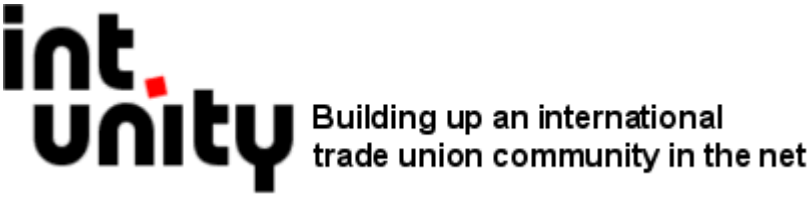
International trade union activity and work of works councils on the Internet



A report for int.unity by Andrew Bibby, 2004

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Introduction

New communications technologies have much to offer the trade union movement. The internet in particular has the potential to transform unions' administrative and democratic structures, to help in recruitment, organising and servicing of the membership, and to enable unions to anticipate the new demands on them which they will increasingly face in the twenty-first century.

Perhaps even more importantly, ICT-enabled communication can facilitate stronger work between unions at the international level, a development which is essential if unions are to respond adequately to the growing globalisation of the world economy.

This report focuses primarily on the situation in Europe, exploring innovative uses of email, websites and other internet-based communications technologies being made both by individual unions and by international trade union organisations. As will readily be seen, unions have certainly not been technophobes in the approach they have taken to this new technology. On the other hand, it is fair to say that many unions have still to realise the full potential which the internet offers for their work.

This report has been prepared as part of the int.unity project, which itself has the goal of building up an international trade union community on the internet.

Union websites

The vast majority of European trade unions have embraced the internet, at least to the extent of operating their own websites.

The most recent attempt at a global inventory of union webpages was undertaken by the London School of Economics' Centre for Economic Performance, in 2001. This survey claimed to find a total of about 2,700 websites, made up of 1088 individual unions, 132 national federations and about 1400 local and regional sites, typically run by union branches. The authors of this survey admit that they may have missed some sites, particularly those not using the English language[1].

In Europe, figures for the number of union websites included the UK in first place (373), France in second place (181) and Germany third (59). At the other end, countries such as Albania, Estonia and Lithuania had a single trade union site.

However, the existence of a union website does not necessarily mean very much. As Wayne Diamond and Richard Freeman, two of the academics engaged in the LSE study, put it:

> Union websites vary immensely in what they offer. Some are simple bulletin boards or 'posters sites' – the equivalent of a Yellow Pages style advertisement. Others are much more sophisticated designs, making the maximum use of current web technology[2].

The key issue is whether websites are viewed by unions as central or peripheral to their work. In the latter case, a downward spiral can easily develop – the site is updated infrequently if at all, and doesn't hold current documents or information needed by officials or activists for their work. As a consequence, many visitors quickly become disheartened and cease to return to the site. With visitor numbers dropping, there becomes even less motivation to put additional resources into the website so that the cycle accelerates and the website decays.

This is regrettable. A website acts as the most prominent public shop-window of the organisation, providing an opportunity to explain the services and benefits which union membership can bring, and offering a mechanism for recruiting new members. It is also the medium through which the union can reach external organisations, including the media.

The lesson would seem to be, therefore, that to be effective a website needs to be updated on a very regular, some would say daily, basis. In order to *maximise* the role of a website, however, perhaps more is required: the website has to move from being an add-on or an afterthought to become much more central to the union's internal life, almost a kind of nerve centre of the organisation. The real challenge is to work to integrate a union's internal computer networks with its website, so that new documents and material are automatically made available as they are generated. (Internal and confidential documents can, of course, be password protected.)

As Abigail Lawrence-Jones of the Communication Workers Union (UK) has put it:

A constantly evolving, functional, operational, regularly updated site is a sign of a union that listens to its members and reacts to their needs. it also encourages users to return[3]…

Unions should also encourage departments within the organization to be responsible for updating their own material, using a content management system, which would not require the contributor to know anything about specific internet-language such as html.

Unions collectively have taken a number of steps to improve the usefulness and operability of their websites. One such is the e-Tradeunions.org initiative, which offers an online forum for union webmasters to share experiences and obtain informal advice. Its aim is "to provide answers to the usual questions people ask themselves, when they are taking their union onto the web for the first time, or when they want to upgrade their trade union website presence from, for example, a static site to a dynamic database driven site"[4].

E-Tradeunions.org operates through its website, where a database of Frequently Asked Questions has been compiled. The website is a joint venture of staff with web responsibilities at the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU), Union Network International (UNI) and at three individual unions: COMFIA.CC.OO (Spain), FNV (Netherlands) and Prospect (UK). There are also contact details for over 50 union webmasters, from Austria to Argentina, each of whom offers to help with informal questions.

Another similar forum for information exchange is provided by the Labour Webmasters Forum, hosted by LabourStart at www.labourstart.org.

Union Network International, the Global Union formed as a result of the merger of four trade union internationals in 2000, has gone a stage further. It brought together about sixty trade union webmasters in 2001 for a Webmasters Forum at its head office near Geneva, the event providing a direct opportunity to improve websites and develop unions' web strategy. A second Forum (this time also opened to union magazine editors) was held in early 2003, when UNI Bridge was launched.

UNI Bridge is part of UNI's strategy to ensure that its affiliates in developing countries are able to use email and the internet. The project uses UNI's existing network of webmasters to help create websites for affiliated unions that do not yet have one. Currently a member of the UK finance union Unifi is working with three UNI affiliates in Ghana, the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union, the Communication Workers Union and The Health Services Workers' Union.

