SOURCES OF LABOUR UNION POWER

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Abstract

It is beyond contention that the power of organised labour in Britain has witnessed a marked fall in the last thirty years. Attempts to rebuild that powerbase in a world of neo-liberal globalisation and the ascendancy of employer power means that it is time to go back to basics to try to understand the theoretical sources of labour union power. Using a simple three-fold schema developed by Eric Batstone as a starting point, this paper assesses the issues of creating and exercising collective mobilisation. The potential to realise the possibilities are then discussed through the putting forward of a number of proposals for discussion.

Keywords: workers, unions, collective power, creating leverage

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Introduction

To use Carter Goodrich's phrase from the title of his book published in 1920, the 'frontier of control', whether defined in wide or narrow terms, has been pushed back by employers over the last thirty years. They, the employers, aided by the state, have pushed the 'frontier of control' back in terms of reducing workers' control and increasing their own control of the organisation of work and employment. A narrow definition of the 'frontier of control', as Goodrich used it, concerns the regulation of the workplace *in* the workplace. A wider definition of the 'frontier of control' concerns regulation of the workplace and those processes that affect it both in and beyond the workplace (i.e. the market and society). What the 'frontier of control' essentially concerns is power and the relations of power between capital and labour and their representatives. Sometimes, power, particularly employers' power, becomes institutionalised in the form of legal and quasi-legal regulation. Other times, it is of a more brutal, direct nature like the ability to hire and fire.

Given that workers' power through labour unionism[1] has been pushed back so far, it is useful to look at the sources of workers' power in order to try to begin to understand how workers' power can be rebuilt and reasserted. Power can be best understood as the ability of one party to impose sanctions upon another party in order to gain its will or benefits for itself where the other party is unwilling to acquiesce. In a power struggle, each party will make an implicit study of the feasibility of winning and a cost-benefit analysis of doing so. This suggests that for any party, the contextual conditions of power and resources may lead them not to always or even single-mindedly pursuing some of their (higher) goals because although they may win the costs are so large that the victory is pyrrhic.

Workers' power is derived from three basic sources: the ability to disrupt the production, distribution and exchange of goods and services, scarcity of labour and political influence (Batstone 1988). The first source of potential power comes from workers being located at points of production, distribution and exchange. The second comes from workers being able to act collectively in the labour market, while the third comes from workers establishing their own collective political agency. Mobilisation is the act of pursuing goals using these three sources to secure goals. In all of these, solidarity between workers for instrumental or political reasons is also an important dimension (see later). By contrast, employer power is derived from their economic, ideological and political resources. The first refers to their ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange, the second, the production and social reproduction of ideas which support the *status quo* of capitalism and the conditions of accumulation under it, and the third the support of the state and political institutions like parliament in the maintenance of capitalism and the conditions of accumulation under it.

This paper will examine the fundamental and contingent nature of these three sources of workers' power in order to inform a discussion about how labour unions can increase their leverage over employers, government and other relevant actors in the present period. Throughout, it is worth bearing in mind that intelligence about bargaining opponents is vital so that informed choices can be made about what kind of leverage to exercise, when and how and in what proportion. It's not simply

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[1] The term 'labour' union is used in recognition that most major unions are no longer 'trade' but general unions where many 'trades' and none are submerged within a general union or where trades no longer have such significance in qualitative or quantitative terms.

a case of avoiding unnecessarily taking a sledgehammer to crack a nut, but more a case of understanding that when an employer feels fundamentally threatened by a union's action that this can result, on the employer's part, in either submission or their casting aside any rationality of costs to be incurred so as to defeat the union.

Disruptive Capacity

The starting point for any discussion of disruptive capacity is an acknowledgement that workers must be dissatisfied with conditions of work, that is, have grievances which they wish to have resolved (sic). For there to be actionable grievances, workers must identify the cause of the grievance, the party responsible for creating the grievance and the actor capable of correcting the grievance. However, unions can play a part in grievance development by the way they both follow and lead workers' consciousness through attitudinal restructuring, giving ideological sustenance to oppositionalism and so on. Essentially, they can help 'frame' issues as grievances and certain issues as grievances by calling attention to them, who is responsible for their creation, which actor can resolve the grievance, and by what means.

