

The New Unionism and the New Bargaining Agenda: UNISON–Employer Partnerships on Workplace Learning in Britain

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Abstract

A model of new unionism has been developed which is characterized by features such as the servicing of members as customers and a shift to co-operative industrial relations. The UNISON–employer partnerships in workplace learning in the UK initially appear to fit such a model. This paper outlines the model of new unionism and cautions against interpreting these partnerships as evidence of its development. The paper concludes that this initiative is organized within a collective framework and may provide a basis for the development of workplace trade union activism rather than being indicative of its decline.

1. Introduction

There has been an ongoing debate concerning the defining characteristics of British unionism during the postwar era. For Coates and Topham (1974) a new unionism emerged during the late 1960s and early 1970s which emphasized rank-and-file participation and an oppositional stance towards management. Since the late 1970s the social, political and economic climate in which unions operate has been transformed, and a model of trade unionism in the 1990s, the new ‘new unionism’, has been developed which centres on the extent to which unions have oriented their activities towards the servicing of members as individuals, replacing traditional collectivist approaches (e.g. Heery 1996; Heery and Kelly 1994).

This paper links into two key debates concerning the nature of trade unionism today. The prime focus is on internal union relations, assessing whether union relations with their members are changing as a result of a shift towards individual servicing and the associated adoption of a ‘managerial

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servicing relationship' with its linked developments in union government and administration. This is addressed through an empirical study of the effects of a UNISON membership education programme, Return to Learn (R2L). This programme has been widely extended through partnership arrangements with employers, which leads to the second area of debate addressed in the paper which assesses how far relations with employers are shifting in a fundamental way as a result of the partnership approach.

In the model outlined by Heery (1996) and Heery and Kelly (1994), new unionism has required changes in internal management structures and the use of management techniques such as market research to establish members' needs. In terms of union governance, the new unionism is seen as involving a shift towards centralized structures as opposed to the encouragement of local activism which was the model of the 1970s. Alongside this, there has been a shift away from a confrontational style of industrial relations towards more co-operative forms, which partly represents a recruitment strategy towards non-traditional members, namely women and professionals, but also a strategy towards broadening the bargaining agenda and reducing the costs of disputes.

This model has been criticized for promoting the servicing of members to the status of the defining characteristic of unions, obscuring their distinctiveness as organizations (Smith 1995). However, the model does provide a useful starting point from which to assess changes in union organization and strategy. In this paper we develop an argument that union services to individual members cannot always be interpreted as indicative of a shift away from a collectivist approach. The problematic nature of an approach that assumes a dichotomy between individualism and collectivism has been identified by Williams (1997) and Waddington and Whitston (1997). Smith claims that addressing 'improved services to individual members does not necessarily inhibit the construction of collective organisation' (Smith 1995: 140). We extend this argument through an analysis of UNISON's education and training activities, and in particular one specific initiative, the Return to Learn (R2L) programme, within UNISON-employer partnerships.¹ This paper suggests that, paradoxically, individual services can serve to reinforce collectivism. The UNISON-employer partnerships on workplace learning initially appear to fit the model of new unionism, yet also raise fundamental questions about the model.

In the context of this initiative, a number of research questions are posed. First, to what extent does the Return to Learn programme represent a shift away from a collectivist approach towards one that emphasizes the servicing of individual members? Second, do the UNISON-employer partnerships illustrate a move towards centralized decision making? Together do these developments in partnership represent a more co-operative form of trade unionism? The paper first addresses the concept of partnership. It then outlines the model of new unionism, and goes on to present and analyse the empirical material on the UNISON-employer partnerships on the Return to Learn programme. This is followed by a conclusion.