Websites and recruitment

When the British Trades Union Congress set out to explore what workers look for from a trade union, one of their surprising findings was that many non-union members would join a union… if the union took the trouble to ask them to do so. In unionised workplaces, for example, 36% of non-members said that they were either 'very' or 'quite' likely to join, if asked.[5]

One way to reach potential new members is through union websites. Many unions provide response forms where individuals can identify their interest. Membership forms and details of union services can then be sent back.

A number of unions across the world go a step further and make it possible for new members to join and pay their first membership subscription through the mechanism of the website. ver.di is an example from Germany. In Britain, Connect has offered this arrangement since late 2002, with considerable success. Over a hundred people joined on-line in the first month that the service was operating, and since then the majority of new members have come to the union via this route[6]. Technically this sort of facility is straightforward to arrange, using the same technology used by e-commerce for secure payments.

Websites and member communication

One of the main roles for a union website is to act as a communication channel to - and between - union members. As Abigail Lawrence-Jones says:

> One of the most essential elements of a union website is a facility for members to interact, both with the website itself, but also with each other. The more interaction members have with each other, the better the sense of solidarity they will have. It also follows that they are most likely to revisit the site, and recommend it to colleagues…
>
> For the union, there are also benefits to be had in offering a members' only area, such as insight into what members are currently most interested in, a better understanding of their interests, more direct contact, and the ability to attain usable feedback …[7]

Members' only sections, which require name and password registration to enter, are a feature of many major European trade union websites. They typically offer access to internal union information, to resources for members and activists, to online training programs, and to member-only bulletin boards and discussion forums. Some unions also provide space for public exchange of views and discussion. IG Metall (Germany), for example, operates a web guest book, where comments can be left; the guest book can be read by all, but registration is needed before messages are posted (membership of the union is not necessary for registration).

The internet provides a potentially very powerful way of reaching members during the collective bargaining process, to inform them of developments and to elicit their views. The Swedish insurance union FTF, for example, obtained an impressive 20% response rate from its members using a website poll, during the union's recent negotiations with the employers.[8]

Another Swedish union, the large services union SIF, has also regularly made use of website polling of members during negotiations. A poll held during IT sector negotiations, for example, brought in responses from 3,032 members, 12% of the total covered by the agreement:

> Before the IT wage negotiation, which will affect 25,000 of our members, we used telemarketing in combination with standard mailings. The aim was to persuade members to log on to the SIF website and respond to a questionnaire which was available for four weeks. The

response to this questionnaire will form a basis prior to negotiations on the new IT Telecoms agreement.[9]

The CWU (UK) used the internet to ballot the 267 members of the union who were transferring to new terms and conditions, as part of BT and AT&T's abortive Concert partnership. 71.9% of those eligible to vote did so, with over 90% backing the agreement. The CWU used the independent balloting services of election.com (formerly Unity Balloting) to oversee the arrangements:

Under the e-mail voting system all members entitled to vote were first sent a special pin number to their workplace e-mail addresses. Any wrong addresses were therefore quickly picked up by the e-mail 'bounceback' facility, ensuring a 100% accurate voter list before electronic voting forms were sent out. The on-screen voting itself was carried out by a click of a computer mouse on either the *yes* or the *no* box[10].

Connect (UK) also makes extensive use of on-line ballots, as Sarah Ward reports:

We use the on-line ballots more frequently in order to allow our members a direct say in the process of negotiation. Success earlier this year came with a pay ballot for the managerial and professional group (MPG) in BT. We e-mailed the information and placed lots of info up on the website. So, people could read in some detail what the pay deal would mean for them…. 70% of the MPG-members participated in the ballot. We're using more of these ballots in other parts of our organisation now.[11]

As unions have discovered sometimes to the discomfort of their leaders, the development of electronic communication through the internet also potentially empowers their members to take a much more direct role during negotiations.

Websites to reach particular groups of members

The internet provides a convenient mechanism for unions to tailor their message for particular groups of workers.

In the UK, for example, the public sector union Unison (in conjunction with the national student body the National Union of Students) has developed a website for students and student nurses undertaking part-time work during their studies to make ends meet. The website, www.troubleatwork.org.uk, is designed to provide information on a range of work-related topics, from call centre working to occupational safety and health.

In Germany, ver.di has combined a dedicated website with a call centre helpline service Mediafon for its members in the media industry. The website includes much useful information, but enquirers can also ring up the call centre for further assistance. In turn, the call centre has the facility to transfer more specialised enquiries, for example about tax or legal matters, to advisers with appropriate expertise. One useful benefit for ver.di is that Mediafon provides something of an early warning system, flagging up new problems and concerns as they arise and enabling the union to respond quickly. Mediafon can be used by non-members as well as union members; ver.di says that about 15% of non-members using the service end up by joining.

A similar service, linking both a website and call centre operation, is ver.di's Online Forum for Teleworkers, OnForTe. The website includes a comprehensive database of information on themes relating to telework, as well as advice on such issues as electronic privacy and on-line rights at work. OnForTe, originally set up by one of ver.di's predecessor unions DPG, has built up an expertise in telework advice perhaps unrivalled by other unions.

Mention should also be made of connexx.av, ver.di's initiative to reach workers in commercial radio, the film industry, the audiovisual industry and the internet. connexx.av, originally launched by ver.di's predecessor unions DAG and IG Medien, is currently running on a project basis until 2005. The project has its own website, www.connexx-av.de.

