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Article Title: TUC Organizing Academy 10 years on: what has been the impact on British unions

Year of publication: 2008

Link to published article:

<https://www.tuc.org.uk/publications/viewPub.cfm>

Publisher statement: None

The impact of the Organising Academy on the union movement

10
years on



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Acknowledgements

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Contents

5 Introduction

7 The first five years

9 The 10-year evaluation

Approach

Demographics of organisers: where are they now?

Organising Academy training: how effective has it been?

The tension between servicing and organising

Promoting cultural change

Pay and status of organisers

Networking between unions

Organising Academy impact on unions

20 Challenges for the future: where next for the organising academy?

22 Conclusion

Retention of organisers within the union movement

Career progression for organisers

The relationship between servicing and organising roles

Spread of organising culture

And finally...

25 Further reading

26 Notes

Section one

Introduction

Ten years ago, in 1998, the Trades Union Congress (TUC) established its Organising Academy (OA) as part of its wider 'New Unionism' project. Responding to the dramatic year-on-year decline in trade union membership over a 20-year period, plus significant changes in the labour market, which had eroded the traditional base of union membership, the New Unionism project aimed to develop a culture of organising that could help to transform unions by bringing in new and diverse members.

Previous initiatives to revitalise union membership in the UK, including the ideological shift to 'New Realism' and 'credit card trade unionism', had proved ineffective, with membership falling by some six million members between 1979 and the mid-1990s. 'New Unionism' marked a new approach for the TUC characterised by a willingness to work alongside the New Labour government on issues of common interest, but also engaging and promoting a new organising and campaigning agenda.

The Organising Academy, inspired by similar initiatives in the US and Australia, was established as a flagship programme under the 'New Unionism' initiative with explicitly transformational objectives¹. The TUC, working with OA sponsoring unions, hoped to target groups of workers that were under-represented within the trade union movement (including young workers, service sector workers, black and minority ethnic workers and, to a lesser extent, women workers). The aim was to encourage unions to invest more heavily in organising activity and to attract new people to work in the trade union movement as organisers, policy makers and officials. In addition, there was a hope that the initiative would encourage unions to expand into workplaces and sectors that were poorly unionised, to adopt a particular approach to organising activity that emphasised member involvement and participation, and to develop a cadre of specialist organisers – with the hope that this would help facilitate a broader renewal of trade unionism across the UK.

The key focus of the Organising Academy was the recruitment and training of a cadre of union organisers to a new 12-month long training programme designed to give them the skills and experience necessary to develop and deliver effective organising campaigns. Their key role would be to develop new organising and recruitment campaigns, but – crucially – to help facilitate and empower members and activists in the workplace. As others have noted, this type of organising was an attempt to “rediscover the ‘social movement’ origins of labour, essentially by redefining the union as a mobilising structure which

Introduction

seeks to stimulate activism among its members and generate campaigns for workplace and wider social justice.”²

The aim of this pamphlet is to look at the impact of the OA 10 years on. Essentially we were interested to find out how OA graduates have progressed since leaving the Academy. Where were they now? Have they stayed within the union movement, or moved on? Have they helped to shift unions to a new culture of organising? What problems have they faced in their campaigns? Before we look at these issues, it is useful to look briefly at the evaluation of the OA which took place after the first five years.

Section two

The first five years

At the end of first five years of the OA, a team of researchers at Cardiff University provided an evaluation of the impact of the Academy and the effect that OA graduates were having upon their respective unions³. This early evaluation of the Organising Academy and New Unionism showed that the training and development of a new cadre of lead organisers had a significant impact upon participating unions. In brief, this research found that the OA had been successful in attracting more women and younger trade unionists in to union organising roles and in turn this had impacted on the diversity of new members attracted to the union movement. Also, there was a significant difference between the traditional recruitment role and the ‘new’ organising role, such that the work of specialist organisers extended way beyond direct recruitment to include a whole range of innovative organising tasks, which tended to have a longer-term impact.

In terms of quantifiable outcomes, increased union membership as a result of organising initiatives was noted as significant to justify the investment in specialist organising jobs. While early evaluations within OA participating unions tended to focus on increases in union membership as a result of new organising initiatives instigated by OA trainees and graduates, later work took a much broader perspective, focusing on whether there had been a greater ‘cultural shift’ towards organising within unions, which encompassed all aspects of union activity. As a consequence, many unions began to better understand the inter-relationship between organising, servicing, collective bargaining and the interconnecting roles of organisers, full-time officers, researchers and administrative workers to ensure organising did not become a separate activity from other union work.

