

Organising to win



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Introduction

British trade unions are on the way back. Two-thirds of TUC affiliates have grown in size since 1997, and a sharp upward trend in new collective bargaining deals saw 500 companies draw up recognition agreements last year.

The eight case studies in this pamphlet help show how and why this is happening. Although Labour's employment law reforms and continued low unemployment have helped, the real key to success has been the development of an organising culture across the trade union movement.

Over the last four years, the TUC has helped train 150 (mainly young) organisers through the Organising Academy, while more individual unions are hiring specialist organisers, setting up organising units and targeting non-union companies in their determination to adapt and survive.

There are many lessons to be learnt from this union renaissance, but three stand out from this short study.



- Specialist lead organisers have been crucial, using their planning and organising skills to mount successful campaigns in a range of different settings. The Organising Academy and associated initiatives in individual unions have helped develop a body of organising expertise that was almost certainly lacking in the movement five years ago.
- Building the union on the ground has been done by the workers themselves, with organisers and other "external" union contacts providing support, expertise and resources. All the campaigns have relied upon reps, shop stewards and activists to recruit members, lead worker opinion and, in many cases, plan strategy through an organising committee.
- Every campaign has been built on the issues the workers themselves care most about, and unions have often shown great sensitivity about tackling problems without appearing to undermine an industry or employer. Through practical, concrete help, they've shown that collective organisation is the most effective method for winning at work.

But organising is not an easy option. It may be expensive, difficult and time-consuming, and spreading the union message in small companies, flexible workforces and high-turnover industries requires long-term commitment.

This pamphlet shows how some unions have recovered lost ground, built organisational strength and expanded into new territories. Above all, it demonstrates that organising must remain central to the new union agenda.

This just in... unions back in the news!

The last two decades have been tough for newspaper journalists as proprietors have torn up recognition agreements with the NUJ, slashed pay rates and given their managers free rein to play the bully-boy.

But the NUJ is on its way back. Since June 2000, it's clocked up more than 55 new recognition deals (most of them voluntary) and extended the protection of collective bargaining to 5,000 newspaper and magazine journalists.

And where bosses have dragged their feet, they've more often than not simply been putting off the inevitable. The Central Arbitration Committee backed the union's case for recognition at the Bristol Evening Post earlier this year – the first crucial victory at the most anti-union regional group, Northcliffe Newspapers.

With recognition delivering tangible benefits, and NUJ chapels re-launched or strengthened in newsrooms across the country, it's no wonder the union has had its three best years of recruitment for 30 years.

This collective confidence boost has enabled members to go on the offensive winning substantial pay increases at Greater Manchester Weekly Newspapers, the Bradford Telegraph and Argus and the Express Group amongst others.

A strong union tradition in journalism, and continuing membership and organisation in many offices where the NUJ had been de-recognised, have both helped the campaign.



Jeremy Dear,
NUJ General Secretary

"Thanks to us rebuilding collective organisation at work we've done more in the past twelve months to tackle low pay than we were able to do in the previous ten years"

And the union's been careful throughout to present recognition not as an end in itself but as a way to claw back the fall in relative earnings.

In every workplace, they've made a point of building accurate lists of potential members so everyone would get the union message, and the union would be able to forecast the results of ballot votes.

There are plenty of targets left and, if it is to regain all the ground it lost, the NUJ will have to crack some of the toughest employers in Britain with limited resources.

To boost its chances, it's appointed a new assistant organiser to build up membership in magazines and book publishing and is sponsoring a trainee at the Organising Academy, who will be helping members secure recognition in new media including at Ananova, the first stand-alone, online news service where the NUJ has established chapel organisation.

Even if there's still lots to do, this means everything's currently going according to plan, says General Secretary Jeremy Dear. "The whole idea was to build a picture of success and generate a tidal wave of recognition deals across the industry. Thanks to us rebuilding collective organisation at work we've done more in the past twelve months to tackle low pay than we were able to do in the previous ten years"



Lecturers go back to organising school

There wasn't much evidence of college lecturers' union NATFHE when Academy-trained organiser Martyn Moss first met up with the local branch at Merseyside's Hugh Baird College last year.

As so often elsewhere, de-recognition had set off a slump in membership – just one in five lecturers were carrying NATFHE cards – and local organisation had all but collapsed.

But together with the new branch secretary, Martyn launched an organising campaign to win NATFHE a place back at the negotiating table.

To direct their recruitment activity, they started by drawing up a workplace map using telephone directories, personal contacts and membership records, continually updating it throughout the campaign.



