the union has proved unable to significantly influence the collective bargaining agenda through strike action it has actually lost members. This is what happened following a campaign of 14 24-hour Sunday strikes by Virgin Cross-Country guards in 2006 over payment for productivity changes. Virgin mobilised train managers from across the company (and co-franchisee South West Trains) to successfully strike-break, with the result that the dispute collapsed and a number of RMT members were lost. Although in the wake of these disputes, some of the lost members were subsequently won back, this case is illustrative of the problem faced on occasion and the high stakes that strike ballots and action can involve. Likewise, on the Underground there has on occasion been sharp criticism of RMT EUOs by local reps for settling disputes and calling off threatened strike action on terms that have been perceived as falling short of original demands (Darlington 2008).

Meanwhile, there has also been some internal resistance to the RMT's 'Organising Unit's approach by a layer of activists/reps who have raised probing questions raised about the perceived lack of any clearly defined or articulated organising 'strategy' as such, with the absence of a policy statement that contains strategic aims that could be subsequently assessed in the light of experience. Likewise, it has been claimed no systematic methods of data collection have been adopted to measure what progress has been made, beyond overall membership growth; for example, in terms of a detailed breakdown of membership figures in specific sectors, and evidence of increased union density or reps' representation. In addition, disquiet has been expressed at the limitations of the 'Organising Unit's all-inclusive membership recruitment approach of 'throwing the net into the sea and reeling in anything they can', with its explicit attempt to dissolve any distinctions between the so-called 'periphery' as opposed to 'core' workforce.

Nobody has opposed the attempt to recruit and organise catering, cleaning and security staff and other marginalised groups of transport workers. On the contrary, there has been a recognition that the RMT's predecessor, the National Union of Railwaymen, successfully organised early twentieth century Burger King-equivalent employees in railway hotels, stations and train buffets, as well as laundry workers, seamstresses and any other workers who in any way had some connection with the railway industry on the basis of syndicalist-inspired industrial unionism (Bagwell 1963, 1982, Wojtczak 2005). Nonetheless, as a Council of Executives member explained:

There is an argument ... as to whether we should be targeting the core or the periphery, and I would say within the core grades that the union has historically represented – permanent way, signallers and telecoms, guards, station staff, drivers and others – there are huge areas where we have allowed union density to plummet and union organisation to atrophy. I am told in the south-east region, the level of organisation among infrastructure workers is down to 25 percent in large areas, so there are big problems in some areas which we haven't addressed. But there has been a reluctance or even hostility to regarding some workers as 'core' and some as 'periphery'. Well, I think it is nonsense to say we don't make selections as to who we want to organise ... It depends on what you think a union's purpose is. If you are simply trying to recruit people in terms of trying to increase your membership then it might be a good reason, but what can you deliver? How can those workers be best organised?

As a result, a regional council took the initiative, ironically independently of the 'Organising Unit', to suggest there should be a change of emphasis towards a hitherto neglected strategic sector of the railway, specifically targeting the 50 nationwide train maintenance depots – employing some 20,000-25,000 workers employed by over 20 different companies. In 2008, leading local reps from the sector met and produced a *Workers' Charter* pamphlet and launched a highly successful membership recruitment campaign which, unlike the 'Organising Unit' approach, has been anchored around a set of specific collective bargaining demands. Similar targeted campaigns in other sectors, for example amongst engineering track workers, have now been advocated. This is posed not only on the basis that this is where the railway's core workforce is concentrated, where industrial muscle is strongest and where there is still a tremendous amount of effort needed to recruit new members and strengthen union organisation, but also in terms of the potential spill-over effect on other 'peripheral' groups of workers. Indeed, at two First Great Western train maintenance depots, not only have skilled engineering staff been recruited as a result of the new approach, but also large numbers of cleaners.

Meanwhile, the rapidly changing social composition of the industry's workforce has also posed new challenges. In addition to Virgin (see above), London Underground has undergone a similar change (with currently a 16.7 percent female workforce), and this has also included a significant transformation in ethnic composition, with large numbers of African, Asian, and East European workers joining a longer standing West Indian element. But such changes have not been adequately reflected within the RMT's own representative structures. For example, the union has around 8,250 female members nationally, representing less than 11 percent of its membership, although the proportion is higher on London Underground where there are larger numbers of female station staff. Moreover, all EUOs are male and always have been, and the national executive is all male and has only ever had two women members. Regional council and reps' organisation is highly male-dominated. Ironically, for a union that formally embraces notions of social movementism, the lack of adequate female representation may reflect not only the gendered nature of the occupational areas in which it often organises (compared to administrative grades where TSSA has a base), but also its overall 'workerist' approach, with propaganda and agitation tending to concentrate almost exclusively on traditional narrow issues, such as pay and conditions, to the neglect of a wider bargaining agenda.

Finally, there is the dilemma that having broken from 'new' Labour whom should it support politically? Although broadly sympathetic of forces to the left of Labour, the RMT has thus far been unwilling to commit itself to wholehearted support for any of the existing small parties and has not used its authority alongside other left-wing led unions (such as the FBU and PCS) to attempt to organise the nucleus of a new broader-based, union-sponsored and potentially more credible alternative left-wing political formation. Instead, it has operated a multi-faceted strategy of building political alliances with a variety of different forces, which has even included reinvigorating its parliamentary Labour group. But this approach has, for some activists at least, failed to take advantage of the potential for a new independent political party to the left of Labour that could itself form a component part of the process of revitalising the union.