While most of the findings from this research took a positive view on the OA initiative, there were also a number of concerns highlighted. The first was the need for unions to recruit even more organisers: although OA graduates had begun to have an impact, their numbers were too few to transform union culture and activity at the speed that was necessary to counter the decline. It was essential, the research claimed, for greater investment in organising training for specialist organisers as well as for generalist and full-time officers.

The emphasis was on expansion and diffusion of the organising agenda if unions were to not only counter union decline, but rebuild the union movement such that union members and representatives were not as dependent on full-time officers as they had become over the last few decades.

The first five years

We will now look at how things have changed or progressed at the end of the 10-year period.

Section three

The 10-year evaluation

Approach

This pamphlet reports on the findings from an 18-month research project funded by the Nuffield Foundation, which was undertaken to coincide with the ten-year anniversary of the Academy. Through a survey of people who had been trained in the year-long Academy programme and a number of in-depth interviews, we look at the impact this project has had on individuals, their unions and the wider union movement. We began with the names of 215 people who had been recruited to the Academy's year-long programme from 1998-2007 and from this, we were able to locate 191 graduates who were sent an eight-page questionnaire to complete, but we were unable to find contact details for the remaining 23. From the 191 questionnaires 134 were returned, resulting in a 70 per cent response rate.

In addition to the survey, we did follow up interviews with a quarter of OA graduates in order to explore in more detail the answers they gave in the questionnaire. We selected interviewees based on a set of criteria that included ensuring a sample from each year of the Academy, by sponsoring union, gender, age, and those from prior union and non-union backgrounds. In addition to these interviews, we conducted 21 interviews with senior union officials including heads of organising, trainers and people responsible for developing organising policy.

In our survey we had responses from graduates in each of the year's intake with only a low response from year 2007 (this is likely to be due to the fact that these people were still in the early stage of their training year). These were from 28 different unions (although some of these have now merged), and ISTC (now Community), GPMU (now Unite), CWU, PCS, UNISON and Usdaw were the top five sponsoring unions among our respondents. In terms of where OA graduates are currently working, the top five unions are Amicus (now Unite), Usdaw, PCS, UNISON and the CWU – although people reported working for a total of 27 unions.

Sixty-eight respondents were female and 65 male. Ages ranged from 21 to 59 with the majority clustering around the age range 30–40. Ten per cent of the respondents were from black and minority ethnic groups.

Nine per cent had no previous experience of trade unions, almost three-quarters had been a union rep or shop steward and only 10 per cent had been union employees prior to their training. Overall, OA trainees were well-

The 10-year evaluation

educated, with 49 per cent having an under-graduate or post-graduate degree and another 21 per cent a further education qualification.

Of the OA graduates for whom we had contact details, we found 107 people were still working in the trade union movement but we also know from the contact details of those that did not respond to the survey that many of these were also still working in trade unions. From this we can say that 71 percent of OA graduates were still employed in the union movement. The fact that so many have stayed working for unions suggests that there is a great deal of commitment or dedication to the work that they do. In many respects, the finding that a clear majority of graduates have remained employed in the union movement is testament to the success of the Academy in recruiting a new cadre of mainly young, and certainly enthusiastic, recruits to their ranks.

Demographics of organisers: where are they now?

Since the OA opened its doors in 1998, a total of 240 organisers have completed the year-long training programme, most of whom have stayed within the trade union movement and are having an impact far beyond what might be anticipated from these numbers. One of the major aims of the Academy was to ensure that graduate organisers represented the diversity of union membership. Traditional routes into union jobs has been through an ‘apprentice’ system from lay rep, to branch official to full-time officer and this system had tended to reproduce a culture of male, and often middle-aged domination in the generalist officer corps of unions. The OA training programme has ensured that a new and more diverse group of trade unionists – all recruited on their skills and merit – were brought into the movement and this has begun to change the culture and profile of many unions’ workforces. Fifty-four percent of the OA year-long programme intake has been female and relatively young (the age range has extended from 21 to 59 with the majority clustering around the age range 30–40), yet despite targeted advertising, the OA has been less successful in attracting black trainees (five per cent).