2. Partnership

Since the election of the Labour Government in May 1997, lifelong learning has been established as part of the national policy debate. UNISON's achievements in education and training have given it an influential voice in this debate. Its influence has been evident in a number of spheres: the Director of Education and Training chaired the Task Group on Workplace Learning which reported to the National Advisory Group for Continuing Education and Lifelong Learning (NAGCELL — the Fryer Committee) and has been on the steering committee for the Health Department for the Scottish Office. UNISON has been involved in several University for Industry projects, and is represented on the executive of the National Institute for Adult and Continuing Education (NIACE) and on national training bodies as well as on the boards and governing bodies of educational institutions. Moreover, the UNISON–employer partnerships are being cited extensively as examples of a joint approach to education and training. For example, the Green Paper *The Learning Age: A Renaissance for a New Britain* quotes them as an example of 'workplace partnership in action' (DfEE 1998: 36), and they are also referred to in the report *Partnerships for Learning: Opportunities for Trade Unions and the University for Industry* conducted by NIACE on behalf of the Trades Union Congress (TUC) and the DfEE (Payne and Thompson 1998). The partnerships are cited as examples of how the British government is meeting its commitments to the European Union to promote partnerships on employability under its Employment Action Plan (Hall 1998a).

The concept of partnership has been used in a variety of ways, which need to be clarified. At a national level social partnership is the term applied to the tripartite discussions between government, the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) and the TUC. Partnership arrangements at the level of the company or organization are becoming increasingly popular. Under these agreements unions collaborate over issues such as flexibility in return for employment security. Agreements usually include new structures for consultation, representation and communications, attempting to shift from adversarial to co-operative relationships;

...partnership provides a clear workplace philosophy based on employer and union working together to achieve common goals such as fairness and competitiveness, and recognising that although they have different constituencies, and at times different interests, these can best be served by making common cause wherever possible. (IRS 1998: 12)

Examples include agreements between the supermarket chain Tesco and the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers (USDAW), Legal and General and the Manufacturing, Science and Finance union (MSF) and the Co-operative Bank and the Banking, Insurance and Finance Union (BIFU) (Labour Research Department 1998). Such arrangements have strong government support, one minister describing unions as 'important

partners for employers in promoting competitiveness and good practice' (McCartney 1998). However, Kelly argues that the ideology of partnership can 'weaken or inhibit the growth of workplace union organisation' (Kelly 1996: 101). Supporting this position, research by the Labour Research Department (1998) suggests that partnership arrangements are not supported by middle managers and are frequently used as a means to undermine rather than consolidate the position of trade unions. Guest and Peccei (1998) found that partnership organizations were often ambivalent towards trade unions, preferring to communicate directly with employees rather than unions, and that the partnership agenda was that of the company. Evidence from Marks *et al.* (1998) and from IRS surveys (1997b) support an argument that the concept of partnership being used is merely a new label for employee involvement initiatives aimed at facilitating change with worker and union consent. Hall points out that, 'paradoxically, formal employment security policies have been associated with job losses' (Hall 1998b: 6). After large-scale job losses, such an agreement aims either to reassure remaining workers, or to guarantee that any future redundancies will be on a voluntary basis (Hall 1998b: 6). The agreement between Blue Circle Cement and the Amalgamated Engineering and Electrical Union (AEEU), GMB and the Transport and General Workers' Union (TGWU) specifies that employment security will guarantee that 'under normal circumstances staffing reductions will be handled by voluntary means' (IRS 1997a: 11).

The UNISON-employer partnerships being discussed here need to be distinguished from the arrangements described above. In the course of this paper we develop an argument that the partnerships do not entail union concessions to employers: rather, they consolidate UNISON's position. These agreements cover the provision of the Return to Learn programme alone, not the wider collective bargaining arrangements. At face value, the development of the UNISON-employer partnerships on workplace learning could be interpreted within Heery's (1996) framework. The partnerships involve the joint provision of an employee development programme, Return to Learn, which is targeted at groups of workers who have little access to formal education or to vocational training in the workplace. It is a study skills programme which is aimed at building confidence and providing a foundation for further learning. It started as an internal membership service provided by the National Union of Public Employees (NUPE) to low paid, unqualified members. The partnerships have been established with employers since 1995 and this could be interpreted as the development of a more co-operative approach to industrial relations. Therefore, it could be argued that in developing education and training as a service to members, and in setting up partnerships for employee development, this initiative can be interpreted as representing elements of both the new unionism (change in the union-member relationship) and the new bargaining agenda (change in the union-employer relationship).