That said, all workers have the capacity to disrupt the production, distribution and exchange of goods and services but all workers are not equal in this capacity. This general statement is true regardless of whether the workers are unionised or not, or well unionised or not, and regardless of which sector of the economy the workers work within. The veracity of this general statement stems from the recognition that workers' disruptive power is present in the reliance of the employing organisation upon workers for their labour to carry out the employing organisation's tasks. Consequently, the withdrawal of labour or the withdrawal of cooperation *can* then have enormous implications for the employing organisation in regard of carrying out its primary purposes.

However, disruptive capacity varies *across time and space* for different groups or types of workers. Thus, the general disruptive power of all workers is related to the state of product markets – essentially the level of demand for goods and services and their availability (supply) from other sources. These considerations of demand and supply vary across time – for example, from one year to the next. And, although any one group of workers within the integrated production or delivery of a good or service can stop or slow down this system of operation by withdrawing their labour or cooperation, it also has to be recognised that some workers occupy more strategic positions in these systems than others. So, whilst the withdrawal of one group's labour can stop or halt others up or down stream of themselves, some groups can have much greater impacts. For example, maintenance or software engineers are needed to keep whole systems going rather than just parts of the system going. Alternatively, if one group at the start of the process withdraws their labour or cooperation, little can then happen downstream of them. This can be contrasted with the scenario of a nearly finished good or service as a result of the withdrawal of cooperation by the last group of workers in the production/delivery process. The salience of this contrast lies in the different contexts in which the former or latter scenarios may create more or less leverage over the employer depending on the size and scale of the bottleneck created.

One further aspect is salient here. Different employing organisations – particularly, private sector profit-orientated organisations – have different propensities for creating what is called 'economic rent' depending on the sector they operate in, their market share and so on. In other words, some employing organisations have more or less scope to increase terms and conditions of employment should they be subject to pressure to do so. Arguably, those with less scope will entertain stiffer resistance to demands to increase terms and conditions because pressure to do so is more threatening to their overall economic viability or survival.

The preceding discussion has concentrated on the situation where the employing organisation is the focus of attention. But the other important dimension in discussing disruptive capacity is the proportionality of the impact of the action upon the economy and wider society. Some groups of workers like relatively small number of rail workers or power workers can, at present, exercise a disproportionate impact on others as a result of not just the relative non-substitutability of the service but the immediacy of the impact of withdrawal.

What flows from this discussion? One point is that unions should consider focusing upon mobilising certain groups of workers in preference to others. That is to say that they should strategically orientate on strategic groups of workers who have the potential to wield more power than others. From this, the general strength of labour unionism could be ratcheted up by creating a demonstration effect of two sorts. One is that their action serves as a model for others to try to emulate, and the other is that in the wake of some stronger groups acting, weak groups are pulled along in their wash. This is the basis for attempts to establish pattern bargaining or create 'industry' effects. Another point is that unions should consider in the short to medium term organising certain employing organisations rather than others. A third is that unions should consider using the power of certain groups of strategic workers in a much more strategic manner for the benefit of all workers or members in a bargaining unit, however conceived. And, a fourth is that unions should recognise the difficulties here and look more closely at the other sources of power for exercising leverage (see below).

Whilst there are many possible objections to these lines of thinking such as the counter-impact of employers attempting to mollify those workers with strategic power as per an aristocracy of labour and that unions should not refuse to organise any groups of workers that approach them wanting to unionise, a discussion of these issues should lead to the exercise of more conscious choices by unions. For example, unions in Britain should not make, or be influenced to make, a fetish of union density. The preceding discussion highlights that issues of union identity and union mobilisation are just as important. And in regard of mobilisation, tactics can be critical. The willingness to use the process of balloting, giving notice and striking to up the ante and to refuse to stand down action on the promise of talks without firm substantive commitment to outcomes can differentiate some strikes from being mere irritants and some other strikes being compelling. The same issue of strategic approach is true for the timing and targets of action.

