

Trade unions and teacher professionalism

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Neoliberalism and public management reforms have resulted in de-professionalisation and the loss of professional discretion for teachers and other public professionals. For trade unions, this poses a question about the relationship between trade unions and professionalism of their members and whether, in campaigns against public management reforms, there should be ways of not just defending professionalism but of maintaining and developing it. At a time when teachers in FE are fighting to maintain jobs and decent terms and conditions, this may not be perceived as the most urgent issue, but it will influence the long-term future of both trade unions and FE professionals.

European and international union confederations are in a strong position to influence wider agendas for the professional development of workers, and their political agendas reflect this. Howard Stevenson, Alison Milner and Emily Winchip, in a report commissioned by the European Trade Union Committee for Education (ETUCE) as part of a project 'Educational Trade Unions for the Teaching Profession: Strengthening the capacity of education trade unions to represent teachers' professional needs in social dialogue' (2018), found that there were significant barriers faced by teachers in accessing high-quality professional development. Many cuts in public education services have reduced budgets for continuous professional development (CPD). Where it exists, the training is influenced by employer and government priorities, often being instrumental rather than encouraging reflection and critical thinking of professional practice. As a result, much training that is offered is not considered helpful for any long-term career development.

The ETUCE report found that trade unions have a critical role to play in meeting the professional needs of teachers. As career development is important for career progression, it should be seen as a trade union priority. Union members expect their union to be a voice on all workplace issues, so there should not be a separation between 'industrial' (pay and conditions) issues and 'professional' (training and CPD) issues. These are combined in the present-day workplace. If a trade union engages with both these issues, it may help to involve a wider membership and build a stronger union

(Stevenson *et al*, 2018). For example, the 2018 ETUCE campaign 'Shape the Future of Europe with Teachers' argued that 'Sustainable funding for professional development in initial training of teachers and throughout their career are fundamental requirements for a modern innovative education capable to address the needs of students in a fast-changing world', thus linking the needs of teachers with the needs of students.

Trade union involvement in professional development issues presents unions with opportunities to take part in the development of new types of professionals, who combine professional and democratic goals. This could contribute to the creation of democratic public services which value service users and public service professionals so that they support and complement each other and are not set against each other.

In many countries, social care is low status and undervalued work. The European Public Services Union (EPSU) over the last 15 years has been trying to raise the status of social care workers through increased access to professional development and training. Working with national affiliate unions, EPSU has advocated for increased access to training, which in turn strengthens the union case for increased pay and conditions. In Sweden, in 2020, the municipal workers' union, *Kommunal*, negotiated an agreement with the local and regional government employers' organisation to provide more staff and training in eldercare. Although the Swedish government had given over 210 million Euros for extra workers, *Kommunal* would like workers to be taken on full-time and that training 'takes place in paid time and is in line with existing training provision for nursing assistants and nurses', so contributing to improving the pay and status of workers in eldercare (EPSU, 2020).

The demand for trade unions to be involved in professional development can be seen in other sectors, where occupational groups are struggling for access to professional development and training throughout their careers. Trade union action may be initially in response to staff shortages but there is a growing recognition that training and CPD are essential for high quality staff and public services. In 2021, four Austrian health and social care trade unions, representing workers in both the public and

private sectors, wrote an open letter to the national and regional levels of the Austrian government demanding action on training. The unions had estimated that over 75,000 workers will be needed by 2030. Health and social care workers are not paid when working on the job during their training. The unions were asking the government to set up a National Training Fund (EPSU, 2021). Although this is part of a strategy to address shortages of health and social care workers, these demands integrate training into wider union action.

Community unionism is another approach which has enabled some education trade unions to raise awareness of training and professional development issues within public services. Community unionism originated in the US and has been taken on by many European and UK unions. The NUT was influenced by the experience of Chicago teaching unions that had worked closely with communities to campaign for increased resources for schools and teachers. This informed the development of an NUT manifesto 'Vote for Education' which was used during the 2015 election campaign. 1.6 million copies were printed. It demanded a wider vision of learning, more time for teaching rather than tests, action on child poverty, ending the school places crisis, mending a fractured education system, ending for-profit education, investing in education and making teaching an attractive profession (NUT, 2015). This showed a teaching union developing a holistic vision of what an educational system should look like, including the teaching workforce, and campaigning for it during a general election campaign. It enabled the NUT to raise these issues with parents and local communities.

This trade union strategy was significant in several ways. As well as highlighting the importance of a trained and adequately supported workforce, it is also developing a new form of teacher professionalism which will focus on addressing problems within schools through a stronger 'teacher voice'. It is contributing to rethinking the role of a teacher and placing teachers within a democratic framework, so helping them to deal with issues at local level by working with parents and local groups. This shows the important role that trade unions can play in supporting the development of a democratic professionalism. However, this strategy has not yet been reflected in the National Education Union (NEU) which was created from a merger of the NUT and the Association of Teachers and Lecturers in 2017.

There are sometimes opportunities to raise the profile of professional development and training and the importance of a professionalised workforce which have been missed. A UCU research project in 2017 examined the relationships between FE and communities, conducted by Vicky Duckworth and

Rob Smith. It recognised that neo-liberal ideologies were taking over the concept of community and replacing it with deregulation, competition and globalisation. FE colleges were having to navigate these policy changes while still trying to address the needs of the communities that the colleges themselves had often grown from with specific industry and skills needs. This research provided a powerful account of the role that FE colleges play in supporting learners in communities, but the emphasis was on the role of college leaders rather than on the teaching staff. This was a missed opportunity to value the teachers who were effectively leading many of these transformative processes (Further Education Trust for Leadership, 2017).

In the ETUCE research, Stevenson *et al* (2018) identified five complementary strategies that trade unions use to promote professional development interests. An immediate action can be for trade unions to provide professional learning opportunities independently or in partnership with others. Members can work together to define their professional learning needs, and this process can strengthen collective action. Some trade unions, as part of their advocacy role, argue for the importance of high-quality professional training as part of a well-funded public education service. This may be done by a single trade union or, probably more effectively, can be part of building alliances with communities, schools, colleges and other campaigns so that teachers' professional needs are understood in a wider context. In Europe, the concept of social dialogue is seen as central to raising professional development priorities with employers and other stakeholders. All these strategies contribute to making professional development and training central trade union activities.

References

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