Nevertheless, we would caution against interpreting this within Heery's (1996) model of the new 'new unionism' and in particular Heery and Kelly's

(1994) model of the GMB's 'new managerialism'. Rather, we argue that the partnerships on this employee development programme represent both continuity and change in relation to traditional collectivist approaches to servicing members' needs. In order to address this debate, the first section of the paper outlines the key features of these models, before assessing the UNISON-employer partnership initiative in more detail.

3. 'New managerialism' and the new 'new unionism'

Heery and Kelly (1994) suggest that three phases of unionism can be identified in postwar Britain: professional, participative and managerial unionism. Professional unionism covers the period from 1940 to the mid 1960s and is associated with a reliance on professional negotiators who service a passive membership. The membership is seen as largely undifferentiated in terms of interests that are mainly instrumental, in terms of pay and conditions, and achieved through collective bargaining, often at an industry-wide level. During this period power and decision making is concentrated in the hands of officials.

During the 1960s, as participative unionism develops, the emphasis shifts towards the rank and file and away from the full-time officers, who now take on a facilitating role enabling the participation of lay activists. The workplace becomes an arena of contested power where the relationship with management becomes more confrontational and local activists represent themselves. These developments are epitomized by the TGWU, where officer accountability was achieved 'through an increase in lay representation on national, regional and company negotiating bodies and the extension of reference-back procedures, while the encouragement of single employer bargaining transferred bargaining prerogatives to stewards' (Heery and Kelly 1994: 6).

Heery and Kelly (1994) argue that the decline in union membership since 1979 has promoted the emergence of managerial unionism, where members are regarded as consumers who must be lured into union membership through attractive services and benefits. This is linked to a shift in emphasis from collective to individual interests. Membership interests are again perceived as instrumental, but are now differentiated and not immediately obvious, and therefore must be revealed through market research. In this way, the role of the union bureaucracy becomes one of researching and monitoring members' and potential members' needs, and developing and delivering services to meet these needs. Particular attention is given to target groups for recruitment, typically women, professionals, young workers and part-time workers.

The features that for Heery and Kelly (1994) would indicate the development of managerial unionism are evidence of marketing or remarketing of the union through a change of name or logo, through the redesign of union journals and publicity material, through greater use of advertising

and through high profile campaigns. Other indications would be the application of managerial techniques to the running of the union, increased control of financial resources, involvement and communication techniques, training and development of officers and performance monitoring. In addition, there may be an increased role for specialists within the union as well as greater use of consultants. A central feature of managerial unionism is market research and surveys, which may be used directly to define the collective bargaining agenda. Other features suggested are sliding scale subscription rates to make the union more attractive to low paid workers, and help lines to provide advice and support directly to the individual member, frequently twenty-four hours a day.

Heery and Kelly suggest that there may be variations, but that the three types of servicing relationship are discernible. Heery (1996) develops this discussion in a comparison of the TGWU during the 1970s and the GMB during the 1990s, arguing that under John Edmonds the GMB has consciously attempted to transform itself, and now exemplifies the new unionism, having adopted all of the features described above.

Thus, this new unionism is based on change in three key areas, the principal one being a shift of emphasis from traditional collectivist approaches to one of servicing members as individuals. This in turn necessitates changes to union governance, with a shift to centralized decision making, alongside a growth in individual membership polling. Third, it is linked to the application of management techniques to the internal running of the union. These are all associated with a more co-operative approach and a broadening of the bargaining agenda to acknowledge diverse employee interests. What evidence is there for such changes occurring in UNISON? Heery suggests that the development of a divisional structure, and procedures for proportionality and fair representation, indicate an attempt to accommodate a diversity of interests in line with the model (Heery 1996: 185). These general issues are addressed later in the paper, but first the following section assesses the concept of new unionism through an analysis of the UNISON Return to Learn programme.

4. The empirical material

Training and Development as a Service to Individual Members

UNISON's Department of Education and Training provides training and development as a service to members. While many trade unions provide education and training for activists and officers, UNISON is one of the few unions to provide membership development as well. Whereas the EETPU's provision of training in new technology and electronics in the 1980s was seen as being part and parcel of the 'new realism', along with single union deals and the aggressive poaching of members (Bassett 1986), UNISON's service to members has a much older pedigree.

