

The modernisation of workers' unions for the 21st century

Abstract

Modern workers' organisations, in order to survive successfully in today's society, have to adapt to the new conditions and demands and not lose, in the process, their basic goals. Key to the achievement of this seems to be to recognise that modern workers' unions are, in fact, at least akin to political parties and no longer simple associations of people with common interests. A new, modern union structure needs to be built following the action guidelines and elements of good public relations, which will facilitate the organisation of efficient action initiatives in the context of the new information society and the market conditions that have changed the way of functioning both of companies and of the workforce. New, efficient unions need to have a high PR profile, aided by the establishment on their staffs of appropriately-qualified professionals. In the process, they will create for themselves a prominent presence that will act on two fronts – towards gathering a new membership in addition to a strengthening of their public profile, image and credibility.

Keywords: workers' unions, labour market, organisation, information technology, post-Fordism, decentralisation, political engagement, public relations, campaigning, modernisation

Introduction

Modern trade union organisations, in order to survive successfully in modern society, have to adapt to the new conditions and demands that this is imposing on them, while being careful not to lose their basic solidaristic values and goals in the process.

The modern market is very different from the one applying at the time workers' unions appeared as the answer to emerging industrial capitalism. Market changes happen quickly and abruptly; technology changes almost overnight. Market borders are erased, markets have become multinational and global as, in some cases, have also the workforce. Many companies have their production in other parts of the world where the workforce is cheaper, which has led to the loss of jobs in home countries and to the creation of new ones in less-developed countries, mainly in east Asia.¹ With the development of communications technologies, many jobs the relocation of which was, up to that point, impossible even to imagine became usual practice, for example the customer service centres of US and British companies, whose call handlers are located

1 Of relevance here is the famous conversation between Barack Obama and Steve Jobs, the former President of Apple, who answered Obama's question about iPhone production returning to the USA by saying 'Mr. President, those jobs are not coming back.'

in India, or the computer departments of the major banks which are also being moved to India.²

Such a modern labour market imposes a demand for a modern, changed workforce and, consequently, organisations that gather such a new workforce together have to change as a result both of their membership and the new market conditions.

The forms of company organisations are changing, becoming more decentralised and networked, and more horizontal than vertical, while old, rigid hierarchy structures are becoming obsolete. This is a challenge for workers' unions which, in general, are centralised hierarchical organisations, inert to change.

The information age

The organisational form of workers' unions is obsolete. Unions were formed at the end of the 19th century and at the beginning of the 20th as the answer to the industrial revolution and a production system based on Fordist principles³ – i.e. armies of workers concentrated in great industrial plants. In developed countries, unions reached the peak of their might at the end of the 1960s. In the great struggle between capital and labour, capital responded to the increased strength of workers' unions by casualising the workforce.

Unions are trying in the post-Fordist era to adapt to these changes and to a new workforce that is increasingly younger, more and more often employed in casual jobs and also more geographically mobile. Short-term contracts, agency jobs and instability increasingly makes organising such a new kind of workforce difficult. This, in turn, calls for a new organisational form that is more responsive to technological developments and which is more flexible.

Certainly, structure in workers' unions is not a question that can be evaded: it is necessary in representative organisations. The lack of it would diminish or impair unions' negotiating strength and, because of that, it presents a challenge for unions to introduce openness, decentralisation and flexibility without loss of their basic structure. The challenge for trade union leaders is to realise that the new situation demands a certain degree of decentralisation, and that a portion of power should be transferred to the membership. Members should be encouraged to implement new technologies and link horizontally. The age of mobilising armies of workers is gone; the information age demands a networked syndicalism that creates many activities concerning workplace rights and other social issues, and which acts as an important actor in the fight for social justice.

Serbia may fall a little behind the developed countries of the west in the usage and implementation of information technologies and the average level of computer literacy of the population. Nevertheless, modern workers' organisations have to accept that we are living in the information age and to find a way efficiently to include modern information technologies in all aspects of their activity: in organisation and in communication with members – both potential and existing – as well as with the public.

2 For example, Deutsche Bank.

3 Henry Ford, the founder of the Ford Motor Company and the first to apply the assembly line system.

Examples such as the election campaign of Barack Obama and the so-called 'Arab Spring' are a perfect illustration of the power of the information media in attitudinal change and the recruitment of people with the same beliefs, and their subsequent organisation and co-ordination. A direct approach to communication with existing and potential members, and getting to know their views and opinions, is the tool that information technologies can supply to unions.

Trade unions need to realise that cyber space is actually the place where people work, get organised socially and politically, learn and have fun. It is necessary to grasp all the cultural implications of this new technology, which favours horizontal instead of hierarchical organisation and which transports information instantly and globally.

Unions as political parties

Modern trade union organisations are, in fact, political parties and not simple associations of people with common interests, like social clubs. As such they have to take on an appropriate and proactive role in political networking and in co-operating with political parties in the matter of workers' rights, economic policies and the accompanying legislature.

The new structure of modern workers' organisations should be built along the following guidelines:

- each employed person is a potential member, regardless of his or her current status, occupation and the type of company that employs them
- the main goal of the union is successfully to represent the interests of each individual member
- union activities should be transparent and democratic
- unions should be politically independent and with a financial structure that ensures their independent functioning
- unions should devote as much capacity to the protection and provision of assistance to their members as to recruiting them in the first place
- in transition countries, unions have to achieve and maintain a high profile role and credibility, and be recognised as a social actor
- unions have to make a move from mere bargaining over the price of labour to adjusting to the age of high technology, maintaining solidarity care for those members for whom is too late to change or upgrade their skills and qualifications
- employ expert and skilled personnel, who can influence employers, in advisory and consultant capacities at executive level
- unions should be connected internationally for the purposes of exchange, and should implement experiences from other countries.

If we accept the concept of the modern union as akin to a political party, it follows that the same 'rules of the game' should be applied to them, too. From the premise that a political idea, a party or an individual that represents it can be treated as a good, a market product, it follows that modern unions should implement the same mechanisms of political marketing in order to achieve a better position for themselves. This means that modern unions must have an expert public relations cadre, expert in media com-

munications, and to set such a task as primary and necessary for further development and success.⁴

Modern unions need to have a high-profile, prominent appearance that acts on two fronts – towards gathering new members and strengthening their public profile, presence and credibility.

This may be achieved by applying appropriate PR techniques and by the following elements:

- stressing social issues in the media, thus raising public awareness of such issues
- achieving media coverage and a prominent co-operation with the state and other institutions
- raising public awareness of concrete social issues connected to the trade, sector or a specific union, and increasing their potency, via the media
- applying high profile, positive, public pressure on state institutions on current and important social issues
- raising public awareness of the role of unions in society through the media
- ensuring a high representation of unions in the media via regular media conferences giving greater social ‘visibility’
- union campaigning activity on every important social issue
- generating both social values and a morality, and giving good effect to them
- working with young people, informing them of the possibilities of education and learning, and with a perspective on the working world, and providing early promotion of unions.

Conclusion

Unions must adapt to the new market and social conditions, and to modernise and re-organise their structures which should be constructed following the action guidelines and elements of PR. This will facilitate their efficient functioning in the new, information society and allow them to incorporate experts in PR and media communications on their staffs. In turn, this will help them achieve a high profile, prominent public presence and to develop action initiatives in line with the tasks of gathering new members and of strengthening the public image, influence and credibility of all trade union organisations.

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4 If possible, via the formation of a separate PR and media communications department.

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