A number of unions have made moves in recent years to bring self-employed and autonomous workers within the union fold. One recent example comes from the Netherlands, where FNV Bondgenoten acted as godfather in the establishment of a new union for the self-employed, FNV Zelfstandige Bondgenoten. This embryonic organisation brings together a wide range of workers, from self-employed ICT specialists to masseurs, under the slogan 'On your own, but not alone'. The Zelfstandige website acts as a vital communication channel for members and includes much useful advice[12].

A similar idea is being followed in Denmark, where the large Danish union HK has created a website www.freelancer.dk for what amounts almost to a 'digital trade union'. This website has a private section of the website offering specific advice and information, accessible only to HK members who have paid the monthly subscription. However, there is also an extensive public area of the website, which among other things includes the facility for any freelancer to advertise their services in a searchable database. HK says that, as well as providing a valuable service, the database also enables it to identify potential new members.

In France, the CFDT-affiliated managers' and professionals' organisation CFDT-Cadres launched a *Réseau Professionnels autonomes* (network for independent professionals) in late 2002, aimed at, among others independent consultants, graphical designers, software engineers and freelance journalists. The network (initially being run as a three-year pilot) is strongly focused on a specialist website, www.professionnels-autonomes.net.

FABI (Italy) is another union which has set up a specialist organisation *Sindacato Nazionale Autonomo dei Promotori Finanziari (SNAProFin)* for freelance professionals in the banking and finance sector. The union says the numbers of independent consultants within the sector are continually growing. SNAProFin has its own website, www.snaprofin.it.

Websites and industrial disputes

The potential of electronic communications as a valuable tool during industrial disputes was highlighted at an early stage in the internet's development. Eric Lee in his 1997 book *The labour movement and the internet*[13] describes a number of examples from the United States of online newspapers being produced by striking journalists, to explain to the general public the background to their disputes. Another much-quoted example was the so-called 'cyber-picketing' undertaken under the coordination of the International Federation of Chemical, Energy , Mining and General Workers Unions (ICEM) against the multinational tyre company Bridgestone/Firestone in 1996, when the company had sacked hundreds of members of the ICEM's US affiliate. The 'cyber-picketing' consisted of a mass e-mailing to the company by supporters of the union and of the sacked workers, an action which forced the company to construct a parallel email network to avoid its systems being overloaded.

With the subsequent development of malicious 'denial of service' attacks by hackers on high-profile internet targets, it would probably now be ill-advised - if not illegal - for unions to repeat this particular tactic. Nevertheless, the internet offers an extremely efficient communications tool during disputes. As Wayne Diamond and Richard Freeman point out:

> The internet has become a medium through which unions conduct labour disputes. They do this by e-mail contact with members, and by presenting the unions' case to the general public over the internet. The first and most common mode of using the internet in disputes is union provision of online information about the dispute. The web allows unions to supplement or correct highly filtered media reporting at low cost and to inform members or the public about bargaining issues.[14]

One example of effective use of email comes from the 1999 dispute between the Teamsters union (US) and Overnite Transportation. The teamsters

instituted a 'virtual picket line' during the dispute, which included daily updates to its website and email alerts to 4000 people. Special email messages were targeted at Overnite's own customers[15].

One issue which has come to the fore is the extent to which a company can have the legal power to control critical information about it posted on the internet.

This issue arose in Korea during a dispute in 1996 following the dismissal of 580 workers after the takeover of a firm by Pohang Iron and Steel Co Ltd (POSCO). Supporters of the dismissed workers ran an 'anti-POSCO' website, which deliberately parodied the design of the official company site. The company applied for a legal injunction against the site, claiming that it violated the copyright of its own homepage. This allegation was in turn attacked by the Korean labour movement which argued that the company was attempting to restrict freedom of expression on the internet.[16]

A very similar issue has been considered by the British Columbia (Canada) supreme court, following legal action by British Columbia Automobile Association (BCAA) against a branch of the Office and Professional Employees' International Union, which had used the initials bcaa as part of a strike website, www.bcaaonstrike.com.

The company argued, among other legal charges, that the union website breached copyright elements of its own website, since the union had used some elements of the company's website design on the strike website.

The supreme court judgment found the union guilty of copyright infringements, but found in favour of the union in other aspects of the case. Vicki Skelton has offered this analysis of the situation now applying in British Columbia:

For unions, this decision is groundbreaking. Internet picket lines are legal as long as unions follow a few guidelines derived from this decision:

1. copying the employer's website too exactly, its design, layout and colours, will bring charges of copyright infringement that will succeed
2. using the employer's visual trade marks such as its logo design in a manner that could confuse visitors as to the ownership of the site would be misleading and therefore fall under the tort of passing-off
3. registering website domain names that include the employer's trademarked name is legal

4. using the same meta tags as the employer's, so that your website will also appear on the same 'hit list' is legal
5. using a website as a communication tool during a strike is legal[17]

Internationally, the WIPO Arbitration and Mediation Center rules on disputed web domain registrations, including cases of alleged cybersquatting. WIPO's panel of neutral experts generally rule in favour of companies making complaints.

