Gender Democracy in Trade Unions

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GENDER DEMOCRACY IN TRADE UNIONS

For Mary Foster

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List of Abbreviations

AGM	Annual General Meeting
APT&C	Administrative, Professional, Technical and Clerical Staff Group
BEOW	Branch Equality Officer (Women)
CCT	Compulsory Competitive Tendering
CFDU	Campaign for a Fighting Democratic Unison
COHSE	Confederation of Health Service Employees
DSO	Direct Services Organisation
EOC	Equal Opportunities Commission
FTO	Full-time Officer
HC	Health Care
HCSG	Health Care Service Group
HCSGE	Health Care Service Group Executive
LG	Local Government
LGSG	Local Government Service Group
LGSGE	Local Government Service Group Executive
LP	Labour Party
M&C	Manual and Craft
NALGO	National and Local Government Officers' Association
NDC	National Delegate Conference
NEC	National Executive Council
NHS	National Health Service
NLGC	National Lesbian and Gay Committee
NUPE	National Union of Public Employees
NWCf	National Women's Conference
NWCm	National Women's Committee
RHA	Regional Health Authority
SG	Service Group
SGE	Service Group Executive
SOG	Self-organised Group
STV	Single Transferable Vote
SWOMP	Socialist Women on Male Platforms

TUC   Trades Union Congress
TUPE   Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) Regulations 1981

1 Introduction

This book looks at the attempts of the largest British trade union, UNISON, to support equality of representation and participation amongst its female-dominated membership. Whilst democracy infers equality, this is often a desirable rather than a defining feature (Holden, 1993). UNISON's rule book provides structures that guarantee representative equality for its female membership. I have therefore used the concept of 'gender democracy' to indicate that equality between men and women members is a defining feature of UNISON and is the specific focus of this book.

This book has four main aims. First, it describes and analyses UNISON's strategies for reshaping trade union democracy and achieving gender democracy. Secondly, it illustrates the difference this reshaping makes to women's participation and representation. Thirdly, it exposes how these strategies can be blocked and limited. Finally, it argues that union structures need to be organised around principles of individual and group representation. In essence, it argues that UNISON's structures are a necessary element of equality between men and women, but not a sufficient condition for the empowerment of women as a social group.

In itself, noting that equal opportunities policies are necessary but not sufficient is nothing new. What is new is that UNISON is the first British trade union to adopt a comprehensive range of strategies that relate to the representation and participation of individual women and women as a social group. An added feature of this research is the detailed study of the decision-making committees in the union that made it possible to address questions of 'what difference does it make?' Finally, the analysis draws on wider political theory that addresses the redistribution of power to oppressed social groups. This provides a powerful explanation of why UNISON's strategies are not sufficient in themselves to empower women as a social group.

This chapter provides the context and content of the study. The next section gives an overview of the changing face of British trade unionism and provides the context in which UNISON emerged as the largest UK

trade union. The chapter identifies essential elements in UNISON's new model of democracy and provides an overview of the research approach. The chapter closes with an outline of the remainder of the book.

The changing face of British trade unionism

Much has been written about the dramatic change in British trade unionism since Margaret Thatcher's Conservative Government came to power in 1979. The first, and foremost change, is the dramatic decline in membership across Britain during the 1980s and 1990s. Over a twenty-year period, membership has fallen by 40 per cent. It now stands at 7.2 million, 30 per cent of all employees (Hicks, 2000). Women make up 44 per cent of the workforce and approximately 40 per cent of trade union members are women. The Trades Union Congress (TUC) – which is the umbrella organisation for 80 per cent of all trade union members – believes that recruiting more women will be a key factor in reversing the decline in membership.

The Workplace Industrial Relations Survey series indicates that the number of workplaces with a trade union presence fell from nearly 75 per cent in 1980 to 50 per cent in 1998, and the number of workplaces recognising trade unions fell from 65 per cent to 42 per cent over the same period (Millward et al., 2000). However, these are aggregate figures and a slightly different picture emerges when these figures are analysed by sector.

