

Finding solutions for the future

Trade unions can benefit enormously from intelligent use of new technology

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To warrant implementation, any change proposed to the TUC should be readily achievable, inexpensive, and likely to make a significant positive difference. The three ideas suggested below are worth consideration, as they play to the labour movement's traditional strengths, while also introducing innovative information and communications technology (ICT) that are helping to revitalise organisations everywhere.

1) To begin with, the TUC could invite affiliates to join it in creating a small permanent Membership Study Group (MSG). This group would conduct research to uncover the needs and wants of current and prospective members of TUC affiliates, which would help their unions operate from a solid factual base. Waves of user-friendly surveys could be sent to target populations. Volunteers from these groups could then be sorted into panels to answer critical questions over many years (the better to identify baseline data, and then progressively chart revealing changes). A special effort should be made to disaggregate data accordingly to significant blocs of members (age, education, gender, hobbies, nationality, political orientation, skills, etc.).

If this research procedure is followed, discussions about trade union members would become a lot clearer. Trade unions would possess timely, exacting, and revealing survey data (attitudinal, behavioural, demographic, economic, political, psychological, etc.) on which to base their actions.

Over and beyond the social mapping gains cited above, this use of long period survey data by the MSG would also enable trade unions to fine-tune their Internet messages. They could now take into account the vital specific characteristics of each individual message-receiver. They could also begin to offer membership in virtual affinity groups (hobby groups, singles groups, travel groups, etc.) established online, and further reinforce the time-honoured notion of unionism as a warm and welcoming movement.

MSG members should include grass-roots activists close to the rank-and-file, along with university social scientists who specialise in working-class studies (and use ground-breaking ethnography software). Membership should be diverse, and representative of present and prospective TUC ranks.

IT assessment groups

2) Second, the TUC could invite affiliates to join it in creating a small permanent ICT Assessment Group (ICTAG). It would evaluate new options in hardware,

software, groupware, and thoughtware in order to help trade unions maximise their investment in ICT. With vendors breathlessly racing one another to bring alleged improvements to the market 24/7, the ICTAG would never run out of exiting options to assess. Also by referring to LabourStart.org it could scan the uses of ICT being made by trade unions (and business and NGOs) around the world in order to assess creative adaptations elsewhere.

For example, an ICTAG could help TUC affiliates decide whether or not to begin using upgraded “next-generation dashboards” (software that mimics Excel spreadsheets in intuitive, distinct ways). It also could evaluate so-called “thin” computers (disk-less, processor-less “dumb” devices, which give access via the Internet to various files and programs stored on some remote server). Users pay a phone company or Net service provider only for minutes of actual computer use, rather than a monthly user contract. As it requires only 5% as much power as a PC, and with little inside to break, the “thin” computer would definitely warrant ICTAG’s attention.

A similar innovation worth looking at involves a controversial corporate technique known as word-of-mouth marketing. Companies lure customers into spreading a good (Internet) word to family and friends about a company’s products by using samples, coupons, and other goodies. This state-of-the-art method helps cut through advertising clutter to reach a highly desirable target audience. TUC affiliates could employ advocacy messages from a trusted friend, a powerful form of PR, and use it to great advantage in their organising campaigns – especially after the TUC’s ICTAG first field tested, vetted, and improved the procedure.

Video buzz

Likewise, TUC affiliates could post online videos on social media such as YouTube and social networking sites such as MySpace. If the videos are as good as they should be, the move will generate considerable word-of-mouth publicity, especially among young adults. The TUC’s ICTAG would help by first assessing the videos before airing, and then assessing the union’s response to the inevitable mix of positive and negative feedback such material engendered. Trade unions have much to gain from a video buzz, but the good will outweigh harm only if the assessment process is thorough in ensuring only quality gets through.

Likewise, another innovation worth assessment is the use corporations are beginning to make of iPods for training purposes. TUC affiliates eager to help staffers learn new languages, for example, can load iPods with language tapes for audio training. They can also ask users to download trade union audio and video files, educational courses, and other such material – once, that is, the TUC’s ICTAG signals the idea is worth the effort.