However, in the case of the web domain www.bridgestone-firestone.net, a website run by Jack Myers, a former employee of the company who used the site to highlight a pension dispute, the WIPO panel ruled against the multinational. In its judgment it recorded that "The Panel concludes that the exercise of free speech for criticism and commentary also demonstrates a right or legitimate interest in the domain name". The Internet is above all a framework for global communication, and the right to free speech should be one of the foundations of Internet law".[18] (The website had since been withdrawn).

On-line communication with members in the workplace

The speed at which email and the internet have become an established part of life has left both employers and unions facing the question of how these electronic tools should be used in the work situation. What sort of rules are appropriate, and what rights should unions have to access these facilities to communicate with their members?

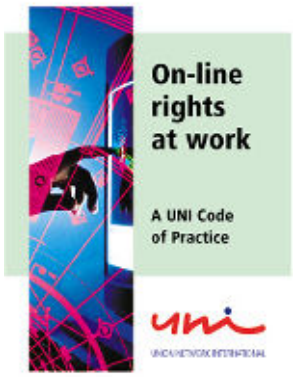
An early example from Australia demonstrates some of the problems which can arise. The airline company Ansett sacked one of its employees, Maria Gencarelli, for what it called 'unacceptable use of technology'. What Ms Gencarelli, a representative with the Australian Services Union, had done was to circulate to her colleagues by email an update on the bargaining talks being carried out between Ansett and the union. The case eventually ended up in the Australian Federal Court, which ruled in 2000 that Ms Gencarelli had been unfairly sacked. The company was deemed to have contravened the freedom of association provisions in the country's Workplace Relations Act[19].

The global union FIET (now part of Union Network International) took the lead in developing a union response to issues of email and internet use with the launch in 1998 of its *On-line rights for on-line workers* campaign. This was followed in 2001 by the publication of UNI's *On-line rights at work: a UNI Code of Practice.*

UNI's code includes the following clause:

The works council/trade union and its representatives have the right to access and use enterprise electronic facilities for works council/trade union purposes, both internally and externally. This includes the right to send trade union/works council information to all employees using the electronic communication tools available. Employees have the right to use enterprise electronic facilities to communicate with their trade union/works council and their representatives.[20]

As the Code points out, this clause aims to extend into the electronic age the sort of facilities provision for workers' representatives which was the subject of the ILO Convention and Recommendation agreed in 1971.



The UNI Code goes on to offer model clauses to regulate the monitoring and surveillance of electronic communications in the workplace, and to propose a fair way to regulate the use by employees of email and the internet for non-business purposes.

A number of individual unions have taken up this issue in their own countries. GPA (Austria), FNV (Netherlands) and MSF (now Amicus – UK) are among those which used FIET and UNI's work to produce their own Model Agreements on electronic facilities. MSF has also produced a companion code of practice covering issues of privacy in the workplace.

Some employers have been happy to facilitate the use by unions of corporate email and internet systems. In France, for example, the multimedia union

BETOR-PUB CFDT has negotiated a formal agreement with the Société OLSY which gives the union access rights to the company's network.

However, there have also been examples where employers have attempted to prevent employees from making contact with their representatives. One case was that of Xerox Germany. In 2001, UNI's General Secretary Philip Jennings formally raised this issue in a letter to the managing director of the firm. The letter included the following points:

> We have been informed that Xerox recently banned access for its employees to the ver.di campaign website "xeXit" and that furthermore it is impossible to send emails out of Xerox to an 'hbv.org' or receive emails from HBV/ver.di.
>
> The right of employees to collective organisation is one that has long been acknowledged and endorsed internationally as a fundamental human right. This means not simply the right of individuals to join trade union bodies without fear of victimisation or discrimination, but also the right of those collective organisations to be able to perform their work freely, and to communicate with their members without hindrance. In an increasingly digitised world of work, this means access to electronic means of communication.[21]

The issue of access to email and the internet becomes of even more significance in the case of European Works Councils. We shall look at this aspect later in this report.

Trade union websites and e-learning

The European Union has reiterated on many occasions in the past few years the importance of ensuring that Europe's workers have the opportunity to improve their training opportunities and skills competencies. It has also emphasised the role which the social partners can play in meeting this objective. Following the landmark *eEurope* Lisbon summit, a specific eLearning initiative was launched by the European Commission in May 2000. A series of reports on the possibilities for computer-assisted and online learning have been produced, and a European eLearning summit was held in May 2001.

As well as offering traditional training and learning opportunities for members, trade unions are exploring the potential of online learning, including training materials delivered over the internet.

The Norwegian managers and technicians union FLT has been particularly enterprising in this respect. The union has entered into partnership with the Association of Professional Engineers, Scientists and Managers Australia (APESMA), under which it offers its members access to a MBA (Technology Management) course originally pioneered by APESMA and now adapted for the particular needs of Norwegian students. FLT has developed a specialist website, www.addisco.no, which can be accessed by members seeking further professional training. (The APESMA MBA has also been adapted by a number of British unions, who offer it to their own members).[22]

In Sweden, SIF has in recent years developed a range of e-learning resources for its members. As SIF has explained:

> Multimedia technology makes it possible to reach a wide audience with exciting, professional products which are available for the member when he/she is most motivated and in need of the service; and many of our 350,000 members work with technology and are attracted by technical media![23]

Early work by SIF included a competency analysis tool *Put your house in order* and a package in negotiation and communication techniques *Plead your own cause,* which was used by 30,000 members. A more recent initiative has been an interactive learning program, available both as a CD-ROM and on the internet, called *There is a time for everything*. This program urges SIF's members to make time for themselves, both at work and at home, and to use time effectively. It reminds members of the importance of work/life balance and warns that time is a finite resource.