The public sector employs approximately one-fifth of the British workforce, 60 per cent of whom are women. Ninety-seven per cent of public sector workplaces retain a trade union presence. This stability compares with a fall of 77 per cent to 42 per cent in private manufacturing and a fall of 50 to 35 per cent in private services in the last two decades. In addition, although the number of public sector workplaces recognising trade unions fell from 94 per cent to 87 per cent over the same period, this was a relatively small fall, primarily explained by the dismantling of the national negotiating system for teachers (Millward et al., 2000). However, if we look at union density at workplace level, it is possible to see the effects of the privatisation of nationalised industries, new management practices and the contracting-out of public services to private sector companies.

Between 1980 and 1998, union density in public sector workplaces fell from 84 per cent to 57 per cent, with the steepest fall taking place from 1990 to 1998. Analysis by Millward et al. shows how workplace changes affected union density. Those workplaces that remained in the public sector retained a relatively stable union density. However, the workplaces which were being privatised were those with the highest density (91 per cent), and the new public sector workplaces being created had a lower aggregate density. In addition, to losing members, Fairbrother (1996) argues that the traditionally centralised and hierarchical public sector unions were unable to deal adequately with the major restructuring and reorganisation within the public sector. Such changes saw a move to individual, rather than uniform, terms and conditions, a shift to local bargaining and a modification of previously consensual bargaining relationships. It is within this context that UNISON was created from the merger of NALGO, NUPE and COHSE.

A 'new' union

The period of dramatic membership decline saw an increase in union mergers, with unions becoming more inclusive in their membership. Britain's two hundred plus unions seek to represent workers in a variety of forms. Although the British trade union movement grew out of the organisation of craft workers, craft-only unions are relatively rare. More common is the industrial or occupational union that restricts its membership to particular occupations or industries or the general union that represents workers across a range of jobs and industries. In 1979, 109 unions were affiliated to the TUC. By 1999, this had fallen to 76 (TUC, 1999). In July 1993, NALGO, NUPE and COHSE merged to become the largest union in Britain and the third largest in Europe.

NALGO, which could be described as a white-collar public service union, predominantly organised clerical and professional officers in local government and the NHS (see Spoor, 1967; Newman, 1982; Miller, 1996). Prior to the merger, NALGO was the largest partner union. It represented approximately 750,000 members, 55 per cent of whom were women. NUPE operated in similar workplaces to NALGO, organising nurses and ancillary staff in the NHS and manual workers in local government (see Dix and Williams, 1987; Fryer et al., 1974 and 1978). It represented approximately 550,000 members, 74 per cent of whom were

women. The third union, COHSE, organised nurses and ancillary staff in the NHS (see Carpenter, 1988). It represented approximately 200,000 members, 80 per cent of whom were women. Once merged, UNISON represented almost one million women, approximately half of whom worked part-time. UNISON also represented a significant number of black workers – estimated to be 10 per cent of the membership (Southern and Eastern Regional TUC Women's Rights Committee, 2000).

Although there was a history of rivalry between the unions, by joining together they were more likely to win any competitions that arose for single-union recognition in the restructured public sector organisations (Waddington and Whitston, 1995). The merger also had implications for the structure of the trade union movement. It was anticipated that the merged union would represent one in 18 of all workers in the country, one in six trade unionists and one-third of all women union members (Labour Research, 1993).

Merger discussions started between NALGO and NUPE in 1988, with COHSE joining the talks a year later, cautiously following a 'twin-track' approach to involvement or continued independence (Fryer, 2000). As this study will show, reconciling differences between these three unions had implications for the final structure of UNISON. Chapter 3 describes the partial reconciliation of two significant differences – the employment of paid officers, and equal opportunities strategies. Underpinning these organisational differences is the occupational heterogeneity amongst the membership of the previous unions. UNISON represents a far wider range of workers than the former partner unions. Of particular significance was the amalgamation of all grades of worker in the same union. Reference was made earlier to new management practices that led to job losses in the public sector. Senior management, organised by NALGO, drew up and implemented plans for contracting out the jobs performed by NUPE members (Fryer, 2000). Both sets of workers are now organised within the same union. The union also encompasses workers from NUPE and COHSE who had previously been fierce competitors in the health service (Fryer, 2000).