Scarcity of Labour

Today, it is normally assumed by most commentators, and by many unions as well, that workers and their unions are helplessly at the mercy of the ebbs and flows of the labour market, the labour market itself influenced by supra-firm and national processes. Thus, it is viewed that workers are acted upon: they do not act. To give some examples; unemployment in Britain is at low levels currently but mass in-migration is also evident. Meanwhile, certain skills experience differential demand and some workers are deemed to have outdated, outmoded skills. All of these phenomena have taken place regardless, and in spite of, what workers and their unions have demanded or done. Although workers are often at the mercy of the labour market which necessitates not just union organisation but also political representation to regulate the labour market, is it the case that unions punch well below their collective weight here in a situation where in some areas and labour markets there is also most zero percent unemployment?

To guide us here, we need to ask the question: historically, what are the means available to unions to increase the scarcity of labour? Firstly, limiting the supply of labour by establishing a number of

entry barriers to particular labour markets for particular skills. This may be achieved through apprenticeships, qualifications and recognised experience. Sometimes, this can take the form of regulation by professions. Secondly, by raising the school age, increasing the proportion of the workforce in further and higher education, reducing the retirement age, reducing the working week and so on, the size of the workforce can be reduced in order to increase labour scarcity. Thirdly, by restricting entry to the labour market or specific labour market to workers from other countries, again the degree of labour scarcity could be increased. Fourthly, by increasing demand for labour by engaging in employment creation schemes as a result of state expenditure on public building projects. Each of these means present their own challenges in terms of morality, union policies, national legal framework and relations of power. In particular, unions are in nearly all these scenarios dependent upon acting upon another actor to set in train a particular form of regulation – for example, creating a regulatory body or changing the direction of regulation – rather than being able to act directly upon the employment relationship or in the workplace. This means that union influence here becomes that bit more dissipated and diffuse. Consequently, many would consider that unions cannot make much progress of the labour scarcity front at the present and therefore should concentrate their attention and energies on other areas.

Political Influence

It has traditionally been assumed that unions exercise political influence through the creation and/or support of their 'own' left-of-centre, social democratic party. The focus for this comprises the national political stage, and in particular government and parliament, influenced through individual membership and institutional affiliation. Given the domination of neo-liberalism, the domination of policy circles by the business lobby and the reduction in union institutional influence in the Labour Party, less thought has been given to looking at unions as actors which a) support a competing array of left-of-centre parties, and, b) act as pressure groups to exert influence on an array of actors that have a role influencing union members' interests.

Before looking at these, it is worth noting that targeted political and financial support for candidates for elected office remains an under-explored and under-utilised option which few unions in Britain either have as policy or fully implement. Such a policy sees the Labour Party as a broad church, within which there are 'better' or 'worse' candidates to support through campaigning for and providing financial resources for. Consequently, before support is given candidates are asked whether they support an itemised list of union policies (and incumbents' voting records are examined). But it also sees the creditable left as not enclosed entirely within Labour and, therefore, other independent left candidates are supported in similar terms. The leading exponents and practitioners of this approach are the RMT and GMB unions.

   i) *Continental European left alliances*

In a number of continental European countries (Demark, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Norway, Portugal, Spain) and some further afield like Australia, the realignment of the independent radical left – that is groups and parties outside labour or social democratic parties - has taken place since the early 1990s, with the pace of this development picking up particularly in the mid to late 1990s. (However, some of the reconfigured components of these projects predate the 1990s.) Each of these has achieved greater or lesser success, whether judged over time in each country and on comparative basis. The most successful projects – in terms of their electoral presence - have had to contend with the challenge of making compromises upon entering government coalitions while trying to remain true to their founding principles and politics. The most advanced of these left

realignment projects in terms of securing elected representation and wider memberships have been those in Denmark, Germany, Greece, Italy, Portugal and Spain.