The NALGO Correspondence Institute was set up in 1920 to provide vocational courses for local government officers seeking promotion, and this provision has been long established as part of the package of services offered to members. In 1993, at the time of the merger, NALGO provided professional education through correspondence courses, ranging from BTEC qualifications to those recognized by professional bodies, such as the Chartered Institute of Housing, the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accounting, and the Institute of Trading Standards Administration. It also provided activist training and development for its own staff.

In contrast, both COHSE and NUPE had set up trade union education departments in the 1970s in common with many other unions. These departments provided national programmes of education, alongside materials for the development of branch activists in regional programmes, which broadly fits with what has been described as a period of participative unionism. In NUPE the major focus was on activist training and membership development for non-traditional learners. The latter began in the 1980s and was delivered by the Workers' Educational Association (WEA), reflecting this tradition of manual worker education. In NUPE trade union education was seen as a political tool; it was not restricted to workplace issues, and shop stewards were seen as having an educational function. Similarly, in COHSE, education played a central role in union campaigns in defence of the National Health Service and in the organizational development of the union.

Rather than representing the 'new realism' or 'new unionism', therefore UNISON's educational provision has grown out of NALGO's distance learning services to professional members, NUPE's membership development programmes for manual workers and COHSE and NUPE's traditions of political unionism.

While it is indisputable that individual members benefit from the provision of learning opportunities by the Department of Education and Training, it is important to emphasize that this is organized through a collectively established framework. This is reflected in 'UNISON's Aims and Values', where the role of the union's education service is defined as having the objective of 'encouraging members to take part in education and training, and giving representatives the opportunity to achieve the highest quality of education and training for their union duties and in their own lives'. This collective framework is also evident in the establishment of the Open College in 1994. This brings together learning for personal and professional development on the one hand, and union 'role' education, which contributes to democratic participation and representation in the union. This is 'underpinned by a clear set of principles and objectives, flexible methods of access, a coherent approach to accreditation, a broad range of provision and is firmly grounded in partnership' (UNISON, n.d.(a): 2).

Through the Open College a passport approach to learning is fostered, whereby individuals can engage in learning at an appropriate level, have

access to flexible learning methods and receive accreditation for what they have achieved. The Open College is divided into four phases, and provision at the first three phases is accredited through the National Open College Federation, which is recognized for access purposes by colleges and employers. These courses are aimed specifically at UNISON members and no fees are charged. At Phase 4, members and non-members alike can study professional vocational courses and fees are charged, though at a lower rate to members.

A distinctive feature of the union's role as a provider and broker of learning opportunities lies in the significance of the linkages between different types of provision; for example, activist education can be accredited, and there are progression routes between personal development, activist and vocational provision. Second, the range of provision from the most basic level (literacy and numeracy) through to degree-level qualifications is significant in so far as it opens up horizons for low paid, unqualified workers within a unified framework. Third, the structure provides a collectively organized framework and support to individuals progressing through it.

Perhaps more importantly, provision is more than a service to members because of the linkages into the workplace through the employment relationship. Recognition by professional bodies means that the qualifications have currency in the labour market. Although individual members are charged fees for courses at Phase 4 of the Open College, many employers pay these fees and provide time off for staff undertaking study. This is particularly true of the professional membership of the former NALGO. Other types of provision have been developed which are linked directly to the employment relationship. Nurses in membership of UNISON are required by the UK Central Council (UKCC) to undertake five days of professional updating within any three-year registration period. Through its Post-Registration Education and Practice (PREP) courses, UNISON is able to offer professional support equivalent to that offered by the Royal College of Nursing in the form of twenty distance learning modules which meet the UKCC requirements. Increasingly, vocational progression routes are being established through the Open College. This is because the structures allow for the accreditation of prior learning and prior experiential learning acquired through employment, as well as progression routes into new qualifications, such as the Diploma or Degree in Health Care Practice, which are awarded by Sheffield Hallam University.