Martyn Moss, NATFHE Organiser

After just six months of campaigning, NATFHE has won back recognition and recreated a thriving, self-supporting branch.

The next step was to identify contacts in every department (nicknamed "post-people") who would spread the union message by distributing the branch's regular Recognition Specials.

Identifying these activists was crucial, Martyn says. "It meant we had a network and that was the key that underpinned the success of the campaign."

Finally, regular one-to-ones helped them find out what problems the workforce wanted tackling and get across the message that only recognition could improve conditions overall.

Management were not exactly keen on the campaign. They snubbed requests for an up-to-date staff list, refused formal access to Martyn Moss and even rejected overtures from the local MP to restore relations with the union voluntarily.

None of this could halt the NATFHE recruitment express. Membership tripled in just six months with over four out of five permanent staff signed up (success was a little slower with part-timers).

The branch now has negotiation rights on pay, hours and other conditions, a newly constituted consultative body and facilities with time-off for branch officers.

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Shot in the arm for health workers

Sandwell UNISON, which covers three hospitals in the Black Country, got an organisational shot in the arm when Academy Organiser Phil Siddle was drafted in to support hard-pressed branch officials in early 2001.

Membership had dropped below the 1,000 mark, there were only half a dozen members coming to branch meetings and a mere five officers in place.

Not surprisingly, the branch was largely dependent on outside help from regional officers to handle its casework.

Together with the few active members, Phil launched a re-organising campaign in May, beginning with a mapping exercise to identify priorities.

After analysing the results, they launched a regular newsletter and ran a series of branch open days to improve communications with members and potential members.

They sent 12 new activists on a weekend 'Winning The Organised Workplace' course, and started working on issues to make the branch more relevant.

The first group they targeted was health care assistants. Through one-to-one interviews and a questionnaire, the branch discovered a host of pay problems, the worst being that overtime was being worked in bank shifts without any premium payments.

The campaign has also targeted black and Asian workers, many of them isolated and under-valued. One-to-ones helped the branch recruit key activists, launch a communication network and set up an organising committee.

A newsletter article and open day on the issue produced a surge in recruitment and encouraged one of the assistants to become a shop steward, and the union has succeeded in putting overtime on the agenda of the trust's joint negotiating body.



Trevis Paul (Sandwell Black Members Officer), Dave Pearce (Branch Chair), Dave Prentis and Julie Bush (Branch Secretary).

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And after over 50 workers attended the first black members' meeting, Sandwell has become the first health branch in the West Midlands to set up a black members' self-organised group. A joint employer-union seminar on black workers is scheduled for November 2002.

Generating activity has attracted 200 new members, identified 25 new activists and encouraged more than two dozen regulars to branch meetings. Sandwell now has officers for women, black and young members, runs its own newsletter and is handling more issues directly with management.

All this means that after just a few months, Phil Siddle is now able to devote more time to other work in the West Midlands, and regional officers have stopped handling cases as the revived branch has gained the confidence to represent members and resolve issues on its own.

Union alliance gives tenants extra

No one offered Birmingham UNISON anything other than long odds when they launched their bid to persuade city council tenants to vote against plans to transfer the authority's entire housing stock to new landlords.

But the branch recognised there was a potentially very powerful alliance between the two groups for whom transfer could spell disaster.



For 2,000-plus council staff, new employers meant the threat of lower pay, worse conditions and possible redundancy. For council tenants, there was the spectre of rent rises, an end to secure tenancies and even demolition of houses to clear. So under the umbrella of the union's Positively Public initiative the branch launched a joint campaign to persuade the tenants to vote No, overseen by the joint union-tenants group, Defend Council Housing.

Success on the campaign trail has helped renew the branch and boost membership. More members are now active and many of those involved in the campaign have gone on to play leading roles in the branch.

Academy organiser Rachael Baker was attached to the branch to bring her planning skills to the battle ahead, developing a phased campaign plan, which included a series of events that would give ordinary union members a chance to get involved.

There were meetings with staff, shop stewards and with the union's self-organised groups of women, black, lesbian and gay and disabled members to find volunteers to help with leafleting and other activities, while 30 new activists joined the fray in response to a union questionnaire.

To reach the tenants, activists sent out mailings, handed out leaflets, knocked on doors and held public meetings to explain why they should vote against stock transfer.

An open-top bus toured the estates and the council's arguments were taken apart in the local media, with exchanges between the two sides becoming increasingly charged in the run-up to the ballot itself.

When the votes were counted, the result was a resounding No – a major reverse for the government's policy of transferring housing from local authority control.

