

# Lessons in organising

***PSE talked to Howard Stevenson, co-author, with Gawain Little, Ellie Sharp and David Wilson, of the recently published book Lessons in Organising. What Trade Unionists Can Learn from the War on Teachers.***

***PSE: What's the book about and why did you write it?***

Howard: The book was written by a group of us with a long association with the NUT and then the NEU. We've had different roles as activists, researchers or officials but were all involved in what has been a strategic shift in the union as it has tried to come to terms with dramatic changes in the school system that were intended to change education. Changing an education system requires changing the teachers who work in it and so confronting the organisations that represent teachers collectively. So there's been a deliberate attack on teacher unions as part of a wider transformation of the school system.

It's clearly been hard work, over a long time, but the union has been trying to come to terms with those changes and has been engaged in a process of what we call 'renewal'. Inevitably it's complex and uneven, but there have been some important successes. For example, in the 2017 general election the union's campaign around school funding was described by BBC journalist Chris Cook as 'extraordinarily successful'. There is opinion polling evidence that about 750,000 people switched their votes on the issue of education, and it was Cook who argued that that was because of the NUT's 'School Cuts' campaign. Then during Covid, the newly amalgamated NEU had a particular impact when standing up for the health and safety not just of its members but of students and communities. The Government was forced into some of the biggest retreats of the Covid period in relation to schools. These did not happen randomly, but because of a strategic shift in the union over a considerable period of time. We wanted to tell that story because we think people can learn from it. This book is our contribution to a debate we always need to be engaging in.

***PSE: Could you say a bit about the three rs - the three different approaches to union organising you describe in the book: *rapprochement, resistance and renewal?****

Howard: That framework was developed in a book I did with Bob Carter and Rowena Passy (1) following our work on teacher unions and the social partnership period of the Labour government in the early 2000s. *Rapprochement* is a form of trade unionism that effectively goes with the grain of the system, trying to get the best possible deals for members within the prevailing system - but not seeing it as the union's job to challenge the system. We focused on the social partnership period 2003-2010 but the model also applies to the NUT in the 1960s and 70s: national collective bargaining, a social democratic consensus, the NUT at the table, a powerful organisation with considerable influence. But since that consensus was fractured by Thatcherism, the approach has delivered very little.

By contrast, resistance is a strategy that challenges the system more fundamentally, but tends to avoid seeing any need to change the union itself. The industrial relations landscape was changing but the union response wasn't. It depended on the traditional repertoire of national industrial action centred around strikes organised from the centre. Delivering that sort of action in an increasingly fragmented environment was more difficult. The exhortation to 'struggle harder' was never going to cut through. I think we've seen something similar in the UCU university strikes. A tremendous amount of strike action, but union density in the sector has been too low for that to really have an impact. If you've been involved, you'll know that at times it has felt attritional. So in this book, we argue that to be effective the union itself has to change. A more decentralised environment requires stronger

connection with individual members in workplaces. For the NUT, the notion of workplace organisation had always been a bit ambiguous. It had national collective bargaining and effective local officers who could come into local authority-run schools and sort problems out. School reps typically didn't have much to do. But in the post-'88 Act environment, renewal - the strategy we argue for - required a change in the structures and cultures in the union. More decentralisation, more participatory engagement, a relentless focus on union building from the bottom up. This shift in the form of the union itself is what we mean by renewal.

***PSE: The book looks at organising within schools. Is it relevant to post-16 contexts?***

Howard: The right have engaged in a relentless effort to re-engineer public education so it's delivering the workers the system requires - developing human capital and creating the individualised, self-responsibilising citizens we're supposed to be. This attack on public education is driven by its role in reproducing labour and its ideological function in cementing the hegemonic leadership of the ruling class. However, in practical terms transforming education means transforming the curriculum. The curriculum is where the purposes of education are contested and is the terrain of the struggle. But the curriculum is enacted by teachers - what the curriculum looks like, and how it's experienced by students, depends on what teachers do. So ultimately it's about controlling teachers' work. This is what we mean by a 'war on teachers' and you see that in FE just as much as you do in schools. The mechanisms are the same - marketisation, managerialism, fragmentation, decentralisation, Ofsted, the use of a whole battery of metrics. Incorporation has been FE's version of the 1988 Act.

***PSE: The book makes an important connection between union strength and progressive education. I don't recall much that was progressive in school in the late 60s and 70s, whilst in pre-incorporation FE, I recall strongly unionised departments with far from progressive attitudes towards education.***

Howard: In talking about the 'war on teachers' we use Gramsci's notions of a 'war of movement' (the big confrontation we arguably saw in the mid-80s) and a 'war of position' (a longer term ideological struggle). Thinking in Gramscian terms also makes you think about what we might call the 'balance of forces' - alliances, groupings, blocs - but also that union members often have quite contradictory views about the world. There can be reactionary positions

on a range of issues. Take exclusions for example, or the fact that a lot of teachers resisted the move to comprehensive education. The 60s and 70s were not a golden age for progressive education. But there was a direction of travel - in primary education the developments around Plowden (3); in secondary, developing comprehensive education; lots of radical, exciting stuff going on in further and adult education. It's not that this wasn't contested - sometimes from within the profession - but there was a broad trajectory offering lots of possibilities, and it was those possibilities that were countered by the right.