With giant software packages rapidly fading away, the TUC and its affiliates must learn how to best employ Web 2.0 — an array of fresh internet tools that will revolutionise the way we use the internet. Drawing on blogging, Wikipedia, mash-ups, MySpace, and related bottom-up, user-driven services, Web 2.0 requires active participation and social interaction. Already popular with many young union members, Web 2.0 promises to help flatten boundaries in union bureaucracies, much to the trade unions' gain ... provided an ICTAG helps pave the way.

Composed of grass-roots digerati (the cyber elite), TUC professionals, and campus-based allies, an ICTAG could sponsor far-flung, low-cost, frequent-user courses at all levels, both virtual and on the ground. It could hold an annual contest to spotlight the most innovative uses of ICT being made by members of TUC affiliates. It could offer scholarships to help grass-roots digerati attend UK conferences on ICT uses (and possibly also the Labor Tech Conference held annually in the USA).

Above all, an ICTAG could help TUC affiliates at every level understand why users will not use second-rate interfaces, such as stodgy or out-of-date trade union web sites: Rather, unionists everywhere want a customised-tailored, engaging, and empowering ICT experience, and the ICTAG could help TUC affiliates provide this.

What-if scenarios

3) Finally, the TUC could create a small permanent Futures Study Group (FSG) to explore near-future “what-if” scenarios that seem to be guiding the actions of UK and global employers. In this way the TUC and its affiliates could anticipate and prepare to rapidly respond to planned (and unplanned) change. Members might include rank-and-filers with a keen interest in forecasting, along with allied university specialists.

The FSG would scan forecast literature online and in print, and interview top forecasters. Naturally it would disaggregate the forecasts by industry, and then again by company size, location, specialisation, and other critical variables to give them on-the-ground real time applicability.

The FSG could alert unions to especially innovative ideas. President of the North American public services union SEIU Andy Stern, for example, advocates a new type of trade union based on extensive use of computer power: “Imagine the union as an outsourcing vehicle that will take [over] a whole series of services [such as much done now by computer-aided personnel departments] from employers – not just for one employer, but for a whole sector or whole industries, so that there are common benefits, common training plans.”

The TUC's FSG would hold hearings to assess proposals such as the Stern Plan, which proposes consolidating large numbers of American trade unions.

The group would also solicit expert opinions and run focus groups with rank-and-filers. And, in 101 other exacting ways, give ideas such as Stern's a neutral and constructive review, in order to encourage more promising out-of-the-box notions.

Sceptics will undoubtedly wonder aloud about the efficiency and effectiveness of even well-intentioned committees. To be sure, the three above might underperform and disappoint. But given how high the stakes are (nothing less than the labour movement's survival) all sorts of safeguards can and should be adopted.

Likewise, technophobes will undoubtedly warn that computers can thwart creativity, which thrives on ambiguity and fuzzy borders. To be sure, there is some merit in their concern. But it has more value as a warning than as a paralysing judgment. Computers remain only as constricting or as creative as those who program them permit: trade unions can guard against the computer's many intrinsic limitations, while still making the most of its unique assets.

Constructive feedback

The TUC and its affiliates must guard against all who move forward while looking only in the rear-view mirror. Such men and women, however well-intentioned, would snuff out ideas like the three outlined in this article, because they fail to understand that there is in each much worth nurturing — so long as they are meticulously implemented. These suggestions need to be posted as soon as possible on the TUC's intranet and the web sites of its affiliates for constructive comments — the three ideas warrant field tests, creative improvement, and serious consideration so that they can theoretically be up and running in the very near future.

The TUC is a continual work in process. It is constantly evolving and striving to make each change an improvement. It understands what Microsoft means when the company reminds us, “we don't watch the same TVs we watched 40 years ago, and we certainly don't use the same PCs we did 20 years ago. The point is, there's a lot of innovating left to be done,” (Ads, October 2006).

Today, as the fast-paced 21st century begins, and as seven million pages are added to the internet daily, the TUC seeks to make innovation routine, rather than random; central, rather than marginal; exhilarating, rather than foreign; and profitable, rather than failure-prone. While remaining true to the principles of the labour movement, the TUC also recognises the enormous potential of new technology.

At the end of the day the creation of three new computer-based TUC committees may prove inadequate, so great are the obstacles faced by the labour movement. This much, however, seems certain: a precious opportunity for change exists here — and, if missed, generations hereafter may not have access to the high quality of computer-aided trade unionism they need and deserve. But if seized,

the TUC and its affiliates may take the British labour movement to an even higher level.

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