

LET US WIN THE BATTLE OF IDEAS



says Frances O'Grady, who becomes TUC General Secretary in the new year

IT IS a great honour to succeed Brendan Barber as TUC General Secretary at this vital time for the trade union movement.

We are now stuck in the longest double-dip recession since World War Two – the longest slump in modern economic history.

Our economic plight reinforces the need for a strong, effective trade union movement, capable of giving hope and voice to millions of working people, their families and communities.

But for most of the last three decades we have been on the back foot. The decline in union membership goes a long way toward explaining why workers are now suffering the biggest decline in their living standards in generations.

The fact is the economy stopped working for many ordinary people even before the crash. The deindustrialisation of our economy, the boom in top pay and shareholder profits, the rise of privatisation and outsourcing all had a role to play in this failure. But just as important is the fact that union membership and collective bargaining have been in decline for the last 30 years.

We know it's because our membership is not as strong as we want it to be that we often struggle to secure as much as we want for our members at the bargaining table.

And we know too that our ability to influence governments and public opinion is weakened by the fact that fewer people have a union card.

So we need to set ourselves two challenges in the months and years ahead.

First, we need to reinvigorate our efforts to rebuild union

membership, taking trade unionism into those parts of the economy – in particular the private service sector – where trade unionism barely has a foothold.

We must reach out to the three million people working in unionised workplaces who are not union members. But we must also repackage and

**A FUTURE
THAT WORKS**

CONTINUED BACK PAGE



We must redefine what unions bring to the table for private sector workers, says Mike Clancy

THE CONSEQUENCES of fiscal contraction as the primary response of the coalition to the deficit are being felt across the UK economy. Double-dip recession and no-one outside government believes that public sector job losses will be offset by private sector employment growth. The economy is stagnant and failing to produce good quality, sustainable employment by any significant measure. In the context of eurozone crisis and slowdown in the Chinese economy, there is little room for optimism. In parallel, global financial institutions the IMF and World Bank continue to preach austerity and further reductions in government spending as the means of deficit recovery.

There are signs that political and other pressures for a credible alternative economic response are resonating. Economic stimulus as opposed to fiscal contraction is winning support, not just on the streets of eurozone countries, whose citizens have had enough of the austerity experience, but also among progressive economists and politicians who can convey the benefits of government spending in a downturn. However, a 'virtuous cycle' of government investment driving economic activity that stimulates employment growth, which in turn increases tax receipts and supports consumer spending, remains off the coalition agenda.

We can speculate about the coalition's longevity amid this continued economic failure and banking scandals, but an election before 2015 remains unlikely because of electoral peril ahead. For some ministers this is likely to be the only taste of power in their political career; they anticipate the backlash of

voters in 2015. Even so, current polling data is not a major cause for optimism that UK voter experience of austerity will be translated into a clear electoral majority for a party committed to a new economic plan.

Union reach and message

If union membership reflects our success in contributing a voice for the alternative, then we have communications issues. We know the numbers: 6.4 million members at the end of 2011; union density at 26%, and collective bargaining covering 31.2% of workers. The public/private split is stark: 56.5% of public sector workers are in membership compared with 14% in the private sector. The collapse of private sector union membership/bargaining reflects many factors: the transition of the UK economy from manufacturing to services and hostile employer attitudes to recognition. But also the quality of the union 'offer' and its relevance to private sector employees.

Competition in product and service markets, many of which are international or global, is the reality that confronts private sector employees. Success in markets determines their pay and future employment. UK capitalism focuses on short-term cost control, business merger/reorganisation and executive pay incentives to lever profit, rather than investment in innovative products and services that lead markets through their durable appeal or imagination. Progressive commentators are turning the debate to how we harness capitalism to a long-term perspective and as a means of delivering fair outcomes for the majority of



CREDIT: X

Austerity, the alternative and the union voice

We are winning the debate, but for unions to thrive, we must continually improve our workplace performance and address our look and our accessibility

■ Mike Clancy is General Secretary Designate of Prospect

citizens – not just a financial or hereditary elite. In this space, unions must argue not only for high quality public services, but also private sector trade unionism and the social and efficiency impact of collective bargaining.