The Left party – Die Linke - in Germany emerged first as an electoral alliance in 2005 and now exists as a fully-fledged political party. Made up from the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS) - itself born out of the wreckage of the former East German ruling socialist party - and a breakaway from the West German-based Social Democratic party, which is Germany's version of Britain's Labour party, it now has significant representation in the federal and state parliaments. Critically, labour unionists from the top and bottom of two major unions (engineering IG Metal and public sector Ver.di unions) helped the process. In 2007, in Greece, Sy.ri.za – the coalition of the radical left - gained 14 seats in the national parliament, having picked up its first MPs and MEPs in 1994. Its main component is Synaspismos, standing for the Coalition of the Left of Movements and Ecology, which was founded in 1992. In Portugal, the Left Bloc was formed in 1999 from a number of existing left parties and currently has 8 MPs and 1 MEP. All these parties and coalitions have developed in train with the emerging popular opposition to neo-liberalisation, globalisation and imperialism.

In Norway, where the left realignment phenomena, the Red Electoral Alliance, has fared poorly by contrast with those elsewhere, in 1999 the Campaign for the Welfare State was established by six national public sector unions and joined by nine others from the private sector and an array of other civic pressure group organisations shortly afterwards. This then led to a broader alliance, the Popular Movement for Public Services in 2002, and a coalition between different parties of the left, including the Norwegian Labour party, at the behest of the union movement. All this bore fruit when a new centre-left government in 2005 was elected, adopting much of the policy advocated by the coalitions.

This short consideration of left of Labour parties and coalitions serves a number of purposes here. First, to highlight that the case for left of Labour political representation should be considered and one way of doing this is to look at the continental experience. Second, in doing so, the impact of these left parties and coalitions should not be judged solely in terms of the number of their elected representatives but also in terms of their impact in

- shifting the political agenda to the left
- giving sustenance to workers' opposition and resistance to management and employers, and
- pulling social democratic and labour parties back to the left.

This latter point is worth elaborating for one way of influencing such parties is not always from within. Indeed, by courting or supporting or working with other relevant political parties, it is possible to apply pressure on Labour-type parties. Third, left realignment can take the form of the creation of a single political party (or new parties) as well as existing left parties cooperating in electoral and organisational alliances where dissolving themselves into a new organisation is not required. Fourth, and following from this, if the conditions in Britain are seen to be inopportune for the development of the left realignment that has taken place on the continent – because of the absence of proportional representation or left sectarianism – then the example of Norway develops more purchase (see below for an application of this argument under 'social movements' and 'producer-user alliances').

ii) Acting as pressure groups

Whilst unions have always acted as pressure groups whether by design or by necessity, the experience of having a decade of a Labour government has substantially reconfigured this process.

The period of the run up to 1997, when it became increasingly clear that Labour would win the forthcoming general election, the period of Labour in office, and the prospect of future general elections where the compulsion has been not to 'rock the boat' through criticism and behaviour lest this damage Labour's electoral standing have all concentrated affiliated unions' attentions on the political process *within* Labour. Of course, this is understandable and correct up to a point but it was also clear prior to 1997 and ever more since 1997 that the outcome of these efforts by unions would be a lot less than in previous periods because of capture of the Labour Party by the Blair-Brown 'new' Labour project. Consequently, affiliated unions have put too many eggs in one basket and therefore should consider how non-affiliated unions have acted as pressure groups upon government and other state and non-state bodies. The point here is two-fold. First, that any government can be influenced outwith its own party political structures – that is through direct pressure being applied on government. Second, that there are a number of voluntary and statutory regulatory bodies (like professional bodies and quangos), especially under the increasingly devolved political settlement in Britain, which have influence over the employment relationship and wider society. In regard of these, pressure can be applied on them for two reasons – because they can influence government on policy through a process of dialogue and bargaining, and because they can influence how government policy is applied in their roles as implementers of policy. In addition to this, unions can act as pressure group actors in two other main ways (see below on 'social movements' and 'producer-user alliances').