Conclusion

Some conclusions and make broader generalisations from the chapter can now be made in relation to current debates about union revitalisation, whereby a number of important linkages between organising, militancy and revitalisation can be identified. At a fairly simple

level, the study highlights the direct link between union orientation and action (Bacon and Blyton 2004). Thus, the ideological orientation of the RMT – involving not just its distinct application of an organising and strike mobilisation approach, but also its broader leadership and left-wing political approach – has been highly influential in shaping the specific nature of membership action and the potential fortunes of the union (see also Frege and Kelly 2004, Milkman and Voss 2004, Turner and Hurd 2001). In turn, it has been the politicisation of industrial relations arising from the process of privatisation and PPP, with all the restructuring that has been involved, which has also encouraged membership discontent and its manifestation in a ‘militant’ and left-wing political union orientation and leadership. In other words, the *process* by which the RMT has organised and attempted to rebuild the union – a process which stands in sharp contrast with most other unions – has been shaped by both ideological and practical factors, by both ‘strategic choice’ and broader environmental contextual influences.

With reference to the *outcome* and consequences of such an approach, the chapter underlines the important link between union effectiveness and membership growth. A number of studies (see, for example, Bryson 2006, Charlwood 2003, Jowell *et al.* 1997) have suggested that one of the principal reasons why British workers generally are not joining unions in greater numbers is that they are often viewed as simply not being ‘effective’ enough. Kelly (1998:48-9) noted the central problem faced by unions is the perception that they may be too weak to ‘make a difference’ to the solving of workplace injustices and, therefore, employees may not think they have something tangible to gain from membership. Yet if the RMT’s experience of significant growth in membership in recent years is an indicator, it would seem that what has attracted workers to join has been its apparent ability to deliver in terms of obtaining manifest improvements in pay and conditions, as well as in providing some insurance against arbitrary employer actions. Of course, the relative returns to members have not been the only factor determining union membership levels, but it does appear to have been an important feature.

There also appears to have been a direct link between militancy and such union growth and revitalisation. Thus, in order to be in a position to extract concessions from employers, the RMT has adopted a combative stance, often involving collective mobilisation and the threat of, and use of, strike action. As Bob Crow has commented: ‘I think when they see the unions fighting, people will join’ (*Financial Times* 13 February 2004). In other words, while the union’s influence in the workplace has undoubtedly derived in part from its strategic industrial bargaining power, it has also come from the union’s effective strategy and tactics, including its ‘organisational effectiveness’ (Bryson 2006) as a vibrant advocate of both its members and potential members, and its ability able to involve a wide activist base. Such an adversarial stance, and the benefits it has bestowed, contrasts with the more accommodative forms of trade unionism adopted by many other unions as part of their own organising approach.

Another linkage has been between revitalisation and democracy. Hyman and Fryer (1977) assessed a number of specific influences on union democracy, including the degree of membership homogeneity, extent of skill, status and educational qualifications, strength of occupational identity, and the size and distribution of membership. But in addition, it was noted that union government is affected by the prevailing conception of union purpose, whereby the broader and more ambitious the union’s objectives, the more likely the members will become active participants. In the case of the RMT, the union’s organising and strike mobilisation approach has been both cause and affect to such democratic tendencies. Attempts to regularly mobilise members to take strike action, the vigorous encouragement

of membership activism, the union organising drive, and the broader left-wing politically-informed objectives that shape union policy have encouraged democratic processes, and in turn such democratic processes have helped to shape the union's approach, its organising success and the energising of the activists. The significance of mobilisation theory has also been underlined, notably in terms of the role of union activists in identifying, formulating and articulating grievances as well as organising collectively for redress through the mobilisation of members and through union organising and recruitment (see Kelly 1998).

Finally, the experience of the RMT appears, to some extent at least, to belie the view of commentators (see, for example, Brown 2008, Charlwood 2004, Gospel 2005, Metcalf 2005) who have assumed unfavourable economic and political constraints severely limit the scope for unions to undergo significant revitalisation through organising, and that the unions, rather like the biblical Lazarus, will need a miracle before they can come back to life (Coats, 2005). In fact, despite continuing formidable obstacles of both an internal and external nature, a number of which are common to those unions which have adopted a more accommodative organising approach, the RMT has clearly been able to make some significant gains for both its organisation and members. The union's alternative approach to organising and revitalisation has undoubtedly been influential in this respect, albeit not without its own limitations and weaknesses. Nonetheless, the experience of the RMT also highlights some of the relatively favourable specific industrial contextual features within which it has operated, despite the overall challenges posed by privatisation and PPP, which has also been an important contributory factor to success, and which are not necessarily present elsewhere. In other words the scale of the RMT's *subjective* accomplishments cannot necessarily be assumed to be automatically replicable by other unions (for example PCS) that operate in less favourable *objective* contexts, although the overall organising approach may be transferable.

Table 1: RMT Membership figures 1990-2007

Year	Membership
1990	117,783
1991	114,101
1992	105,126
1993	85,653
1994	67,981
1995	59,250
1996	60,142
1997	56,337
1998	56,470
1999	55,037
2000	57,869
2001	59,277
2002	63,084
2003	67,476
2004	71,544
2005	73,347
2006	74,539
2007	75,906

Source: Figures provided by RMT, and are at year end.

Note: The 1990 figure is a combined figure that includes the ex-National Union of Railwaymen (NUR) and ex-National Union of Seamen (NUS), in 1989 the NUR membership figure was 102,639. In June 2008, RMT membership leapt to 81,000, boosted in part as a result of the merger of the Oil Industry Liaison Committee (OILC) as well as by continuing organising successes across different sections of the transport industry.

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