Equality of misery

However, fiscal conservatives have been successful at influencing private sector workers to accept the 'equality of misery' argument. Those with limited or no pension provision, no voice through collective bargaining, unilateral employer determination of their employment conditions and punishing performance management systems, appear to want others to join them in that existence. If the private sector has poor pensions, so should everyone else. If a company gets rid of the bottom 10% of performers each year why should public sector workers have it any different? These reactions, even allowing for their partial reporting in national media, illustrate the challenge to trade unions when organising in a private sector where workers have frankly got used to having to accept what they are given.

We must reflect on why the principles of organising to resist or improve through collective means have not captured imaginations, and turn the debate to one about improving employment conditions and pensions rather than levelling down. Perhaps it is because when considering the economics of the union effect in market environments, we do not convince employees, let alone their employers, that we are not just a cost risk that will injure company performance or competitive advantage.

As I begin my time as Prospect General Secretary, I reflect that these should be conditions where our alternative economic message is resonant, our values widely shared and membership rising. We are winning the debate, but for unions to thrive, we must continually improve our workplace performance: address our look and our accessibility. We must also cogently argue for the union effect in the private sector.

Our core arguments on fairness and equality are not enough in themselves. To justify our place in an economic alternative built on long-term investment, industrial strategy and coherent regulation, we must redefine what unions bring to the table in respect of efficiency, human capital and the release of discretionary effort. That will take some doing.

Warning: they want a regional health service

National agreements in the NHS are under attack through the back door, says Amy Leversidge

THE NHS is facing numerous attacks on collective bargaining. Like other areas of the public sector, the government has chosen to unilaterally impose a pay freeze for two years which will then be followed by a pay cap of 1% for the next two years, flouting the independence of the pay review bodies. In December last year George Osborne asked the review bodies to look into regional pay linked to local markets, attempting to break down national agreements. NHS trade unions have also been facing threats from individual foundation trusts who have attempted to undermine national agreements and create their own local terms and conditions, and more recently a group of foundation trusts have formed a cartel to attempt to devise their own regional terms and conditions.

Agenda for Change was introduced nearly ten years ago and includes the terms and conditions, job evaluation system and skills framework for NHS staff. In 2007 the Kings Fund reported: "Achieving equal pay for jobs of equal value was one of the key objectives of Agenda for Change. The trust managers were generally supportive of the more standardised working hours and job evaluation based pay as providing a more transparent and fairer pay system."

The NHS trade unions have so far been successful in defending Agenda for Change and stopping foundation trusts from moving away from the nationally agreed terms and conditions, for example in Central Manchester Foundation Trust the employer was trying to withhold incremental progression by linking it to sickness. The RCM and other NHS trade unions took this to an employment tribunal who ruled in our favour and said this was an unlawful deduction of wages and was in breach of contract

expressed via the national agreement.

There have been numerous other attempts by individual foundation trusts to create their own local terms and conditions. Union campaigns have ensured none of these have been successful. However, there is a more worrying threat on the horizon; the boards of 16 south-west NHS Trusts have formed a pay cartel to join together to attempt to form their own regional terms and conditions.

A cartel for cuts

The 'South-West Pay, Terms and Conditions Consortium' wants to reduce the pay bill in the south-west by moving away from the national agreement and creating new terms and conditions. This includes potentially looking at incremental progression, increasing the working week, reviewing annual leave entitlements and reviewing pay levels, including the link with the job evaluation scheme. Shockingly, each Trust is paying £10,000 to join the cartel.

RCM and the other NHS unions are fighting to keep the national agreements in place and stop the pay cartel in the south-west. It is no coincidence that this cartel was formed just a few months after the Chancellor announced plans for regional pay. These plans have caused divisions in the coalition with senior Lib Dems saying they would not support regional pay. However, when foundation trusts form cartels to dismantle national agreements that is to introduce regional pay through the back door.