More recently, the collective framework of provision has been developed through partnerships with employers to create new occupational progression routes for care workers, nursery nurses, learning and healthcare assistants. Return to Learn can be customized to combine the generic elements of an employee development programme with vocational pathways. Since 1999 there is also a progression route through a part-time diploma in social work. The significance of this development is that it provides a career pathway for predominantly low paid women workers in a sector of the labour market that traditionally has offered little opportunity

for progression. Previously, access to professional occupations rested on an individual's initiative to enter university and college courses. While the job progression provided by the Return to Learn programme can be a reality for only a limited number of workers, it does provide opportunities to groups of staff, delivered through union intervention but funded by the employer.

The Development of Partnerships with Employers on Education and Development

There has been considerable discussion on the extent to which a joint approach between unions and employers on issues such as training and development can contribute to the generation of a less conflictual approach to industrial relations. The 'new bargaining agenda', incorporating issues concerning equal rights, health promotion, flexible working and training entitlements, was adopted by the GMB in 1990 largely as a response to its market research on what employees wanted from a trade union (Heery 1996). The latter was linked to the identification of target groups for recruitment and the development of new services offered to individual members. The 'new bargaining agenda' was seen as establishing areas of joint work that could contribute to a less conflictual approach to industrial relations, which was seen as particularly attractive to women and professional workers (Storey *et al.* 1993). The development of this joint problem-solving approach is most evident in examples such as the Ford EDAP scheme, which is a jointly managed employee development programme (Maguire 1997) (although it is worth noting that this joint approach does not extend to vocational training nor to the strategic aspects of Ford's training provision).

Nevertheless, there are several ways in which UNISON's approach differs from the new 'new unionism' and the 'new bargaining agenda' as espoused by the GMB. The UNISON-employer partnerships on employee development did not develop as a result of a centrally developed strategy which was formulated through market research on employees' perceptions of unions. Rather, they developed as a pragmatic response to the success of the union's internally provided 'Return to Learn' programme. It is useful, briefly, to recount its history here.

The Return to Learn programme was initiated by NUPE in association with the WEA in the West Midlands in 1989 and delivered by WEA tutors. It was aimed at members who had been disadvantaged in the formal education system and was designed around a combination of distance learning and small study groups. After the formation of UNISON the geographical scope of the programme was extended, and by 1998 some 6000 students had completed it. The programme is regarded within the union as having been a significant success, because not only was it reaching its target groups — the low-paid, part-time, low-skilled manual workers who constituted a significant group of non-traditional learners within the union — but it was achieving a dramatic impact on students' lives. Helen Kennedy's report *Return to Learn: UNISON's fresh approach to trade union education*² showed

that 80 per cent of students were women; 42 per cent were part-time; 76 per cent earned below £10,000 per year; 78 per cent were over 35 years of age; 91 per cent had left school at the age of 16 or earlier; and 60 per cent had no qualifications (Kennedy 1995: 6–7). The programme was therefore successful in enrolling the target group of low-paid, part-time women members, though success in recruiting black and Asian members varied from one region to another. Students reported becoming more self-confident, frequently continuing in education and progressing in their jobs. More importantly for this discussion, 23 per cent of respondents reported that they had become involved or more involved in UNISON after completing Return to Learn. Among those who had become more involved in the union, 25 per cent had taken positions within branches, 14 per cent had become workplace representatives; and 9 per cent had taken positions beyond the branch (Kennedy 1995: 23). For many of them it was a life-changing experience, encapsulated in one student's statement: '[t]he course I attended, a second chance to learn, I personally consider it to have been a second chance to live' (Kennedy 1995: 9).

The provision of learning and development opportunities in partnership with employers began in 1995 with the running of a communications course for a north London local authority at Phase 1 of the Open College, which was delivered by Workbase. Following this, a number of partnerships were set up to provide the Return to Learn programme, starting in health trusts and universities, followed by local authorities (see Munro *et al.* 1997). By the summer of 1998 there were over 120 in existence. Under these arrangements, the student has the equivalent of 10 days' paid release from work and the employer pays a per capita fee for tuition. UNISON officials see the union's role as central to building workplace learning partnerships because they enable it to extend its influence within the industrial relations context. On a practical level, the union facilitates contacts between the employer and the WEA as the education provider and subsidizes development and training costs and course materials. Because students obtain credits that are recognized for access purposes through the Open College Network, the WEA is able to access funding from the Further Education Funding Council. In some instances Training and Enterprise Councils have also contributed to the programme, allowing a greater number of students to participate. Unlike the internally provided Return to Learn programmes, which are restricted to UNISON members, those provided through the employer–union partnerships are open to non-members.