So what are the graduates doing now? Of those who responded to our survey and who were still employed in the union movement, around half are employed as specialist organisers, and around half are in other roles. Those taking on other roles are, by and large, generalist officers undertaking the usual bargaining and representation roles. Some, however, are in wider policy roles such as training officers, TUC policy roles, senior national officers and other key positions within the wider union movement.

And if we look at those who have left the union movement, we see that many of them have jobs that might broadly be described as being within the ‘political’ sphere. These include working for charities and voluntary sector organisations, policy roles within the government and civil service, and working for other campaigning organisations. One graduate is an MP, and several others have either stood for election or have expressed an interest in

doing so. In this sense, the impact of the Academy and the organising approach that it promotes is far wider than just within the community of those paid as organisers.

Organising Academy training: how effective has it been?

It is clear from the findings from the questionnaire that the vast majority of graduates rate the Academy as being effective or very effective at improving basic organising skills such as identifying issues, recruiting members, planning campaigns and identifying new workplace activists (see Table 1).

Table 1: Rating the effectiveness of the training received at the OA (% of respondents)

Outcome	Effective or very effective	Neutral	Very ineffective or ineffective
<i>Improving your ability to:</i>			
Identify organising issues	89	8	3
Recruit new members	81	14	5
Plan campaigns	82	12	6
Identify new activists	83	12	5
Develop union organisation	77	15	8
Solve organising problems	74	18	9
Research organising targets	59	30	12
Identify sites for organising	52	38	10
Train other organisers	50	31	19
Deal with the media	51	30	19
Deal with employers	25	40	35
<i>Improving your knowledge of:</i>			
Organising techniques	86	9	4
Organising in other UK unions	54	29	17
Equality issues	51	29	20
Organising in other countries	30	26	44
Employment law	26	37	37
Internal union procedures	24	39	37

(n=129-132)

The responses were less emphatic when they related to some of the broader and more strategic aspects of organising work such as dealing with employers, identifying sites for potential organising campaigns and disseminating organising practice through training others. This is reinforced by Table 2, which shows OA graduate's responses to a question asking about their views on the balance of the content of the training they received.

The 10-year evaluation

Table 2: Do you feel that the Academy training year gave or is giving appropriate emphasis to the following activities? (% of respondents)

Activity	Too much emphasis	About right	Too little emphasis
Direct recruitment of new members	6	89	5
Recruiting activists	0	87	13
Promoting workplace organisation	1	88	11
Promoting the organising agenda	8	82	10
Planning organising campaigns	2	82	15
Encouraging recruitment by activists	1	78	21
Identifying targets for organising	5	66	29
Researching workplaces targeted for organising	5	63	33
Training activists in recruitment	0	62	37
Preparing organising material/literature	1	55	44
Representation of individual employees with problems (grievances)	0	52	48
Negotiation with employers over terms and conditions	3	40	57
Negotiation with employers over recognition arrangements	4	32	64

(*n=122-129*)

Whilst there is a clear, majority view that the training included sufficient and appropriate emphasis on core organising skills (member and activist recruitment, campaign planning, promoting organising ideas), some organisers felt they would have like training which would have helped with the transition from organising work to negotiation, representation and recognition – skills they felt are also necessary for organisers to do their job effectively. While these are not covered in any depth in the initial one-year training programme, they do form the part of the training on the Organising Academy's Advanced Organising Programme, which graduates are entitled to take as follow-up training.

The tension between servicing and organising

Many unions have now adopted dedicated organiser posts so that if servicing issues arise in organising campaigns, such as negotiations with employers or individual representation, these are passed over to generalist officers. Organisers report that, in practice, it is often difficult to separate servicing and organising activity completely, yet feel they are given little room for manoeuvre, as their remit is too tightly restricted to organising activity. It was felt that, although it should not be a significant part of their job, there are times when it is necessary to do some servicing activity – not least in order to build credibility with workers and members. As one organiser explained:

In my other union organisers had a more of a crossover role, they did take up grievances and disciplinary issues in their own organising campaigns. I've often made a case that we should have done that as well. Because when you build up a level of trust in the campaign team and then when somebody's got a problem you have to call for the guy with the Mondeo. That kind of belittles your role to be honest, but in terms of my union, we were not asked to do grievances and disciplinaries.

This can be particularly problematic as recent evidence suggests that poor planning of this transition, or poor integration of serving and organising, can undermine the effectiveness of organising activities, with workplace membership and activism falling away if it is managed ineffectively⁴. In interviews, OA graduates attributed this to a division between servicing and organising roles that they perceived as being particularly problematic and that made it difficult to carry out their work effectively.