NHS trade unions are committed to UK-wide terms and conditions and we understand that it may be necessary to make some changes to the national agreement to ensure that it is sustainable.

However, NHS trade unions, including the RCM, will not agree to any changes to the national agreement without having a clear commitment by employers to retain UK-wide pay and conditions in the NHS.

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■ Amy Leversidge is Employment Relations Advisor at the Royal College of Midwives

Celebrating the National Health Service at the London Olympics opening ceremony



KESTON/USA-ZUMA/REX FEATURES

More members, more activists and a credible outcome



Dave Penman assesses the pluses to come out of the great pensions dispute

I TAKE office as general secretary of the FDA as the dust settles on what has been for my union, and many other public sector unions, one of the most difficult industrial issues for a generation – public sector pensions.

Unions are primarily here to represent and advance the interests of their members, collectively and individually. When we are faced with a significant challenge to those interests, then our actions are to be judged on how and whether we performed that role. Did we make a difference?

Unions, not always known for acting collectively at the best of times, worked tremendously well through the TUC to campaign and highlight the challenge our members faced. The 'March for the Alternative' was a success beyond even the most seasoned campaigner's expectations and helped to set a context for the initial dialogue that took place on the government's pension proposals.

Clear signal

When that dialogue failed to deliver meaningful negotiations, when it became clear that unless there was a change of approach there was no chance of a settlement, then my union and a significant number of others sought a mandate for members to take strike action to change that. Most public sector unions, again through the TUC, agreed to coordinate around 30 November 2011, no small feat in itself. FDA members voted 4:1 to support strike action on a turnout of 54%, a result that was beyond challenge by the government and sent a clear signal of the level of anger among a group of members who would not normally be expected to take strike action easily.

There can be no doubt that the inevitability of widespread action on 30 November did bring a response from the government, both in terms of the offer and

the negotiating process. Unions sought to maximise the impetus gained by 30 November in the ongoing dialogue with employers but there was always going to come a point, as it does in any negotiations, when the employer's position hardens and a judgement has to be made about whether there is any more to be gained through dialogue.

That judgement has to be based on an assessment of members' commitment to take action, the potential effectiveness of that action and consideration of whether it will be enough to influence the employer to make further concessions. Leadership in a trade union is about making those judgements, hopefully getting them right and having the courage to be honest with members about them.

Honest with members

The FDA, like a number of other unions, had that debate with its members. We influenced what we could in the negotiations and were honest about what action would be required to move the employer further. That was not an easy dialogue to have with members who were facing a pensions levy during a pay freeze and, in many cases, having to work longer for a smaller pension. Members rightly want us to protect them from unwanted change, but that is not always possible. When it isn't, or the choice is to take significant and sustained action to try to move the employer, then unions must be honest with members.

No union has come through the pensions dispute unscathed, but the FDA is stronger, with more members and activists, and played a key part in delivering a credible outcome. Our members faced a difficult choice, but we gave them that choice through a rational debate about the consequences of their vote, either way, and comprehensive guidance on what the proposals meant for them.

Rhetoric and moral outrage can only ever take a union so far. Continuing opposition because the alternatives appear to be too difficult may play to an internal gallery, but it is not a strategy for influencing members' lives. If unions find themselves in a position where they lose credibility with members and the employer, then they cease to function for the purpose they were created.

■ Dave Penman is FDA General Secretary

MARTIN HUNTER





Lessons in organising



Lesley Mercer reflects on the lessons for union organising to come out of the recent public sector pension campaign

Our starting position

When the mood for industrial action over pensions started to firm up last summer, we knew it was going to be a big organising challenge for the CSP.