Although the partnerships have been successful in obtaining ten days' paid educational leave for groups of workers who have previously had no access to it, staff in the Department of Education and Training have argued that this has not been through the addition of a new item to the bargaining agenda. Rather, they argue that UNISON is providing a solution rather than making an additional demand, in bringing its resources and expertise to a partnership. The view in UNISON, however, is that the partnerships do not lead to a more co-operative approach to industrial relations in general,

but should be seen as a separate arena of activity in substance and procedure which does not interfere in the union's right to be conflictual on other industrial relations issues which are directly related to the wage relation. In this way, this 'single issue' type of partnership is very different from the company-wide employer–union partnerships described above, where concessions are made by the unions. In the case of the UNISON–employer partnerships, where employers wish to offer the Return to Learn programme, the union may gain concessions from the employers. This can be illustrated by two examples. First, partnerships have been established with two housing associations where UNISON had been derecognized, on condition that the union was rerecognized.³ In this context the programme may provide a lever to enable the extension of collective organization. The second example concerns partnerships that are being established with subcontractors to the public sector (e.g. SERCO/UNISON, n.d.), which are increasingly interested in being seen as part of the public-sector establishment. Employees whose jobs were subcontracted as a result of compulsory competitive tendering in local government and market testing in the National Health Service experienced a deterioration of terms and conditions of employment (Escott and Whitfield 1995), but the provision of employee development opportunities through partnerships with employers is an example of how improvements can be made on one aspect of the employment relationship.

The development of partnerships with employers on learning and development does not fit easily into the framework of the GMB's 'new bargaining agenda'. Rather, in UNISON, staff in the department of Education and Training have identified a 'new learning agenda'. This arises primarily from recognition that, as demonstrated in Kennedy's report on the Return to Learn programme (1995), membership development can contribute to union activism. It is also consistent with the perception, at the time of the creation of UNISON, that there was scope in a new union with a predominantly female membership for recognizing different forms of activism which did not necessarily have to take the traditional form of shop steward representative activity. We discuss one example — the recognition of the role of the learning advocate, known as a 'lifelong learning adviser', in the branch structure — below. Nevertheless, UNISON, like the GMB, has linked these developments to the recognition of learning opportunities as a recruitment tool. Return to Learn courses delivered through partnerships with employers are open to non-members, who may be encouraged to join the union. Some of the new vocational pathways linked to the programme, for example for teaching and healthcare assistants, are being developed because these occupational groups have relatively low levels of unionization and are perceived as having recruitment potential. This research supports Williams's argument that 'the provision of such seemingly individualistic services none the less entails a collective dimension' (1997: 508). The Return to Learn partnerships encourage a greater identification with the union and for a significant group of graduates lead to active participation in union activities.

5. Analysis

Heery (1996) argues that a shift to the new 'new unionism' is associated with a centralization of union power and decision making, linked to the increased use of individual balloting. The previous section demonstrated that, despite its being a central initiative, the Return to Learn Programme may have important implications for the renewal and redefinition of workplace union activism.