UNISON can be categorised as an industrial union since its primary area of organisation is in public services – despite successive waves of privatisation ensuring the transfer of services, and workers, to the voluntary and private sectors. Although it is the largest union in the public sector, it is important to note that UNISON does not organise all workers within this sector. More specifically, it organises workers across

a range of public service sectors: former utilities of electricity, gas, water; health care; higher education; local government, and transport. Within each sector, members could be further categorised within a number of craft, manual, white-collar and occupational groupings. Through being the largest union in the TUC, UNISON gained more power on the TUC's General Council and many hoped the creation of UNISON would be an exciting opportunity to change radically the structure and purpose of British trade unions (see Terry, 1996).

So what's new?

UNISON has adopted certain principles that have the potential to challenge traditional models of trade unionism. First, it has supported the reservation of seats in proportion to the numbers of women in the constituency. Although there is nothing new in reserved seats, women are the majority of UNISON's membership, so this means bringing in considerably more women than previously occupied representative positions. At the same time, it supports self-organisation for women. Again, this is not new in itself, but it is unusual for this to be implemented at the same time as women are set to gain the majority of representative seats. A third strategy has been to provide self-organised groups with rights of representation to mainstream committees.

The next chapter argues that these strategies challenge traditional conceptions of representative democracy. Given the dominance of women in the union, the first strategy necessitates limitations on representation by a specific group, that is, men. The second gives women the potential to use two routes into the democratic process – as an individual and as a member of a social group (Cockburn, 1996). The third gives social groups the same status as individuals. Although some unions have adopted parts of some of these strategies, UNISON has implemented all three at the same time. Two key research questions arise from this model: does UNISON succeed in putting it into practice and what difference does it make to women's representation and participation within the union?

These research questions were addressed over a three-year period ending November 1995. Further details of the research approach and research sites can be found in Chapter 2 and in the Appendix. In brief, the research involved the extensive study of 15 representative bodies

within UNISON.   The decision-making bodies represented different aspects of UNISON's representative structure.   Nine of these representative bodies derived from a mixed-sex constituency, the remainder deriving from a women-only constituency. Of the 15 decision=making bodies, eight operated at national level and seven operated at regional level.   As discussed in Chapter 2, representative structures in UNISON are divided between those that relate to service-specific collective bargaining agenda and those that relate to union-wide non=collective bargaining agenda.   Of the 15 institutions, four related to service-specific collective bargaining agenda and eleven related to union=wide non-collective bargaining agenda.   Within each representative structure I collected material through observing meetings and educational activities, interviewing activists and paid officers and reading union documentation.

Presentation of the material

Chapter 2 provides the theoretical framework for the study of democratic change within UNISON. It starts by noting the difficulty of unravelling democracy and uses Sartori's (1965) work to differentiate between what is the reality of democracy (that is, descriptions of what exists) and what we think it should be (that is, prescriptions of we think should exist). Using Bachrach and Baratz's (1970) typology of power, the chapter illustrates how power over trade union members has been used for white, male members and identifies prescriptions to change the dominant practices of unionism to benefit women and other oppressed groups. The chapter ends with a research strategy for analysing the generation, and impact, of new sources of power for oppressed social groups within trade unions.
      Chapters 3 to 9 are based on the case study research.   Chapter 3 provides an examination of the development of UNISON and notes the extent to which UNISON's structure and rule-book commitments address the prescriptions noted in Chapter 2.   Chapters 4 and 5 examine the implementation of proportionality in five mainstream committees. The chapters illustrate how these principles create a legitimate space for women representatives and enable democracy to be attained through the exclusion of men in proportion to their membership. However, whilst it is possible to change the rules of the game, the chapters identify a number

of social processes which interact to determine the final outcome. Chapter 6 examines the implementation of fair representation and shows the implications of demands for class-based or job-based representation on the representation of black members.

Chapter 7 describes how women in two different geographical regions create a separate space in which to define their own interests. The two research sites provide very different interpretations, objectives and structures for women-only organisation in UNISON. One structure appears to challenge the male model of trade unionism and the other adapts it to the perceived needs of women. In the context of the wider union, the different structures raise questions about how the 'real' interests of women are best identified and served.

Chapters 8 and 9 focus on the content and practice of the union's mainstream decision-making arena and enable us to see how women's access to that arena can be translated into the discussion of the concerns of women. Chapter 8 illustrates that whilst women are gaining access to the national Local Government committee, not all women speak and few women speak of women's concerns. This contrasts with some of the observations seen in the regional structures examined in Chapter 9. Few women are silenced on this committee and more debates contain a gendered analysis. However, these discussions contrast with the issues raised in the women's structures. Each of these chapters identifies the institutional practices that prevent women talking and which inhibit women from talking for women. The chapters illustrate the contingent nature of the relationship between the election of individual women and the representation of women as a group.