We had only once run a national strike ballot before and that was well before the current balloting laws came into force so we had a lot to learn, and learn fast. Our members were scattered over hundreds of different employing organisations across the UK, and thousands of different workplaces. CSP members have never paid their subscriptions via check-off from salary, so the CSP membership data base was at most 50% accurate in terms of who our members worked for, and we held no information whatsoever on work base. Equally daunting, most of our members had no experience of taking industrial action before and were understandably wary and anxious about doing anything that might damage patient care, despite the justice of the cause.

So back in August 2011, the odds of being able to run a legal ballot and get our members out on strike in sufficient numbers to defend their hard-earned pension rights seemed rather low.

Outcome

Three months later we had the membership data we needed to comply with the law and the ballot duly took place without legal challenge. The turnout was a healthy 66%, with 86% of CSP members voting to take strike action. On the day of the joint union strike action itself, November 30, we estimate that 90% of our members took part in the action after reaching agreement on which members needed to go into work to ensure

patient safety. On the picket lines, CSP stewards were present and visible and extremely vocal.

What worked for us

There were no magic ingredients to our approach. As with all union organising, the CSP campaign came down to a mixture of detailed planning, hard graft, and the ability to motivate our members, reps and staff. Underpinning this basic approach though, we have identified a number of other factors that were key to our campaign:

Clear focus – from the start we made it clear that the pensions campaign was a priority right across the CSP and that everyone had a role to play. Other CSP work was not dropped, but it was reprioritised. Senior CSP officers, paid and elected, reiterated this message throughout the organisation at every opportunity. All CSP staff and reps were sent weekly updates on the campaign, summarising the past week's work and what was planned for the following week, so that we could ensure that everyone was up to speed and build a sense of common purpose.

Member communications – as part of our comms strategy, we produced targeted briefing materials that explained the issues at stake in the clearest way we could, testing them out for 'user-friendliness' before we published them. As new materials came out, we signposted our members to them via our weekly all-members ebulletin. We set up a dedicated email address and phone number for queries, staffed on a rota basis, and we published FAQs on our website based on these queries. Given that very few of our local stewards had ever taken part in strike action before, let alone organised it, we produced an 'ABC' of what to do in the run-up to November 30, on the day itself, and afterwards.

Face-to-face contact – rather than relying solely on written communications, CSP officers addressed over 400 member meetings in all parts of the UK in the run-up to the ballot. By the time the ballot started we had spoken directly to more than a third of our whole NHS membership to put over the information and the arguments, and to answer members' questions.

Membership data – we used all the

electronic means available to us to improve our membership records. Later on, it became a matter of all hands on deck to work the phones during the daytime, evenings and weekends. The determination of CSP staff and local reps to chase down the last membership detail so that the maximum number of members could be included in the ballot, and legal challenges avoided, was truly impressive.

Help from others – other unions with more recent experience of industrial action than the CSP were very generous with their advice to us. Our union solicitors Thompsons gave us the advice we needed, when we needed it, which also proved invaluable.

Legacy

With the benefit of hindsight, we could have done some things differently. And it has to be said that while we secured significant improvements to the government's pension proposals as a result of balloting and then taking joint union action, the final outcome fell short of what any union set out to achieve. Nevertheless, for the CSP the legacy of the pensions campaign is a strong one.

In addition to securing a better pensions outcome from that on offer in the summer of 2011, the CSP now has an excellent membership database which we are determined to maintain and extend. Having spent years trying to introduce an 'organising' approach into the CSP, we have demonstrated its value and as a result embedded it further. We have strengthened the CSP profile and the reputation of our local reps with members, managers and colleagues from other unions. Our membership levels were already high but, like most other trade unions, we have recruited additional members as a result of the campaign.

Last but not least, we have proved that when we speak on behalf of members, we do so with their support. All of these factors are important to us and we firmly believe that they will stand us in good stead moving forward.