SIF has also introduced a career counselling resource, *CareerCoach (KarriärCoach)*. This is a web-based tool designed to help individuals analyse their working life prospects. SIF members receive a password from the union and can then work their way in their own time through the programme. Afterwards, SIF has trained advisers available who can discuss the findings and offer personal advice.

KarriärCoachen är ett webbaserat analysinstrument som hjälper dig att identifiera dina drivkrafter, din utvecklingspotential och dina mål. Det hjälper dig att få svar på vilken karriärväg och organisation som passar dig bäst!

SIF also developed a web-based tool for members who were engineers, 'the competence compass'. The service operated by enabling individuals to compare their current skills with those on offer, and to assess for themselves their further education needs.

The French managers and professionals' union CFDT-Cadres has made similar use of its website, with its members able to access an interactive time management resource, TempoCadres. A similar resource on stress management is currently under preparation, and will also be made available to members through the web.

Using union websites to help members find work

In times past, trade unions in many countries have played an important role in ensuring that their members found work. This tradition, particularly associated with craft-based unions, is being revived today with the aid of the internet.

Mention has been made above of the role played by the Australian union APESMA in providing higher education opportunities for its members. APESMA has also established its own successful recruitment agency, ETM Recruitment, which helps members find engineering, technology and management positions.

Connect (UK) decided to set up its own employment agency in the early 1990s, when large numbers of Connect's members were being offered voluntary redundancy by British Telecom. Connect uses the name Opus[2] for this service.

Opus² operates in a very similar way to commercial employment agencies, in that candidates provide it with a completed registration form, CV etc. Vacancies are advertised on the Opus² website, and also from time to time in Connect's members magazine. One advantage of the employment agency is that encourages members who are leaving their employment to maintain their loyalty to the union. Opus² also charges employers when posts are filled, at the standard rate of 20% of first year's annual salary.

Another UK union the National Union of Journalists helps its freelance members (who comprise over a quarter of the union's membership) find work, through the Freelance Directory which it maintains at its website www.nuj.org.uk. The Directory (originally produced as a printed volume) lists 1600 professional journalists who are NUJ members, in a database format which is searchable by region, skill and specialism.

Another service, of particular benefit to workers not covered by collective bargaining, has been developed by the innovative Swiss on-line trade union for IT professionals, //syndikat (see below). //syndikat encourages members to check for themselves whether they are being paid fairly. Its Salary Checker program, accessed through the website, contains information on payment levels to IT professional workers in Switzerland.

The Salary Checker database is made up of information supplied by //syndikat users and other visitors to its website, and it therefore becomes more valuable the more people use it and contribute their own data. About 4,500 workers (or about 6.5% of the total IT workforce in German-speaking Switzerland) have so far contributed their information. The Salary Checker software checks data supplied for obvious errors or deliberate mistakes, and – according to //syndikat – the data is now demonstrably representative statistically of the whole IT sector in Switzerland.

//syndikat
Die Online-Gewerkschaft

Similar ideas to //syndikat's Salary Checker have been tried by unions in Austria and the Netherlands, and the idea of an IT salary checker has now been taken up by Union Network International (UNI) which plans to operate a European-wide Salary Checker service for IT workers.

Implications of the internet for union structures and democracy

Much academic and business writing in the past ten years has suggested that, with the coming of an economy based increasingly on the exploitation of non-tangible assets and of 'information', old hierarchical organisational forms and Taylorist management techniques will become increasingly inappropriate. Instead, commentators have suggested that in future business organisations will be flatter, less top-down, and based more on networking than in the past.

The German writer Ulrich Klotz in his essay *The New Economy* published by the German trade union federation DGB goes on to relate these changes to trade unions' own roles and organisational forms:

> With the spread of IT, an economy is springing up that is based more on the production of ideas than its predecessor, which was founded on the principle of manufacturing objects at the lowest possible cost. Consequently the task and structure of organisations is undergoing a transformation…
>
> To be able to play a game redefined through new technologies, many institutions in our society, including unions, will have no choice but to redefine their roles, self-images, organisational structures and methods of operation…
>
> Owing to the origins of the unions, their internal organisation corresponds to that of a classical Taylorist factory for mass production: control is exercised from the top to the bottom of the power pyramid. Those at the bottom do the work that is planned at the top. As long as markets and membership structures remained stable and easy to manage, it was possible to operate successfully on this principle. Since then, however, the environmental has changed radically.[24]

Klotz suggests, in other words, that existing union organisational and democratic structures are a product of the industrial age and are particularly tailored to the needs of that way of working. New democratic structures may need to be developed for a new economy.

A number of unions have experimented with uses of information and communication technologies in relation to their members' delegate conferences. In some instances, this has taken the form of webcasting proceedings, so that members not attending can see what is taking place. With the arrival of fast broadband communications, this may become increasingly feasible in the years ahead.