And today, not all educators oppose the things we're challenging. Part of the right's hegemonic success has been to win active support amongst some teachers on the ground. People who've been taught, trained and now work within a particular system can struggle to see how it might be different. But what we have to do is to help articulate what those alternatives can look like.

***PSE: How would you approach work in unions in other areas, say health, construction or logistics?***

Howard: By 'lessons in organising', we don't mean: 'this is what you must do' but one of our aspirations is that trade unionists outside education can engage with this story, that there are things they can take away from it. We frame the argument around three lessons, and are interested to see how this resonates with people in other sectors.

Lesson one is that relentless focus on workplace organisation. How do we make the union visible and meaningful to someone at the place of work where they experience all the contradictions of the work they're engaged in? That can only happen when somebody, a workplace rep, makes the union visible. Active workplace organisation - not just basic communication but through contesting what Carter Goodrich (2) famously called the 'frontier of control', between workers and management in the workplace, and actively building a collective culture - applies in any context.

The second lesson is that just focusing on workplace organising is not enough, particularly in highly fragmented workplaces. We argue that only focusing on workplace struggles to overcome the fragmentation experienced in the workplace only deals with immediate material issues - ideas can help unify across workplaces. There is a need to connect workplace organising with narratives that not only offer alternatives but can help unify across diverse, fragmented environments. This is why we

talk about the need to also 'organise around ideas', but these will look different in different contexts. We could probably think relatively easily about what a more optimistic, democratic, socially just education system might look like. But it's about re-imagining work and the purpose of labour, and connecting organising activity with being able to articulate alternatives. The left is getting better at this, for example around a Green New Deal or the four-day week. We need to be able to articulate and mobilise around alternative visions of what working and living can look like.

Third is the importance of leadership. We're not interested in those narrowly identified as 'leaders', but in leadership as a function that must be exercised at all levels of the organisation, often by those who don't consider themselves leaders at all! The workplace rep may be the most important person exercising leadership for union members in that institution. The rep is the person the members see, and who makes the union real to them - and is key to making change happen. A key part of leadership for activists is how we develop leadership in others. It's about leadership as an educative process that involves drawing others into collective action and shifting people's thinking. These two processes are completely interdependent.

***PSE: Your argument about leadership is powerful. But is there a tension within the strategy of renewal between creating a more active, participatory union that can contest the 'frontier of control' and re-imagine education, and workplace activism that aims to get union negotiators back around the national table - at which point, do you face the traditional tension: workplace militancy becomes problematic when national leaders are trying to negotiate a deal?***

Howard: The way you present that is similar to our analysis in chapter 2. It's what the trade union movement's response was to Thatcherism and the aftermath of the miners' strike. An almost European style of social partnership was getting traction in the TUC in the 1990s, but at the same time there was a commitment to what we've called 'institutional organising' - represented by the TUC Organising Academy, for example. Are these contradictory? Trying to get back to the table to have that dialogue with employers at one level, but this more conflictual model of organising at another, and both coexisting within the same organisation? Is it possible? We argue that in the TUC strategy in the 1990s and 2000s these were not seen as incompatible if 'organising' was seen primarily as a way to make up for losses in membership in order to have more

influence through social partnership. In the book we're clear that organising must be unambiguously focused on worker self-organising to decisively shift the balance of power between capital and labour.

But if I may slightly reframe the question: we need to think about how we ensure that any process of union renewal is underpinned by democratic renewal. This involves recognising that too much union 'business' is often conducted too far away from most members. Union rule books are essential to the formal democracy of the union, but if engaging members in these processes is limited then union democracy is inevitably quite thin. In reality, much union engagement is more informal, where groups of members talk about work and the union, but without engaging in more formal structures. This is where the leadership dimension is so important, because this type of leadership can provide the organic link between the informal democracy of the workplace and work group, and the more formal democracy of the union branch and the rule book. Connecting these dimensions offers the possibility of a much deeper form of democracy.

We raise these issues in the book, and I hope we offer some constructive insights, but we don't make any claim to provide answers. Union democracy always needs problematising in a way that avoids any complacency. The current strike waves have brought literally hundreds of thousands of people into union action in a way most involved have not previously experienced. That is tremendously exciting, but it can be quite threatening too. We have to embrace the opportunities that this presents and learn to share the power. If we don't find different ways to do things, we'll soon be back in our small meetings, talking to ourselves, and the moment will have passed.

1. Bob Carter, Howard Stevenson and Rowena Passy (2009) *Transforming the School Workforce* Routledge

2. Carter Goodrich (1920/1975) *The Frontier of Control: A Study in British Workplace Politics* Pluto Press

3. Published in 1967, *Children and their Primary Schools* or the Plowden Report was a significant policy event supporting progressive development of primary education.

<http://www.educationengland.org.uk/documents/plowden/plowden1967-1.html>