■ **Lesley Mercer is Director of Employment Relations and Union Services at the Chartered Society of Physiotherapy, a combined professional body and trade union**

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The view from Australia

Rights at work are about to become a hot election issue, says Ged Kearney

AUSTRALIAN UNIONS have a proud history of standing up for workers' rights and campaigning for a fairer workplace relations system in which everyone is treated with respect, no matter what their job.

When the union movement comes together as one it is a powerful voice that delivers powerful results for workers in every industry.

Perhaps the most famous illustration of that is the Australian Council of Trade Unions' Your Rights at Work campaign that successfully brought down the Conservative coalition government of John Howard in 2007.

This campaign – in response to the Howard government's autocratic industrial relations laws, WorkChoices – not only brought together a collective voice for workers, but proved how unions can shift public opinion when we campaign on issues that matter to working people and their families.

Fast forward five years and we now have a set of industrial relations laws built on the principle of fairness. It's something the ACTU is eternally proud of, but our work is not done. The reality is that as soon as one campaign is done, it's time to wind up the motor and start again.

Regardless of who is in government, unions will always need to be vigilant against attacks on workplace rights.

In 2012, we face bigger challenges than ever. We have the prospect of a coalition government returning to power before the end of next year and we know they are champing at the bit to strip back some of those hard-won workers' rights.

They want to see the reintroduction of individual contracts that allow employers to unilaterally set pay and conditions, reduced protection from unfair dismissal, and even a 'white-anting' of the safety net of minimum standards in industry-wide 'awards'.

Still scarred by their experience in 2007, the coalition – now led by Tony Abbott – has sought to avoid revealing any details of its industrial relations policy. But those titbits it has let slip have been telling. They have left it to their friends in big business to ramp up the phoney war against Labour's IR laws, the Fair Work Act.

Insecurity is the new divide

All this is going on against a backdrop of working life that for many Australians is far from rosy in its current form, despite the gains made under the Fair Work Act.

The biggest issue confronting workers in Australia today is insecure work – 40% of the workforce is in casual, contract and labour hire employment.

We have seen a new divide emerge in the Australian workforce of 'core' employees – those with secure jobs – and a periphery of insecure workers. In the workplace they have no job security and fewer rights than permanent workers, including no paid leave entitlement. Their injury rate is 50% higher than for permanent workers, and opportunities for career and skills development are minimal.

Outside of work this spills into anxiety about an inability



The biggest issue confronting workers in Australia today is insecure work – 40% of the workforce is in casual, contract and labour hire employment

to make plans for the future, to achieve an appropriate work-life balance, or to even obtain a loan to buy a car or house.

The ACTU recently commissioned an independent inquiry into the issue, chaired by former Deputy Prime Minister Brian Howe. The Howe inquiry has identified a series of potential solutions and there will be a long-term campaign to win public support for changes to workplace laws.

Campaign will be long-term

Everywhere I go, workers are excited that finally someone is going to do something about insecure work.

We don't pretend it is an easy road ahead. We have many workers in insecure work who have little or no rights and at the same time there is the real threat of a Conservative government that would quickly undo many of the rights that other workers have only recently gained.

But we are in this for the long haul. We are ready for long-term campaigns to achieve our goals. We've done it before – paid parental leave took decades of campaigning before it was introduced by this Labour government.

And the success of the Your Rights at Work campaign should remind all politicians that the broader Australian community – not just union members – will stir and respond to unfair attacks on working conditions.

■ **Gerardine (Ged) Kearney is President of the Australian Council of Trade Unions**

Unions 21

BRITAIN'S INFLUENCE in the world has rarely been more needed, but the threats to that influence are growing at pace.

We are living in the shadow of Europe convulsed by a continuing currency, banking and economic crisis. We have witnessed changes in the Arab World that have brought down old orthodoxies, but have thrown up new challenges.

And with the death of Osama Bin Laden we have seen the emergence of a new era, defined more by the events of 2011 than 9/11.

Underlying these moments in history is a far deeper historical trend of the movement of wealth and power from north to south, and west to east. It is unlikely that our generation will witness a more profound reordering of geo-economics, and potentially geopolitics, than

Where do we find ourselves in the autumn of 2012?



