What is the organising model of trade unionism and is it a good or bad thing?

Introduction

Other briefings will seek to explain how trade unions derive power. Although the construction of trade union power is not simply a matter of the number of workers belonging to a union, there is a critical need for trade unions to increase membership and their ability to attract non-unionised workers to them by affecting positive changes in working lives.

What sets trade unions apart from other organisations is their engagement in collective bargaining, where they try to offset the structural advantage of employers by improving the individual workers’ bargaining position through collectivisation.

Before discussing the ‘organising model’ it is necessary to recap briefly of the ideological debate concerning trade union purpose. Questioning union purpose inevitably requires a view to be taken of the socio-economic system within which trade unions operate.

It is a common criticism of unions that they only seek to work within and reform the existing system; that they pose no serious challenge to capitalism. However, significant numbers of trade union activists and some leaders do have a real class-conscious perspective and are ultimately trying to play a part in challenging the capitalist system.

Notions of union purpose must be seen against this ideological backdrop; between the pragmatism of how they try to deliver achievable, stated objectives for their members; and, the wider vision for a fundamental change to society.

What is the ‘organising model’?

The ‘organising model’ is a term frequently used in current debates about how trade unions can increase membership and influence. However, it is generally used in a nebulous manner and without adequate definition.
At its simplest level it is seen as trying to put back into the union those things that happened at the very origins of the movement. Imagine a continuum. At one end ‘Union servicing’ is characterised by membership passivity and non-participation in the structures of the union (at any level) with employed union officials or full time activists carrying out all representational and bargaining functions for members at a distance. At the other ‘organising’ end members know they are the union, they do a lot for themselves and union staff provide a supporting role and where they provide leadership, it is as part of an active and conscious mandate given to them by members.

Central to this approach is that organising should be issue based, that is, focused on identifying and resolving grievances with the employer and by means of oppositional and adversarial collective activity. ‘Union organising’ for members promotes self-organisation, self-reliance, self-initiative, respect, participation and activism. Importantly, underlying all this is a sense of trying to return unions to their social movement origins by using a range of techniques to build organisation. It starts with a systematic approach to identifying potential members, activists, and the issues that concern them. This is often called “mapping”. Direct participation through an organising or campaign committee is facilitated. The importance of direct, person-to-person recruitment on the basis of ‘like recruits like’ and the use of media and the wider community is encouraged. Most unions are on the continuum not at either end but somewhere in between.

**That sounds right – what’s the problem?**

The organising model is, at least, is a step forward from the ‘servicing approach’, which views recruitment as an isolated activity and sees members as passive consumers of union services. That approach simply tries to sell the union to non-members and once recruited, to leave running the union to the ‘experts’.

The drive to embrace organising may have slowed membership decline but it is still in decline. The level of job cuts in public services clearly has a negative effect on total union membership. At the same time the push by employers to reduce job quality, real wages and conditions of employment should be fertile recruiting ground for unions but we have not seen the organising model, as adopted, produced significant increases in membership.

At core, the organising model is about allowing workers’ to understand the levers available to them in pursuing a collective approach in the workplace but also to recognise their limitations. There is a dangerous tendency to describe and teach the organising model as a range of politically passive techniques. It is very easy to miss the political lesson on how to mobilise workers. Simply applying a textbook approach to recruiting and organising will never work. Trade union organisers need to be able to draw political lessons from local struggles.

**Has this meant a renewed leadership of unions?**

There is no doubt that, even within the limitations of the TUC’s approach, the organising model has introduced organisers with different, ‘non-traditional’ political identities, those who some term as the ‘new social movements’. Certainly, many unions have promoted the import of younger people, women, and those from different organisational backgrounds from beyond the labour movement when recruiting paid organisers.
Nevertheless, the jury is out concerning the success of recruiting this new class of paid official, both in terms of improved workplace organisation and, from a Marxist perspective, the development of a politically aware cadre of workplace activists.

That doesn’t mean that as Marxists we should dismiss this approach. We should be involved in training activists and also working to build relationships with any new cadre of organisers, be they paid officials or workplace activists. Most importantly we need to aspire to be those organisers.

What’s good about the organising model?

The organising model accepts the importance of identifying and exploiting grievances around traditional union issues to recruit and develop workplace activists and build union organisation. The key that is missed time and again, is by those who forget the politics, in the organising model and simply see it as being about encouraging non-members to join a union and members to work collectively and act together to address their grievances. Done correctly, no matter how minor the initial organising issues may appear, this should be a significantly politicising process for those who are involved.

Is this new?

In a word, no. Teaching new organisers a few techniques to help them adopt a systematic approach to organising is worthwhile but it is nothing new. Throughout history, good union organisers have always tried to understand the environment they are working in – what are the issues and who are likely to be the natural leaders in any group. The key is not to fetishise the organising model but to embrace its converts while reminding them that this what trade unions traditionally did. Good organisers have always highlighted unjust practices and have helped form a collective approach and action for the group to adopt. But, in doing so, they have encouraged the development of political understanding through the material example of workers’ industrial reality.