I am a big believer that you need to organise to service and service to organise.

.....

I became an officer and when you are an officer you get dragged into the whole servicing mode.

Promoting cultural change

Central to the objective of creating a cadre of specialist organisers was the idea that a key part of their role was to promote broader cultural change. Although most OA interviewees were able to give examples of changes, there was a strong feeling that in some instances they were battling against an entrenched culture that was still focused on a servicing members rather than trying to teach them to self-organise.

One organiser from year one of the Academy articulated what was necessary for wider cultural change:

I think there is a role for specialist organisers. Yes, everyone should be a generalist [officer] in that sense, but I think you do need dedicated organisers, almost to prick the conscience of everybody else, and to show how it's done and to put the time and effort in. So I would say [we need] a combination...if we can. I mean I'd love to say that officers have to do a couple of years organising before they come through the process, because I think that's when you bring culture change, but I guess we're a long way off that.

This was also evident in the responses OA graduates gave when asked about potential problems they may have encountered during their training period. Table 3 shows that the majority of respondents felt there was still an absence of an integrated organising tradition within their unions which created problems in trying to instil an organising culture throughout the organisation. Clearly, this might be expected, as part of the purpose of involvement in the

The 10-year evaluation

OA was to change the unions' culture towards organising, yet interviewees revealed that progress in this area had been much slower than anticipated.

Table 3: How important were the following problems in hindering your own work with your sponsoring union? (% of respondents)

Problem	Very important	Fairly important	Not important
Absence of an organising tradition within your union	43	26	31
Lack of commitment/experience of workplace activists	35	42	23
Lack of support from full-time officers of your union	33	38	28
Employer opposition to unions	33	32	35
Inadequate union systems/information	30	42	28
Excessive demands on your time and energy	30	40	30
Lack of access to targeted workplaces	23	29	48
Lack of support from lay officers	21	39	40
Lack of resources	18	37	45
Difficulty in identifying workplace activists	17	38	45
Your own lack of experience	13	37	49
Rivalry from other unions	10	30	60

(n=125-129)

It is a noteworthy finding that a high proportion of interviewees felt that they are still battling a dominant culture within which organising activities and an organising approach are very much seen as a minority activities. Although a number of unions have begun to send their officers on organising training programmes, the numbers of generalist officers taking these courses are as yet quite low. As one person noted, the number of people working in UK unions that have undergone organising training is low, compared to the number of people active in unions.

It is felt that the organising culture has yet to spread into other areas of unions, particularly the officers and lay activists. Unsurprisingly, organisers think that such a cultural shift will take a long time to have effect:

I think to believe that you can achieve that kind of a transformation in 10 years would be optimistic and hugely naive, I think. It's turning a very, very big ship and I think that it's been nudged into a slightly different direction, but it's far from turning its course, I think.

In addition, many felt that their unions still have a tendency to think of organising in terms of recruitment, not as building lay-member organisational structures that are able to challenge the dominant power of the employer and where members are self-organising and self-servicing. In some ways, it is difficult to know how to interpret these findings and perhaps a note of caution should be added in response to these points. It is possible that organisers'

training has sensitised them to feeling that organising is a minority activity when in fact a culture change may have taken place (however slowly). However, this point notwithstanding, it is clear that there is still scope for British unions to increase their investment significantly in organising and recruitment.

Pay and status of organisers

Despite the fact that some OA graduates – particularly from the early years – are now employed in very senior roles within the union movement, this is not the case for the majority of organisers. There remains a common perception that organising is an entry-level role, and there is often little opportunity for promotion other than to generalist officer posts. In terms of pay, organising work is clearly less valued (in monetary terms) than that of other generalist union officials. Many interviewees reported that pay was substantially lower than equivalent officer grades. A consequence of this was that organisers felt the need – often reluctantly – to move on to other roles within the union, where they did not have the same opportunity to spend time on organising activity.

We found that a significant minority of graduates are frustrated with the way in which their employing union understands and applies ideas about organising. Specifically, organising approaches that focus more on quantitative recruitment targets rather than building membership structures appear to be a source of frustration for some organisers. However, overall organisers generally remain positive about the opportunities for their unions to change and develop, but the sense of working within an entrenched culture is palpable and they often see their ability to promote this kind of culture change as constrained by their junior status:

If you want an organising strategy to work and you want committed people, it's not about them getting thousands of pounds, but it's about getting what is the rate for the job and the rate for the job is an officer's rate.