Chapter 10 brings the themes of this study together in the context of earlier debates and explains why UNISON's structures are necessary but not sufficient. In relation to the latter argument, the chapter argues that women as a social group are still relatively powerless in relation to other groupings within the trade union. As a consequence there is too much reliance on individual women to push women's concerns. The chapter argues that unions should be organised around the representation of individuals and groups – a structure that UNISON has tentatively begun but needs to develop. That more could be achieved should not detract from the amount that has already been achieved. The chapter also emphasises that UNISON's structure contains some very necessary elements for gender democracy. Proportionality and fair representation have challenged norms of trade unionism and have altered political

processes for women.   The chapter argues that these are necessary elements for all unions and other political organisations serious about gender democracy.

2 Making Sense of Democracy

The purpose of this chapter is to provide the reader with an analytical framework for understanding democratic processes within trade unions. It starts by following Sartori's (1965, 1987) example of differentiating between what is the reality of democracy (descriptions) and what we think it should be (prescriptions). Although democracy is constantly evolving, it always takes something of the former shape with it. That 'is' and 'ought' are never static has implications for the analysis of current reality. Should one begin one's analysis with the current 'ought' and 'is' or is an historical review necessary to provide an explanation of current descriptions and prescriptions?

Given that a comprehensive review would require the prescription and description of the role and identity of constituents, the role and identity of representatives and the role of the paid officers, I have forsaken this task. Instead, I focus on four main areas of debate. First, I describe Bachrach and Baratz (1970) analytical framework of power and decision making. Second, I apply this framework to indicate how democratic processes in trade unions have tended to favour white, male members. Third, I provide an overview of prescriptions for gender democracy and use Bachrach and Baratz's framework to explain how they could provide new sources of power for women and other oppressed social groups. The chapter ends with the research strategy that derives from these frameworks.

The analysis of democratic processes

Prescriptions and descriptions

Democracy is extraordinarily difficult to define and analyse. Sartori (1965, 1987) locates the problem of definition in the concept of democracy itself, noting that 'what democracy *is* cannot be separated from what democracy *should be*' (1987, p. 7, original emphasis). Sartori

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believes that this difficulty can be overcome by giving democracy a descriptive and prescriptive definition, a descriptive definition being that which describes what democracy 'is' in reality and a prescriptive definition being that which describes what an ideal democracy 'ought' to be. Sartori reiterates the dynamic nature of democracy by noting that the 'is' and the 'ought' of democracy are always interfering and colliding with each other. Indeed, he argues that 'democracy results from, and is shaped by, the interactions between its ideals and its reality, the pull of an *ought* and the resistance of an *is*' (ibid., p. 8, original emphasis). As this study will show, there is not one 'is' or 'ought', but using these terms does provide a useful framework for distinguishing the most relevant of the myriad of descriptions and prescriptions of trade union democracy. It also focuses attention on the omnipresent negotiation between prescriptions and descriptions. Integral to this negotiation are the 'rules of the game' (Bachrach and Baratz, 1970).

The rules of the game

Bachrach and Baratz argue that political systems develop a set of 'predominant values, beliefs, rituals, and institutional procedures' that operate consistently to the benefit of certain persons and groups at the expense of others. They call these values the 'rules of the game' and note that those who benefit from the rules are placed in a preferred position to defend and promote their vested interests through the 'mobilisation of bias' (1970, pp. 43–4). Bachrach and Baratz also provide a means for identifying how these preferred positions are shaped and maintained. They developed a typology of power and noted how groups maintained power through decisions and non-decisions.

Decisions

Bachrach and Baratz (1970) noted that decisions were those actions that required a choice be made from alternative options. They developed a typology of power and used it to show how 'A' could ensure that 'B' chose A's preferred option. They argued that the compliance of B was usually sought through the application of authority, influence and force and, to a lesser extent, power. Of relevance to this analysis is their definition of authority, influence and power. 'Authority' describes B's acceptance of A's option because it was reasonable and legitimate.