This paper now moves on to examine a number of areas which do not readily fall within the three categories of disruptive power, labour scarcity and political influence.

Solidarity

Solidarity between workers – particularly solidarity given to workers on strike by others, through financial donations, demonstrations and sympathy industrial action – is often said to be the way to win industrial disputes. However, only solidarity of an industrial action type is likely to be able to help striking workers win a strike because the other types of solidarity can at best sustain the strikers, where the unproven assumption is that striking for longer will be sufficient to win the strike. Consequently, the most important issues here concern the disruptive power of sympathy action, which employing organisations and sectors it affects, as well as whether the action thereby creates its own political leverage. Therefore, we can largely situate the component of solidarity action within the earlier discussion of industrial action.

Political Strikes

Although Britain has almost no substantial history of political strikes[2] compared to many continental European countries such as France, Greece, Italy and Spain, a discussion of political strikes is still worthwhile. The reason is that unions should consider the strategy of making *political* capital of their *industrial* action. The lesson from unions' continental cousins is that in the public sector and over issues of government policy, strikes can be used to create and exercise political leverage by making the industrial action – and the reasons giving rise to it - a 'political' hot potato. The current (at the time of writing, late November 2007) strikes against pension reform in France are a case in point. This means that to exercise this type of leverage, the strikes cannot be carried out in a token and episodic manner. Rather, they have to be of a more widespread and sustained nature, shutting

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[2] This is largely because of the economistic nature of labour unionism in Britain, where political matters have been dealt with through the Labour Party, and because of the legal framework for lawful disputes.

down or seriously disrupting the major and essential services in all major centres of population. Moreover, and in tandem with strikes, unions in Britain could also learn something useful about street mobilisation of their seven million members from their counterparts in France, Germany, Greece, Italy and Spain.

The strategy deployed in these other European countries is thus not just about shutting down the services but also about both maximising the visibility of the action (to the public, government and strikers) and the participation of workers in the strike by holding mass demonstrations. The purchase of using strikes to make political capital is that, whether for public sector unions or unions in general and where the government is the bargaining partner, the strikes offer the possibility of undermining the political legitimacy and stability of the government, forcing it to consider giving in to the strikers' demands in order to restore its – the government's – political legitimacy and stability.

At the moment, strike action in Britain which is in the public sector is seldom beyond a day long in its entirety or is confined to a serious of one-day strikes with considerable gaps in between. Just as crucially – the joint-union strike over pensions in March 2006 being the only exception in recent years – these strikes require that there is coordination between different unions and groups of workers so that they strike on the same day to maximise the impact. Whilst current industrial action legislation makes solidarity action unlawful, there is no legal impediment to the coordination of different unions' strikes on this basis. Even different settlement dates do not cause an insurmountable problem for seldom are the settlements actually made on these dates, providing windows of opportunity, and once a lawful mandate for industrial action is triggered, it has no time limit on its subsequent longevity. Rather, political will on the part of different unions, and their respective leaderships, is the key factor here to realising not just that 'an injury to one is an injury to all' but that 'strength is unity'.

Social Movements

Social movements are often heralded as potential saviours for the union movement, be these the anti-war/peace, anti-racist, anti-globalisation, anti-poverty or environmental movements. In order to have some appreciation as to whether this is a realistic claim or suggestion, we need to dissect what are meant by the terms 'social' and 'movement' before going on to discuss their aims and those of unions. By 'social', it is normally meant that the movements are not part of the formal political process (at local, regional and national levels of elected bodies, quangos and the state). Nonetheless, that does not mean these movements are not political for they act as political agencies and they act for political ends. Moreover, they operate as political bodies in terms of creating political leverage and identifying points of leverage in any and all spheres of public life. Most obviously, social movements are extra-parliamentary agencies based on mass mobilisation and direct participation like public meetings, demonstrations and the like. What is much more open to contention is what is meant by the term 'movement'. Using such a term implies something positive about the collective's size, internal coherence and commonality of aims. If we are to define a model of a movement, it would be something like a social phenomenon which has:

- a commonality of an agreed singular aim across its self-selected constituents and concerned constituency, with a small number of commonly agreed secondary aims
- a wide geographical dispersion with a critical mass in localities, communities and networks across this spatial dimension
- the attachment of a large number of politically engaged and politically active lay people within it
- the affinity of a large number of politically engaged and politically active lay people to it

- a common internal identity which conveys the aims of the movement and the strategy and tactics deployed, as well as this identity being both representative and the sum of those in and attached to the movement
- a common external identity which has purchase and currency with a large number of people and this identity conveys the broad aims of the movement as well as some of the strategy and tactics deployed

We can also reasonably infer that any 'movement' will have a vitality of spirit and activity to it. On top of this, the resources of such a movement are created by voluntary action (activity and donations) and even where people are employed as a result of a resource, they are subject to direction and accountability to the constituents of the movement.

The importance of laying out this model is because union activists frequently use the term 'movement' in rather dubious and contentious ways, essentially and implicitly stating what they wish was the case rather than what actually is the case. Thus, for example, such talk of the 'union movement' implies a far greater degree of vitality, coherence and unity than is now the case compared to, say, the 1970s. We could best get a measure of the relative degree to which unions form a 'movement' by hypothetically asking a cross section of union members if

- they feel like they are part of, or belong, to the 'union movement'?
- if they do, why this is the case, what do they think the union movement's purpose is and what do they do to act on this feeling?
- if they do not feel part of the 'union movement', why they do not, and what would make them feel like they did?

The responses (of members, not activists) would in all likelihood suggest that some essential features of a 'movement' are currently missing because whilst the union 'movement' has a common heritage of labour unionism and social democracy and expresses the fundamental aspect of what it means to be a worker, it also has many differences stemming from occupational and political factors. Thus, some members will show greater identity with their own union than the wider union 'movement'. And the TUC, as one of the few cross-union symbols of the union 'movement', is not particularly visible or influential in order to cement a common, purposeful identity across unions.

The same mapping exercise can be applied to any of the social movements listed above. But, for many within other social 'movements', there is often no form of membership, and in other cases, the 'movements' are made up of different campaigning organisations that are not membership based. *In toto*, this may lead to the conclusion that sometimes the terms 'milieu' and 'campaign' might be more appropriate than 'movement' in the cases of these social movements. What is also important to recognise is the dynamics of each 'movement' can be quite different in their nature and rhythms. In the case of the current anti-war movement, the inability to stop the invasion (and then end the occupation) of Iraq has had a considerable and deleterious impact on the quantitative and qualitative nature of that movement. It is also the case that this anti-war movement is quantitatively and qualitatively different from those concerning British military action in the former Yugoslavia and the first Gulf war. Again, these points are raised by way of highlighting the different dynamics and context that affect any single 'movement' – indeed, it is likely that if a Venn diagram of all recent anti-war movements was drawn, only a very small number of the hard left would be common to all.

The overall point of this discussion is that the aspiration and expectations of those who rightly advocate closer working relationships between unions and campaign groups should be grounded

and tempered – both in terms of what the union movement and other social movements are - so that a realistic appraisal of the possibilities is made. In other words, we must recognise what are commonly termed as social 'movements' are often quite diffuse in aims and nature which means achieving engagement and common action with them are far from easy or straightforward. Nonetheless, how could social 'movements', campaigns and the like help unions or how could both help each other?