From its local beginnings in the West Midlands, the Return to Learn programme was developed and sponsored by national UNISON officers and expanded as a central initiative. It was at national level that the employer partnership programme was established and negotiated with employers. Indeed, a number of the early partnership courses were set up by national UNISON officers negotiating with senior personnel officers, with little or no reference to the local branch activists (Munro *et al.* 1997). In this context, the Return to Learn Programme appears to fit with the new unionism model — a national initiative, centrally controlled, offering a service to individual employees. However, as the programme grew national officers became more aware of the importance of local activists in extending and sustaining the programme. Branch activists are better placed to assist with recruitment to the course, to help participants who may experience difficulties with middle managers giving them time off, and to deal with other local issues. More importantly, as argued earlier, students of the Return to Learn course are more likely to become involved in union activities (Kennedy 1995), and the involvement of local activists is crucial to capitalizing on this interest. Some graduates of Return to Learn have become Voluntary Education Advisers (VEAs) within the WEA, taking the role of mentor to new Return to Learn students. Building on this experience of voluntary activism, UNISON has been working on two DfEE Union Learning Fund projects to build the capacity of shop stewards to respond to the lifelong learning agenda and to develop the role of 'lifelong learning advisers' within the branch structure. The latter has involved the development of training materials to prepare Return to Learn graduates for this learning advocacy role. In order to consolidate this work, the National Executive Council put a motion on lifelong learning to the National Delegate Conference in June 1999, urging branches and branch education organizers to promote lifelong learning; to develop partnerships with employers around workplace and community learning; to establish lifelong learning advisers; to develop a team approach to education in the branch; and to build lifelong learning objectives into the Branch Development Plan. The Return to Learn programme is creating links between membership development and union 'role' education, providing a means for the development of new forms of workplace activism and a broadening of the scope of workplace negotiation. It therefore has the potential to strengthen workplace activism rather than being an indication of its irrelevance.

It is possible within UNISON to identify pressures both towards and away from greater central control. The constituent unions of UNISON, NALGO, COHSE and NUPE had very different traditions, but they did introduce shop steward systems during Heery and Kelly's (1994) phase of participative unionism. The case has been made that NALGO operated with much greater lay activist autonomy than NUPE (Terry 1996). During the negotiations in the lead-up to the formation of UNISON, the autonomy of branch activists from employed officials and the apparent shift towards central control were key sticking points. Terry (1996) points out that, for NUPE particularly, the experience in the 1980s of privatization and the contracting out of services had highlighted the limitations of workplace organization in resisting national government policies. In contrast, there has been a wider debate concerning the potential effect of decentralized collective bargaining in the public sector during the 1990s on the renewal of workplace unionism. While commentators are cautious about the extent of such a renewal (Fairbrother 1996; Colling 1995), there are certainly some pressures within UNISON away from centralization.

Within UNISON's Education and Training Department, there appears to have been a shift in emphasis from activist to membership education and training, which may fit with Heery's model (1996). However, the structures established in 1993 when UNISON was formed retained a strong emphasis on workplace organization. This tension between the centre and the workplace can be seen in the use of Branch Development Plans (BDPs). These plans provide a centrally defined structure to enable branches to take on more tasks themselves. The BDPs resulted from a strategic review within UNISON established at the 1995 National Delegate Conference. The intention of the plans was that they should foster branch organization within a national framework, although UNISON documentation makes clear that this should not prevent 'branches and regions incorporating their own priorities into the process' (UNISON, n.d.(b)). An intention of the Strategic Review was to reduce the staffing levels at UNISON's head office, which were high as a result of the merger of the three unions. The review's aim was the decentralization of operational activities to the region and branch, while head office retained responsibility for strategic issues. A paradox emerges of moves to decentralize, but according to a central agenda, on the terms of head office. While UNISON clearly has a strong central organization, it has retained an emphasis on workplace organization which does not correspond to Heery and Kelly's picture of a move towards individual balloting.

As noted earlier, the attempt within UNISON to accommodate a diversity of interests has been identified as fitting the model of new unionism (Heery 1996: 185). A commitment to equal opportunity is embedded in the constitution of UNISON. Its core objectives are equality of opportunity at work and in the community, and fair representation in all union structures for all members. UNISON aims to achieve this through three key initiatives. The first is *proportionality*, which ensures that the number of women and men on all union bodies is proportional to their membership. The second,

fair representation, provides for all categories of members to be represented on union bodies, whether they are full- or part-time members, manual or non-manual members or members from different occupational, skill, race, sexuality and disability groups. The third, *self-organization*, was designed to provide women members, black members, lesbian and gay members and members with disabilities with the opportunity to meet together, share concerns and develop the agenda in relation to the concerns of that group (McBride 1996).