Some unions have also used their websites in the build-up to their conferences, in an effort to involve more members in this process. The Swedish union SIF, for example, has an extensive section of its website currently devoted to preparations for its 2004 Congress. Members can read material relating to the key topics for discussion, and can also use an on-line questionnaire to informally communicate their own views.[25]

SIF in the town of Södertälje has also experimented with the election of branch officials through direct on-line democracy.[26]

This idea was taken a step further in Ireland, where the CWU (Ireland) experimented for a time with the idea of a 'virtual branch', established especially for teleworkers. The union worked closely with Telework Ireland in creating a special 'virtual membership' package for these members.[27]

Perhaps the most radical step towards restructuring the internal democratic life of a union has been taken by the Austrian services union GPA. GPA has recently developed a set of new interest groups within the union, using the facilities of its www.interesse.at website. GPA sees these interest groups as a new, third, dimension in the internal democratic life of the union, complementing the traditional regional and sectoral structures. Members can self-select the interest group they feel is appropriate to their work. The interest groups are recognised in the GPA constitution and are autonomous; each group has the right to have delegate representation on the GPA Executive Committee and the GPA Forum.

Professional workers, for example, have access via the website to the work@professional interest group. There are also similar special interest

groups for flexible workers, including the self-employed (work@flex), for social service staff (work@social), for workers in IT (work@IT), for education workers (work@education), for mobile workers operating away from their office base (work@external) and for migrant workers (work@migration). Each interest group has its own website section, offering access to information, news and on-line discussion forums.

The 'e-union'

These innovative developments at GPA show what can be achieved within the structures of a long-established traditionally structured trade union. But perhaps we need to go a step further, to consider whether new technologies, including the internet, can actually encourage the development of new types of trade union organisation.

Can information and communication technologies lead to changes in the very *essence* of trade unionism? What would trade unions look like if they were being created from scratch today?

There has been considerable discussion in recent years of the idea of the 'e-union'. Roger Darlington, for example, makes the following comments in his paper *The Creation of the E-Union*:

> First, trade unions – like all other bodies in our society – have to reinvent themselves as e-organisations. This means that trade unions have not simply to use computers to assist certain activities, but to put the internet at the centre of their purpose and strategy. Second, this re-invention will affect everything that trade unions do and ought to do. This means that information and communications technologies will influence profoundly all current union activities and, even more so, all future activities if unions are to survive and prosper.[28]

He adds that unions will face extinction if they fail to transform themselves into 'e-unions'.

For an idea of what an e-union might look like it is worth looking at some examples of organising initiatives in the IT sector. One of these is WashTech, the Washington Alliance of Technology Workers. WashTech operates almost exclusively via its website, acting as a forum and collective voice for IT professionals working for Microsoft and for other IT workers in Washington state, USA. It grew out of a campaign in 1997 against Microsoft's extensive

use of ‘perma-temps’, long-term workers who were not given employment contracts directly with the company.

Marcus Courtney, one of the founders of WashTech, describes the initial process as follows:

> As we got people together, and started reading the e-mails, we started seeing people saying ‘We need a union!’. We started calling them up and e-mailing them, saying ‘Hey, we’re getting together and looking at this issue. Would you be willing to help organize?’[29]

IT workers in Washington state can join the organisation on-line, paying their dues automatically over the internet. Alternatively, they can simply subscribe to WashTech’s regular emails and online newsletters. In fact, the numbers joining have been relatively modest: only 250 members were signed up in WashTech’s first two years, for example. Nevertheless, Marcus Courtney sees the organisation’s influence as extending much more broadly. Recently, it has taken a lead in campaigns against the migration of IT jobs from the US to lower-cost destinations.

A similar initiative has led to the development of Alliance@IBM, which also operates almost exclusively via its website. As with WashTech, IBM staff can join the organisation online, or can choose simply to subscribe to email newsletters. Both WashTech and Alliance@IBM have become affiliated to the Communications Workers of America (CWA). WashTech and Alliance@IBM have recently been joined by ORTech, reaching out to IT workers in the state of Oregon.

In Switzerland, as mentioned above, Swiss IT workers have created a new union //syndikat, once again almost exclusively centred on a website. In Australia, a very similar initiative has led to the creation of IT Workers Alliance, focused on the website www.itworkers-alliance.org. This aims, in its own words, “to provide information and advice to help IT workers assist one another in understanding their rights as employees within the workplace, whether as salaried employees, agency contractors, or independent contractors”.

Initiatives like these aim to broaden a union's influence and power by reaching out to non-members as well as members. Perhaps the most radical – and some would say controversial – move in this direction has been by the Norwegian finance service union Finansforbundet. In 2002 it launched Rom as a separate non-profit organisation aiming to provide support and advice on work-related matters to a wide range of 'human capital' workers, including those running their own small businesses. Those who sign up to the services it offers (at a cost of about €38 a month) become subscribers rather than members. Rom offers legal advice, training and discounts on services such as insurance products. It is also building up a network of mentors and coaches, to provide one-to-one advice sessions on career issues.

The union hopes that Rom will appeal to both employees and the self-employed. New subscribers sign up over the internet at a dedicated website www.rom.no, making the service cheap and easy to manage.

For Rom, Finansforbundet has deliberately chosen to remove the traditional collective responsibilities and obligations which trade union membership implies, to deliver instead a straightforward business service offering advice on employment and work-related issues. The union, which enjoys a high unionisation rate in its own sector, says that it does not believe Rom will threaten its own work, but will simply enable it to have a relationship with non-unionised workers. However, establishing Rom has been expensive, costing at least 25 million kroner (about €3m) and take-up so far has been disappointing. The future of Rom is due to be discussed by the union at a conference in late 2003.

Internationalising trade union activity via the internet

As the world economy becomes ever more globalised, trade unions are increasingly finding themselves having to deal with trans-border companies operating multinationally and sometimes having little long-term commitment to the countries where they are currently based. At the same time, unions remain predominantly bodies rooted in individual nation states.