.....

If you have organisers paid less than officers you automatically have a problem: either they use it as a stepping-stone to become an officer and we lose all of our very good organisers.

Networking between unions

There is strong evidence that the formal and informal networks developed during the Academy training have remained extremely influential in the subsequent careers of graduates. Indeed, as researchers we depended heavily on these networks to secure contact details for graduates. Interviewees spoke openly about how helpful they found this support as it gave them the sense

The 10-year evaluation

that there were other people trying to promote organising both within their own unions and beyond.

One of the positive consequences of the Academy training has been that it has promoted inter-union discussions and facilitated a flow of information and ideas within unions. Firstly, the classroom-based sessions bring together organisers from different unions into an intensive residential training environment for three or four days at a time. The groups remain constant over the year and friendship networks develop. As one person said of his OA year intake, “We had a great sense of camaraderie.” This facilitates many kinds of discussion, including what has happened in particular unions, challenges and frustrations of organising in particular contexts, and ideas about what works and what does not. Unsurprisingly, many of these networks have continued after the training year and have formed the basis of continuing discussions in relation to developing the organising agenda.

There is an important development because before the Organising Academy a typical career path for a trade union officer was to work as a shop steward or workplace representative and then to move into a role, usually as a paid generalist officer within that union. Occasionally, officers may have received training from the TUC with officers from other unions but this was relatively infrequent. Unless the union merged, it would also have been relatively unusual for officers to move between unions as their careers developed. By contrast, 39 per cent of Academy graduates who still work in the union movement have already worked for another union. Sometimes this has been out of necessity (typically the end of a fixed-term contract), but often it has been out of choice. This represents a very important shift in the career patterns of officers and further facilitates the sharing of information and ideas within and between unions.

I think one of the best things was definitely the networking.

.....

I do think the networking has been absolutely paramount to me...because I knew that I'd got somebody to ring who would understand how difficult I was finding it in my first, second, third year. So I think that kept me alive.

.....

The biggest benefit of the TUC Organising Academy was seeing what people did from different unions and different techniques and comparing to what you were doing in your union...You saw a cross section of the trade union movement all together and it was good to share your experiences.

Organising Academy impact on unions

In terms of the wider impact of the TUC Organising Academy, one of the most notable impacts has been the spread of specialist organiser training to

individual unions. Specifically, the TGWU section of the Unite union, the GMB union and Usdaw have all established their own, in-house training programmes. These programmes demand closer attention as they signal important developments in ideas about the purpose and practice of union organising activity in the UK.

Unite (TGWU national organising strategy)

Prior to its merger Amicus to form Unite, the TGWU had been experimenting with a number of innovative approaches to organising activity. Specifically, it had rejected an approach that focused on organising individual workplaces, in favour of a more co-ordinated sectoral approach. It established a National Organising Strategy in 2004 that involved a phased recruitment and in-house training programme for over 100 dedicated organisers. These 100 organisers have been through an intense period of training, similar to that provided by the OA but tailored to the sector specific approach. The TGWU has also been successful in increasing the diversity of its officer corps by recruiting from within specific campaigns as well as from outside the union:

Equalities lies at the heart of our organising agenda. We are changing the face of the union. One third of our organisers are women; they are also the League of Nations, coming from all over the world. We have to look like the world of work of the 21st Century, putting equal pay and equal treatment centre stage.

The Unite (TGWU) National Organising Strategy is based upon an approach that is “strategic, sectoral and global”. Using corporate and economic research strategies to map various sectors, the union has attempted to forecast where they need to be in the economy in two, five and ten years time. From this, growth areas in the economy have been identified and are given priority in the national organising strategy. The strategy has provided some significant organising growth, meeting a target of 10,000 new members per year, plus recognition wins in difficult sections of the labour market such as Flybe, where a massive 94 per cent voted for recognition on a remarkable turnout of 89 per cent.

Another sector where there has been success is the poultry industry where thousands of migrant workers have been recruited and where a successful combine has been established with over 50 senior lay activists from the big three companies that dominate the industry, Bernard Matthews, Moy Park and Grampian. Contract cleaning and the high profile Justice for Cleaners campaign, has continued to dominate media headlines in London enabling negotiations to take place on zonal agreements by way of minimum standards for thousands of cleaners throughout Central London.