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And relations have remained strong with tenants' groups long after the ballot results, with many tenants joining the UNISON demonstration in Birmingham's Chamberlain Square during the national local government strike in July this year.

Union logs on to computer success

It's an inspired moment that has since passed into organising folklore: community union ISTC handing out condoms at a night club, to hard-pressed staff at Scottish computer hardware firm FCI with the message: "There's more than one form of protection – join a union."

The latex moment finished off a club night for the workforce at the beginning of what turned out to be a three-year campaign to win recognition.

It all started when a former ISTC member at the non-union plant contacted the union complaining about the intolerable conditions and management style back in 1998.

The union handed the FCI brief to two of its Academy-trained organisers and launched phase one of the campaign – taking the union message to the company's sites and identifying staff who could wage the organising battle from the inside.

They used housecalls to track down opinion formers on the shopfloor who were interested in becoming activists: they formed the core of a large organising committee, mapping and re-mapping the workplace and systematically approaching non-members – if someone turned down one approach, a different activist would try again later.

Despite management's tough anti-union campaign, the ISTC won the backing of the workforce, gained recognition – and have proved their worth protecting the workforce ever since.

With the union established by the workforce themselves, helped by the ISTC organisers (and sometimes the entire organising team), it was the threat of a major redundancy programme that triggered the final phase of the recognition campaign.

The non-union staff forum declared it couldn't cope, and its entire membership not only joined the ISTC, but urged the 750 strong workforce to do the same as well. And when the union's organisers were bundled out of a car-park meeting the very next day, there was another surge in recruitment.

Despite management's tough anti-union campaign, the ISTC won the backing of the workforce, gained recognition – and have proved their worth protecting the workforce ever since.

When another 150 redundancies were announced in the wake of recognition, the new branch managed to negotiate that down to 90, and reduced the impact of another restructuring by securing the transfer of workers between sites.

Membership has continued to rise, currently standing at around 75 per cent, and management style has grown a little less confrontational, while negotiations continue to draw up a full set of procedures for grievances, discipline, equal opportunities, harassment and redundancy.

Y not join yr union 2day?

When cable, phone and internet provider Telewest told its field engineers it was introducing seven-day working and ending Sunday premiums last year, they unwittingly handed communications union CWU the recruitment tool they'd been looking for.

It was the major shake-up to the engineers' conditions that galvanised their organising campaign.

The CWU had members for around ten years within the franchises that now make up Telewest. By the late 1990s, changes of ownership had led to franchise consolidation under Telewest. In turn, this led to standardisation and a common structure throughout the UK. By late 2000, the CWU re-assessed its strategy and began a more focused recruitment campaign at Telewest that established a small body of active members. At the time, however, the union had few organisers and relatively little experience of greenfield organising and the campaign stalled. It was Telewest that kicked it back into action.

Rather than continue with a general campaign throughout the company, the union decided to focus its resources on a group of 1,500 field engineers, a skilled section with relatively low turnover.

They've sent the CWU van to many of the company's 80 depots, parking it outside the target workplace to let everyone know they're available.

And they've contacted potential members directly by calling them on the mobile phones they use on the job to invite them to pre-arranged, off-site meetings (initial contacts are followed up by text message reminders).

The forum, which serves as an organising committee to oversee development of the campaign, also produces *Your Voice*, a newsletter that goes to all Telewest CWU members at home, and has set up an internet chatroom to allow the dispersed workforce to exchange information more easily.

The meetings help identify the issues and allow organisers to sign up new members and find engineers willing to get active. Continuing simmering discontent has only swelled the ranks of new members, as the union recognises. "Management style did a great deal for our recruitment campaign," the CWU says.

In order to build union organisation, each depot or cluster of depots has got its own union section with an elected chair and secretary and – in some cases – a worker-nominated safety specialist.

As well as getting support from their local CWU branches, the Telewest sections come together in a national forum at CWU headquarters in London, laying the foundations for effective lay organisation once recognition is achieved.

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In the wake of the field engineers' campaign other groups of staff at the company have also contacted the union, and brought a new set of issues to the fore, including health and safety, management style and problems with a new sales commission scheme.

Recruitment and informal representation for these groups is already underway, even though there are no short-term plans to launch a new recognition campaign. The union has been quite open about its current focus on field operations, as well as its intention to seek recognition for other groups of staff at a later date.

The union's view is that senior management have recognised that the union tapped into management style and morale issues that needed to be seriously addressed. In July this year, the CWU & Telewest finally opened exploratory talks about recognition and issued a joint statement outlining the basis of the potential recognised bargaining unit.