The urgent need for strong international union networks has been widely recognised in recent years, and has formed the focus for the ICFTU's Millennium review of its operations. The merger of four global union

federations in 2000 to form Union Network International is another manifestation of the same imperative.

As several commentators have remarked, international trade unionism can benefit enormously from new technologies, particularly email and the internet. Eric Lee in his book *The labour movement and the internet* has gone as far as to suggest that the internet can lead to a new internationalism, picking up where the trade union pioneers of the nineteenth century left off. "Thanks to the internet, a century-long decline in internationalism has already been reversed," he says.

The ICFTU and each of the Global Union Federations (formerly known as international trade secretariats) each have their own websites, and a central Global Unions website has also been set up at www.global-unions.org, coordinated by the ICFTU.

The ICFTU also makes extensive use of on-line communication in its research and coordination role internationally for the trade union movement. One example is the Global Unions' Trade Investment and Labour Standards Forum (TILS), which has played a key role in developing unions' responses to developments at the WTO. The Forum operates on-line, and links about three hundred members, including staff from bodies such as the OECD Trade Union Advisory Committee (TUAC), the Global Union Federations, national union federations and centres, and individual unions. Participation in the Forum is by invitation, and participants are asked to observe a rule of confidentiality in respect to its deliberations.

Another 'closed' union forum designed for in-depth exchange of information is the Collective Bargaining Network developed by Union Network International's European body UNI-Europa for the banking and insurance sector. This project, partly supported by the European Commission, began in late 2000 and is due to continue until November 2004, with its activities subsequently incorporated into UNI Finance's on-going work.

The Collective Bargaining Network is located in a password protected area of UNI's main website. It includes a database of European Works Council constitutions for companies in the finance sector, and information – provided by UNI affiliates in individual countries – on current national collective bargaining negotiations.

UNI points out that union negotiators more and more need up-to-date information of negotiations in other countries. In some instances, collective bargaining is now beginning to be coordinated internationally: for example, the 'Doorn group', established in 1998 by national union federations in Germany and the three Benelux countries has been a practical attempt to coordinate collective bargaining rounds and to achieve settlements corresponding to inflation plus labour productivity.

Using the internet to reach migrant workers

It is not just companies who are increasingly working across national frontiers: individual workers are, as well. According to the UN, the number of international migrants (people living outside their country of birth or citizenship for at least twelve months) reached 175 million in 2000, up from 154m in 1990. About 60% are in developed countries, with 40% in less developed countries.[30]

Traditional trade union structures are not necessarily particularly well suited to meet the needs of workers who are working away from their country of origin. Two innovative projects coordinated by international union organisations are piloting the use which can be made of the internet for workers in this position.

EUROCADRES

EuroCadres, an associated body of the European Trade Union Confederation which represents more than five million and professional staff in Europe, has received financial support from the European Commission for the development of its *Mobilnet* advice service for workers working in other European countries. The comprehensive *Mobilnet handbook* offers detailed advice on practical and legal aspects of living in other EU countries, with this information provided in all the EU15 official languages. The handbook can be accessed on line, at www.eurocadres.org/mobilnet.

mobil-net

UNI has introduced a 'Passport' scheme for migrant workers, which it has described as "key in the solidarity strategy aimed at helping unionised mobile workers to face the challenges of the 21st century." The idea is that members of one union can apply for a UNI Passport which will enable them to call on the services of a UNI-affiliated union in the country where they will be working[31]. The degree of support available varies between individual unions, who can choose to what extent they feel able participate in the scheme.

UNI is currently inviting affiliates to create a special 'Passport' page on their own website, to help potential users of the scheme know the level of assistance available. One pioneering example of a union 'Passport' webpage is that produced by FABI (Italy), available at www.fabi.it/passport/inglese/index.htm

European Works Councils and the internet

The European Directive 94/45/EC, passed into law on 22 September 1994, established the principle of European Works Councils. The Directive requires multinational companies who have at least 150 employees in each of at least two EU member states and at least 1000 employees in total within the EU to establish a works council "for the purposes of informing and consulting employees". According to the European Trade Union Institute, about 700 companies have currently set up EWCs.

From the trade union perspective, the experience has been a mixed one. The concept of European Works Councils is generally considered a step in the right direction, with EWCs seen as the possible precursors of globally based works councils in multinational companies. On the other hand, EWCs are limited under the European Directive to an information and consultation role, and can relatively easily be turned by management into ineffectual talking shops. EWC representatives are not necessarily even union members.

There is a challenging task, therefore, in ensuring that EWCs develop into useful bodies with some real power, and which are genuinely accountable to the whole workforce. Electronic communications have a considerable role to play in meeting these objectives.