This organising approach has been an important development for the union and it is noteworthy that a national officer, who is a graduate of the first year of the TUC Organising Academy, heads this initiative and who explicitly acknowledge the influence of the TUC training programme on the strategy:

The 10-year evaluation

I pay tribute to what the TUC did because there is no doubt about it – the Academy helped to put organising on the map.

GMB – mainstreaming organising work

In sharp contrast to the Unite (TGWU) and TUC approach, the GMB has adopted a view that employing specialist organisers can risk making organising activity a separate activity within the union – something that ‘those organisers’ do, rather than integrated into the daily work of everyone who works for the union. In an explicit effort to overcome this potential difficulty, the GMB have decided to integrate organising work into the roles of all officers. This has the advantage of mainstreaming organising activity as a core function of the union but previous studies of the work of union officers show that the day-to-day pressures of representation and negotiating tend to take over from the often more long-term responsibility of organising work⁵. Therefore the risk is that organising falls off the agenda in the face of the pressures of other commitments. In order to try to overcome this, the GMB has made it an essential requirement that all officers report on their organising work and that this is a key part of the objective-setting and evaluation of all officers.

In trying to achieve this approach, the GMB has therefore focused on organising training for generalist officers rather than recruit specialist organisers. There are, nonetheless, four senior organisers working in the union’s national organising department and their role is to take a more strategic overview of the companies and workplaces being targeted for organising and recruitment efforts. Similarly to Unite (TGWU), there are a number of nationally set organising target that are priority for the union and the role of the organising department is to develop a strategic plan about how membership, activism and structures can be built and strengthened in key geographical or employer areas.

The senior officer with responsibility for developing the organising approach was actively involved in developing and delivering the TUC training programme at the start, and is happy to recognise the influence of the TUC programme on the current GMB strategy.

But the specific approach of the GMB has also been informed by the particular context within which the union currently operates. This stems from an analysis that the union has expanded rapidly within key sectors over recent years and must now consolidate its position. Increasing density in sectors such as catering services, cleaning services and other contracted-out sectors will, it is hoped, increase bargaining leverage. The integration of organising work into the role of generalist officers is supported by the development of activists who specialise in organising.

Usdaw – organising in the lay activist role

Usdaw was one of the first unions to establish its own internal organising academy, which runs alongside the TUC programme. Usdaw is faced with the challenge of having a very high membership turnover each year, which is

largely a function of the high labour turnover in the retail sector. As a union of 340,000 members, this means that it has to recruit around 80,000 members each year just to keep a stable membership figure. In order to do this, it has developed a six-month organising training programme that is accessible to lay workplace activists. Typically coming from one of the large retailers with whom Usdaw has good recognition rights, lay activists are given a secondment from their full-time job in order to participate in the programme. The union pays their employers the equivalent of their wages and the employee is released to work for the union for the six months of the programme with the expectation that they return to their usual job at the end of the training.

During the six months, the union trains them to go into workplaces with a key focus on recruiting members, identifying activists and identifying issues that are relevant to that workforce. Again, the training is highly influenced by the TUC programme, but is narrower, is specific to the kinds of workplaces within which Usdaw is recognised, and is assessed with fewer written assignments. USDAW argues forcefully that this is a clear example of how partnership and organising can sit alongside each other. And the results are impressive; the union has grown from 310,000 to 340,000 members in the past four years.

Section four

Challenges for the future: where next for the organising academy?

The work of the TUC Organising Academy has developed considerably since the launch of the year-long programme in 1998. Since then, new initiatives have been put in place in order to further embed an organising culture within the UK union movement.

In 2004, a Leading Change programme was developed in response to discussions about the desirability of strengthening and developing the support that the TUC gives to senior union officers – an issue identified as important in our research:

I think the leadership thing is key.

....

Our leadership were very clear that this wasn't primarily about recruitment and numbers – it was far more about establishing structures and that kind of thing.

.....

We have got a very proactive leadership and that's cascading downwards. I think we are all inspired and encouraged by that greatly.