Douglas Alexander MP,
Shadow
Foreign Secretary

the one currently underway.

This means that today, Britain risks becoming less relevant in the two key relationships which have for

decades defined our place in the world.

Less relevant in a European Union that is focused on the crisis and consequences of a currency that the last Labour government rightly decided not to join.

And less relevant to a United States weary of ten years of war in Afghanistan and Iraq – and now consciously rebalancing its priorities and its focus from the Atlantic to the Pacific.

Yet, at a time when the scope of our influence risks being undermined, this government don't seem to have a compass by which to navigate the changes

now occurring. Instead, this government has sought a foreign policy of conscious minimalism and strategic shrinkage.

They emphasise trade and bilateralism not because of a clear strategy for how our interests as a nation are best served – but because of a limited ambition for what we as a nation can today hope to achieve. Such an approach risks us being left unprepared and ill-equipped to face the new challenges that we may face in the coming years.

A government careless about the influence of the United Kingdom and

complacent about the risks the UK faces will not do justice to the proud legacy this country has overseas and at home.

Today's foreign policy environment poses real and grave challenges to this country – ones that are hard to resolve and even more difficult to predict. But to navigate these new challenges we need a coherent approach to conducting a multilateral foreign policy in an increasingly multipolar world.

The threats we face transcend borders – threats to the global economy, climate change, terrorism, food and water supplies – all requiring international cooperation to an extent not previously required.

And yet cooperation requires leadership – and this government is failing to deliver. At a time of great risks and peril, Britain deserves better.

THE BATTLE OF IDEAS

FROM FRONT PAGE

repurpose union membership to make it more relevant to the 20-odd million people in British workplaces for whom unions are headlines in the newspaper, not a lived reality in their workplace. Our message to those workers should be clear and simple – 'Join us, and become part of the solution.'

Our second challenge is to win the battle for ideas and articulate a credible economic alternative to the government's failed austerity binge.

We know many of the key elements of this alternative; an industrial policy that can rebalance the economy away from finance, a fair and effective tax system that collects the tax that too many avoid or evade, decarbonising our economy to secure new, high quality green jobs, and reforming our banking system to ensure it serves the needs of the rest of the economy, rather than just the interests of the City of London.

Under the banner of 'A Future That Works', and under Brendan's leadership, the TUC has already begun to meet these twin challenges. Together, the TUC, unions and all those individuals and organisations that believe there is a better way, have a once in a generation opportunity to forge a new political consensus, and to build a better, fairer Britain. I am sure Unions 21 will play its part in helping us take advantage of that opportunity.

Unions 21 fringe listings

TUC CONGRESS

Monday 10 September

Unions 21 in association with **The Fabian Society** and **The Young Fabians**

1pm–2pm Grand Hotel, The Albert Room

**Hit hardest, scarred longest:
Young workers during the crisis**

#youngworkers

Tuesday 11 September

Unions 21 fringe

1pm–2pm Brighton Centre, Room 8

**Extending collective bargaining,
extending union influence**

#unioninfluence

LIBERAL DEMOCRATS

Sunday 23 September

Unions 21 in association with the Social Liberal Forum

1pm–2pm Consort Room, Brighton Grand Hotel

**Pay without borders: Creating
fair pay throughout the UK**

#fairpay

LABOUR PARTY

Monday 1 October

Unions 21 fringe in association with **Compass**

1pm–2pm Manchester Central, Cobden 2

**Shared value: Negotiating
for economic democracy**

#sharedvalue

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Monday 1 October

Unions 21 in association with **Progress** and **IPA**

7.30 pm Peter House, Oxford Street

**Social partnerships: Can business and
trade unions create a new capitalism?**

Tuesday 2 October

Unions 21 fringe

1pm–2pm Manchester Central, Cobden 2

**What future? Creating opportunities
for young workers**

#youngworkers

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