First, areas of manifest common interest need to be identified, and working relationships and trust established on these thereafter. Here, unions would need to have multiple relationships with a number of different 'movements' spanning their own interests. Joint working and campaigning over a number of issues at different levels (local, national, international) could then be set in train, over and above the obvious times of need, like a GateGourmet situation, where the unions need to call upon outside help. The fundamental premise here is about creating wider popular mobilisations of support – physical as well as financial – but this must be a two-way street in order to create strong and mutually reinforcing relationships. Second, activists from social 'movements' could be targeted for recruitment to the union movement as lay activists or full-time organisers in order to replenish the cadres of activists and personnel. Third, the way in which campaigning organisations organise could be transferred as models of 'best practice' into the union movement through cooperation with individual unions. In return, unions would then encourage their activists to move into these social 'movements' in order to reciprocate and cross-fertilise.

Producer-User Alliances

In recent times, it has almost become a new orthodoxy that producers are deemed to have vested self-interests which are conservative, even backward, and that these are in antagonism with those of the more numerically preponderant users and consumers whose needs are deemed, in contrast, to be modern and progressive. However, Labour's firm adherence to implementing neo-liberalism has now gone so far that it is becoming clear that the unions should seriously examine, as collective organisations of the producers and deliverers of goods and services, the utility of forming alliances with wider citizenship as the users and consumers of these goods and services. The rationale here is that unions' and citizens' interests are intertwined and interdependent because the defence of jobs and their terms and conditions of employment, in the current context, is the most likely defence of the quality of good and services.

This argument is most easy to appreciate in the case of the provision of public services. In the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP), millions of calls go unanswered from claimants and millions of items of mail concerning tax lie unopened in the Revenue and Customs (HMRC), both due to cuts in staff and service. 'Discgate', where personal data on millions was lost in November 2007, was another example of the outcomes of cost-cutting. Similar points about the connection between the poor levels of service, poor terms and conditions of staff and lack of staff can also be made about the fire service, the NHS, public housing and areas like the railways where public subsidy remains critical.

It is normally assumed that users and consumers are not capable of being organised collectively. They are regarded as being atomised individuals, with the only direct representation of their interests being possible through statutory quangos, usually comprised of self-selected members of the professional classes. However, a cursory glance around local newspapers shows that any number of campaigns have sprung up in defence of local services of one type or another. The challenge in organising users and consumers is to establish links between their campaigns as well as to leave an organisational mark behind when they wind down. One indication of what has so far been achieved

is the working alliance between the National Pensioners' Convention and a number of public sector unions like PCS where both support each other when they campaign for their respective issues. Another is that organisations like NHS Together, Keep Our NHS Public and Public Services Not Private Profit have already been created along the lines suggested. If the relevant unions were prepared to help initiate user groups in each part of the public sector, they could look to facilitate popular, mass campaigning bodies which have vibrant local chapters. Ultimately, this could pave the way for a broad, united and effective national alliance in defence of public services. In the private sector, the opportunity for unions is to link the issues of quality of working life, health and safety and opposition to cost cutting to consumers' interests of regular and reliable high quality goods and services. Food manufacturing is an obvious example here while worker and passenger safety on the railways is another.

Conclusion

The starting points for this paper were that a) labour union power has diminished considerably in the present period and b) understanding the sources of union power provides one of the best ways to then consider how, where and when to rebuild union power. Labour unionism cannot hope to meet employers as units of capital on anything like an equal footing unless it aggregates itself to a much higher degree. Neither can it meet the business lobby on an equal footing in terms of access to current government ministers and advisors and the resources and ideology that facilitate this. However, what labour unionism can do is look to its own strengths and resources – immediately through its own members and through other compatible networks where union density, the focus on the workplace and workplace bargaining power are important but far from the whole picture. Consequently, the main lessons to be derived from this paper are that labour unionism needs to exercise strategic choice in a number of the arenas in which it can act – which workers are most strategic, how to act as pressure groups, choosing on what basis to act politically, working with the so-called social movements and so on. All this requires 'out of the box', imaginative thinking to discuss and then realise the possibilities. So this paper, as a scoping paper of the sources of union power, hopes to provide a framework and anchor from which these issues can be productively discussed within and across unions. Discussion needs to tease out what should be done, why, when and where.

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