In total, 85 senior union figures have undertaken the leading change programme from 33 unions or union organisations. The programme, delivered in partnership with the London School of Economics, Birkbeck College, and the Labor and Worklife programme at Harvard University, and featuring contributions from senior academics and international trade union leaders, includes modules called Organising Unions in a Changing World; Changing the Way We Work; and Strategic Campaigning, Organising and Building Coalitions. As one participant noted:

It was extremely useful to step out of a hectic union life and spend time considering the approaches adopted by other unions in the UK and around the world to the changing environment in which trade unions have to work.

In addition to this programme, the TUC organising and recruitment team has also established an Advanced Organising Programme and an organising course for union officers and staff. This sixteen-day programme is taught in four blocks of four days and covers key concept relating to organising. In addition, there are now bespoke courses for specific unions and a number of courses on particular aspects of organising such as Organising Beyond Recognition;

Busting the Busters; and Organising and Campaigning. These have been well attended by generalist union officers who have filled almost 1,000 places on these programmes.

The next step in the suite of TUC OA courses will be a programme for lay activists and will be in place by early 2009. A recurring theme throughout interviews with organisers was the lack of organising training for lay activists. Although it is claimed that there are currently as many shop stewards going through TUC stewards' courses as there were in the 1970s, there is not much in this type of training that focuses on the theory and practice of different organising methods.

I think the next big step has got to be about how you get down to the lay rep base.

.....

We haven't made the link for lay activists at all in relation to organising and what it means for them and the type of union that they want to be members of.

.....

I think [lay organising training] is in its infancy. It's not enough for the lay reps just to do their steward's training and their health and safety training. It is not teaching them how to actually look at their workforce and to get help from their own people to back them up in the workplace. So recently we have been setting up our own organising training linked with stewards' training.

The Activist Academy is a new initiative, supported by the TUC and unionlearn, to respond to the relatively low levels of activist organising training. The programme aims to increase lay reps access to organising training and support union efforts to engage lay reps and stewards in the organising agenda by linking classroom training on organising and recruitment with practical organising and campaigning activity.

Together, these developments reflect a considerable extension of the work of the Organising Academy to consolidate and build on many of the strengths of the programme to date. By broadening the focus of those who receive training on organising, it is a clear intention to promote a debate about the implications of different approaches to organising activity within different unions. Each approach within each different sector, context and union culture creates different challenges and debates about the broader renewal of the union movement. The TUC's objective over the past 10 years has largely been to start the debates so that individual unions can craft specialised responses that suit them and their members. It is evident from these more recent developments that, having successfully started that debate, the TUC now sees a role for itself to take forward those debates to different levels of the union movement.

Section five

Conclusion

Retention of organisers within the union movement

A high proportion of OA graduates have remained employed in the trade union movement, with around half employed as specialist organisers and half in other positions. Of those who remain in organising roles, frustrations were expressed about the generally low status of organising and the relative lack of opportunity for promotion and career development. Indeed, it is precisely these pressures that have pushed many of those into a different role. Nonetheless, a high proportion of both specialists and generalists report that they use their organising skills in their current roles and this reflects a perception that people who have been trained as organisers continue to have an ‘organising perspective’ even when they are in other roles.

In this regard, many of the OA graduates see a clear role for themselves in promoting an organising culture within their unions and beyond, even though they may not be directly employed as specialist organisers themselves.

Career progression for organisers

Not only is there a perception that organising is a lower level role but also there is a lack of career progression open to most specialist organisers. There are relatively few senior organising roles available across the UK union movement, which means that organisers have to move beyond their specialism in order to move up the career ladder. Whilst this is not inherently problematic, previous research (Heery 2006) indicates that they are likely to lose an organising focus, and become involved in broad, but shallow, organising endeavours. Given the long-term and intensive nature of greenfield organising work (Gall 2005), this suggests a rather pessimistic vision for the future with these specialists being unable to use their skills as they become more senior.

The relationship between servicing and organising roles

A central finding of the research has been the persistent view that an unintended consequence of the decision to create specialist organisers is that organising and servicing roles are institutionally separated, causing perceived problems for organisers in integrating their activities and ideas within the wider culture of their employing unions. This has implications for broader questions about union renewal. First, this division of specialist functions appears to have entrenched the divide between organising and servicing activity. Heery (2006: 454) indicates that although recruitment work seems to

have become more central to the work of generalist officers over the past 10 years, this appears to be in addition to the central representation work. This work intensification of union officers perhaps explains why some specialist organisers perceive a resistance to a more broad-based cultural change.