The anthology *Information and communication technologies in Europe: the trade union perspective* published by UNI includes a collection of writings on the experiences of EWCs in the IT sector. As the introduction puts it:

> There are… practical difficulties to overcome, including issues of language and of communication between delegates. One message which comes through strongly from several of the extracts… is the value which new communications technology should have in this respect. Email communication between delegates is seen as crucial, but EWC delegates have in addition explored the potential of on-line 'chat' programmes and document sharing software such as Lotus Notes. Company intranets are also seen as important, as a way to communicate their deliberations with other employees.[32]

One contribution published in the UNI anthology looks at the experiences in the Ericsson EWC, as reported to a UNI conference in late 1999 by Hank van't Wout from FNV Bondgenoten (Netherlands):

> Although communications between members were limited in the early stages of [the EWC's] existence, the group soon began to use e-mail regularly, including e-mail lists and 'chat' programmes. Van't Wout explained that there were teething problems, for example colleagues from the UK and southern Mediterranean countries and others were not linked by e-mail. This situation was a major obstacle to effective and efficient communications. Van't Wout emphasised the positive aspects of communicating across borders through e-mail in terms of administrative and practical arrangements, exchanging information on national situations and regulations and sharing information and ideas. The group has also found interactive programmes to be key in communications between meetings and also as a medium for emergency meetings including management where immediate responses are required.[33]

One interesting way of improving communication within a multinational EWC was tried at Waste Management Inc, where one representative from each country took on the task of being an 'internet steward'. Each month, each 'steward' circulated a brief report (typically one side of A4) outlining recent developments in their country. It was agreed that all contributions would be written in English. These reports were circulated to other 'internet stewards', to other EWC delegates, to union full-timers and to the European Public Service Union. However, shortly after this practice was established, the parent company pulled out of Europe to retrench in the US market and the EWC was discontinued.[34]

Corporate intranets can also be a valuable tool for EWCs. At Cap Gemini Ernst & Young (CGEY), for instance, EWC delegates – as well as making use

of the company's email facilities to keep with each other - have their own section of the CGEY intranet, which includes a database of documents, minutes of meetings, working papers and presentations. This area of the intranet is restricted to EWC members, and at present there is no 'open' part of the intranet dedicated to the EWC for all members of staff to access. However, the CGEY intranet already includes 'open' areas providing information on national works councils and on trade union activities, and the introduction of a similar area for EWC news is anticipated very shortly.[35]

At IBM, the EWC has a limited information section on the company intranet, including details of meeting dates, membership and the EWC's method of operation. However, the use of the intranet remains limited – for example, the formal agreement which established the EWC is not posted, and neither are minutes and working papers.[36]

The Austrian union GPA has undertaken a research project *Internet, Intranet, E-mail, Electronic Facilities for European Works Councils* which includes suggested best practice for EWC home pages on corporate intranets. It proposes, among other things, the following structure for these pages[37]:

Welcome to the European works council!

- Your European works council
- Team introduction with photographs, telephone numbers and locations
- Mailbox (for sending e-mail messages to the European works council)
- Report on activities of the European works council over the previous year
- European works council demands
- FAQs frequently asked questions
- …

What's new?

- Ongoing European works council projects
- Issues for information and consultation with central management
- Readers' letters, discussion forum

European Works council services

- Library, agreement, minutes, bulletins, etc
- …

Collective and works agreements in countries covered by the EWC

- Working time, flexitime
- On-call duty

- Framework agreement on IT systems
- Assessment interviews
- Negotiating performance targets
- …

(Works agreements should be presented in a form permitting users to read but not print)

Interesting links

- trade unions represented on the EWC
- trade unions in countries covered by the EWC
- References (Dictionaries, encyclopaedias, universities, ...)
- Education (language training ...)
- News (magazines, ...)
- …

Overcoming linguistic barriers using technology

International communication between EWC delegates, as indeed between trade unions and union members more generally, can be made more difficult by language difficulties.

Basic machine translation services between some major languages are available on the internet. Members of the IBM EWC, for example, say that they occasionally make use of the Google language tools facility when documents need to be roughly translated[38].

However, this software remains crude and not tailored to the particular vocabulary and needs of a trade union user group. It is therefore appropriate, before ending this report, to mention the multi-language support platform being produced for international trade union communication through int.unity, the European project for which this report is being written. Int.unity makes use of a BSCW (Basic support for co-operative work) Shared Workspace system from OrbiTeam, with a user interface available in both German and English. The interface also permits the use of other languages, such as French, Italian and Spanish.

Int.unity includes among its project goals the following objective:

To implement, test, evaluate from the perspective of trade union users and optimise a Language Technology that is adequate for the target group, which makes it possible for the participating organisations to communicate and work within the framework of the project in their own native languages, ie to create messages, information and documents in their own

respective language, which are then automatically translated in the other respective language – with the assistance of a 'human evaluator' – in such a way that they are as error-free as possible and easily comprehended.

This technical aspect of int.unity's work is being developed by the IAI (Institut der Gesellschaft zur Förderung der Angewandten Informationsforschung) at the University of the Saarland in Germany. The aim is to create "an innovative tool for geographically distributed multilingual telecooperation of trade union organisations and other transnationally operating institutions of the social partners".[39]

Conclusions

The trade union movement has come a great distance in terms of its exploitation of electronic communications and the internet in the past few years. As this report has demonstrated, there is now a wealth of experience ready to be shared.

One of the implicit messages behind this report is that best practice in relation to the internet needs to be better communicated between unions. It makes no sense for each union to have to learn by itself what works and what does not work. Links between unions – both informal networks such as, say, e-tradeunions.org and more formal initiatives such as the int.unity project – are essential.

This report also emphasises the need to make these connections at international level. In the past, trade union internationalism was primarily a matter of principle; today, as multinational companies increasingly come to dominate the world economy, internationalism is a matter of practical necessity as well.

Fortunately, we have – in the internet – a new tool to help in this work. The internet offers a massively powerful means of fast, cheap, global communication which previous generations of trade unionists could only imagine. It is the task of unions today to ensure that this technology is adequately being used, to meet the challenges of the new century.

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