Larry Cohen, Executive Vice-President of the CWA meeting Telewest activists

Travel trade staff snap up union package deal

When Thomas Cook announced it was unilaterally slashing wages in the wake of last year's terrorist attacks on New York and Washington, it reckoned without the travel trade team organisers in transport union TSSA.

The five-strong team, created just three months earlier, helped organise 1,500 workers to write to the chief executive in protest – and persuaded the company to think again.

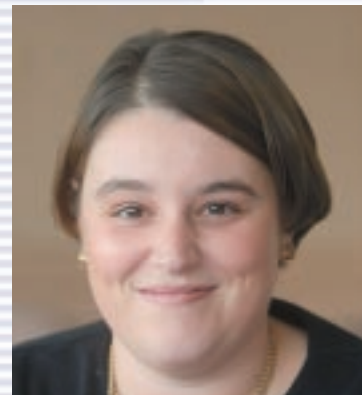
It was an astonishing victory, all the more so given the state of TSSA's membership and organisation in the sector when the campaign was launched in June 2001.

With just six reps for 5,000 staff in the company across 800 outlets in the UK, the team had their work cut out.

But within a matter of months, they signed up nearly 900 new members, boosted the reps quota to 34 and identified another 140 members willing to act as "shop contacts", handing out union information and signing up new workers.

The success at Thomas Cook gave the team a platform for a new campaign targeting First Choice, the third largest non-union travel firm.

And there are certainly issues to organise around at the company: low pay, poor working conditions and major stress – staff have to work through breaks to meet sales targets.



Tracy Booth, TSSA Organiser

The team have boosted the campaign by launching the innovative Adopt A Shop scheme, through which lay members from across the union (and some full-time officers) visit First Choice shops to establish contact and raise the union profile.

To avoid alienating the mainly young workforce who strongly identify with the travel trade, the team are stressing that their agenda of improving pay and conditions will help raise standards across the industry and reduce the heavy costs of high staff turnover.

And they've even won some backing for their message from industry groups like ABTA and the Hospitality Skills Council.

Phase one of the campaign has involved making contact with staff by dropping off copies of the union's travel trade magazine **Just The Ticket** and a postcard survey.

Phase two has seen organisers taking the union message into First Choice shops, with a discount offer on union subs to encourage take-up – over 130 new recruits have joined and there are clusters of active members across the country.

Phase three will survey the workforce to identify key issues for the organising campaign and launch the major recruitment exercise.

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They've also started talks with pilots' union BALPA, aimed at encouraging all the major travel companies to embrace the union-led lifelong learning agenda.



Media workers make headline news

When half a dozen workers at a media intelligence service got together to complain about a proposed cut in their working conditions, only the most incurable optimists might have predicted victory.

But the Micawber tendency were proved right in the case of Romeike Media Intelligence, a Swedish-owned business based in London and Peterborough.

Aggrieved staff from the two sites met up with organisers from media union GPMU – Danny Bertossa (then based in London) and Dave Monaghan in Peterborough.

Danny and Dave helped them organise a petition to protest against the planned rewrite of their employment contracts – and they gathered so many signatures, management backed down.

Later, when the firm announced 50 compulsory redundancies, a combination of leafleting outside the company and meetings and petitions inside meant that 15 jobs were saved, 33 posts deleted voluntarily and only two enforced job losses.

The GPMU organisers also helped Romeike staff set up an organising committee, which drew up the workplace maps to guide their recruitment strategy.



Relationships between the union and the company are now developing positively – with Romeike agreeing to fund training for new GPMU lay representatives in the next few months.

London MOC Carmen Szpytko says that campaigning around issues was the most important factor in winning recognition.

"People joined the GPMU because we talked to them about what mattered to them at work – we couldn't always win but they liked it when we took up their issues."

Successful mapping meant that they signed up over 200 members before they even approached management for recognition, and ensured they also had strong membership in non-production areas like IT, sales and administration – critical when it came to negotiating the bargaining unit with management.

That's why, less than 18 months after the campaign got underway, Romeike staff voted by a massive 92 per cent for GPMU recognition (in a huge 78 per cent turnout), and in August a recognition deal was negotiated with the company by a team led by GPMU Deputy General Secretary Tony Burke. Relationships between the union and the company are now developing positively – with Romeike agreeing to fund training for new GPMU lay representatives in the next few months.

With a result like that, it's no wonder that Romeike has been the most successful organising campaign in the GPMU's history!