Spread of organising culture

Clearly, in purely numerical terms, the number of year-long Academy-trained organisers employed in the union movement is not a high proportion in relation to the number of generalist officials. The best estimate of full-time officers working in UK unions is around 3,000⁶ and the number of OA graduates is now around 250, so they only represent a fraction of union officials. However, given their small numbers, OA graduates have, in the words of TUC Deputy General Secretary Frances O’Grady, “really punched above their weight in the trade union movement”. The aim was that the OA would be a catalyst for change where a new cohort of union officials would, through their respective unions, attempt to spread a new culture of union organising. In this respect the OA initiative has been extremely successful. Some OA graduates now occupy senior positions within the union movement and are responsible for strategic organising planning.

The spread of organising programmes to generalist officers and introduction of union specific organising academies – all influenced by the work started by the OA – has dramatically increased the amount of organising activity taking place.

And finally...

In launching the Organising Academy in 1998, the TUC’s intention was to create an impetus for change. Its aim was to promote organising as central to union activity and the mechanism by which unions could grow and regain their influence with employers and government. It also wanted to encourage unions to allocate resources to union activity and to employ specialist organisers to take this agenda forward. It was a bold initiative as some were sceptical that a centralised programme – organised by the TUC – would have sufficient backing to make it work. Yet, testing the outcomes after 10 years against the original aims and objectives, the project has clearly had a degree of success – not least the spread of organising programmes within other unions. Many union organising initiatives have helped to increase the diversity of union membership – the movement now has majority female membership and an increasing number of black and minority ethnic workers. Migrant workers have been the target of many organising campaigns, showing they are as willing as UK-born workers, if not more so, to join and become active in their unions.

Despite this, there is still much work to be done. Union membership, although rising significantly in some unions – particularly those who have adopted an

Conclusion

organising approach – remains stubbornly stable overall. The TUC estimates that at the current rate of growth it will take over 200 years to reach the membership figures of the late 1970s. As such, there is a need to broaden the base of the union movement if union membership is not to become the preserve of public sector workers and there is much work to be done to find ways to organise among young workers, who have a very low rate of union density.

One call that is increasingly being heard is the need for unions to have a higher visibility in local communities. To date, this has been problematic in that it has been left to trades councils to fill this role and as they are run on a part-time voluntary basis – often with little resource – they are unable to do much organising work. However, as the UK union movement consolidates into larger and more generalised unions, there may be greater potential and resource to establish union offices that can provide localised services to, as yet, non-unionised workers. In the US, there has been a growth of locally based workers centres that have either operated as pre-union organisations or have formal links with unions to provide advocacy and organising training for workers.

While these have often been formed by migrant groups, locally based workers centres may provide way of raising the profile and visibility of unions – providing a route into the movement to those workers working in non-unionised workplaces.

Other calls have included the need for unions to invest more of their income in organising and to give greater consideration to develop the synergy between learning and organising, particularly as evidence appears to suggest that it can lead to membership growth⁷. Some unions have seen considerable membership growth in some sectors and unionlearn reports that 59 per cent of union learning reps have reported that they have seen an increase in recruitment retention as a consequence of their activity⁸.

Unions are also continually pushing for legislative change in order to create a better climate in which to organise and, as has been seen, some unions have begun to develop broader international organising strategies as a means of countering the global nature of capital and its ability to divide workers in different nation states.

Of course, none of these strategies or approaches can be undertaken alone. Innovative and responsive approaches to organising that fit different groups of workers in different sections of the labour market are essential if the movement is to find ways of rebuilding itself.

Section six

Further reading

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Section seven

Notes

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⁴ Markowitz, L. (2000), *Worker Activism After Successful Union Organizing*. Armonk, New York: ME Sharpe. Simms, M (2006), “The Transition From Organizing to Recognition: A Case Study” in *Union Recognition: Organising and Bargaining Outcomes*, ed. G. Gall, Routledge, pp. 67-180.

⁵ Kelly, J., and Heery, E. (1994), *Working for the Union*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

⁶ *ibid.*

⁷ Moore, S and Wood, H, (2007) *Union Learning, Union Recruitment and Organising*. London: unionlearn.

⁸ Holgate, J. (2007) *Union Learning in the CWU: An Examination of the Educational Needs and Learning Aspirations of CWU Members and Proposals for Future Provision*. Report for the CWU.



Published by
Trades Union Congress
Congress House
Great Russell Street
London WC1B 3LS