The UNISON education and training function has been identified as crucial to the achievement of these aims. Within the Open College, two particular programmes have risen to prominence in the context of promoting equality: the Return to Learn course, discussed above, and the Women, Work and Society courses. The Women, Work and Society Programme is unique in being the sole women-only educational provision offered through the Open College, and is aimed at members with relatively low levels of participation in the union. As argued earlier, these courses not only have far-reaching effects on the individuals who take part in them, but also raise the levels of union activity by those who participate — usually the very groups whose interests have traditionally been neglected by unions. As free courses targeting people who have been disadvantaged in the formal education system, these programmes make important contributions to UNISON's objectives of equality at work and within the union organization, becoming much more than membership services.

6. Conclusion

In this paper we have used Heery's concept of new unionism as a starting point from which to analyse the impact and significance of the UNISON–employer partnerships on Return to Learn. While its focus is specifically on this one union initiative, the paper makes a contribution towards some key debates concerning the nature of trade unionism today. The first point to be made is that it is essential to locate any union initiative in its own historical context. UNISON's education and training programme is innovative, but it also represents continuity with the activities of its constituent unions. For example, in UNISON there has been a move to extend the agenda beyond employment issues to include questions about the quality of public services and to highlight professional interests; yet this represents a continuity with the old NALGO membership. The Return to Learn programme was first developed within NUPE and became extremely successful, recruiting well and having a significant impact on the lives of participants. Return to Learn fitted well with the new union's emphasis on equal opportunities, and its dramatic expansion was a pragmatic response to this success and does not represent a policy shift towards new unionism. The move into partnerships with employers was an equally pragmatic attempt to shift some of the costs of the programme to employers. We have argued that the UNISON–employer

partnerships on education are essentially distinct from the company-level social partnership agreements described above, and do not reflect a shift towards a more co-operative form of trade unionism. In this situation UNISON is not making a demand of employers for which it has to make certain concessions. Rather, it is bringing resources to the relationship. In its provider role it is offering a successful, high-quality education programme for non-traditional learners which, if the employer wants it, requires issues of paid leave and the payment of course fees to be agreed. In certain circumstances it is the employer who must make concessions, such as reinstating union recognition, in order to ensure the running of the programme. Partnership arrangements of this nature do not necessarily result in a wider change to management–union relationships.

The central argument made in this paper is that the expansion of individual services can support rather than contradict a participative relationship between union and member. The example of the Return to Learn programme has illustrated how the work of UNISON's Educational and Training Department at national level, in conjunction with the WEA, has developed a radical initiative aimed at grass-roots membership. Not only does this have consequences for new forms of activism within branches, but, more generally, lifelong learning is perceived as having the potential to become more central to the union's organizing activity with consequences for branch and education structures. It has done this without making demands on the middle layers of the union structure, but is attempting to embed the programme within branch and regional organization, providing a potential route to the renewal of workplace organization. Not only does this not fit with the picture of managerialism, but it suggests an innovative route to introduce change in the workplace. While the UNISON–employer partnerships superficially appear to illustrate a move towards greater co-operation with management and an individualistic approach to servicing members, the background, context and implications of the development remain in the trade union tradition of collectivism. In this way, partnership and services can reaffirm the function and character of unions as agents of collective purpose.

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Notes

1. This paper draws on empirical material from two separate research projects. The first was based on case studies of four of the earliest UNISON–employer partnerships for the provision of the Return to Learn programme. Initial contacts and access were arranged through UNISON head office and the interviews were conducted in April 1997. Each case study involved open-ended interviews with the following: the regional UNISON officer and relevant local union representatives; a senior manager; line managers of departments sending participants on the course; a training manager; the Workers' Educational Association tutors; and a group session with the course participants. There were slight variations from one case study to another due to differences in those who had been actively involved in setting up the programme. The findings were published by UNISON as *Partners in Workplace Learning: The UNISON–Employer Learning and Development Programme* (Munro *et al.* 1997). We have also drawn on a series of interviews conducted on the work of the Department of Education and Training in April 1998 which formed the basis of a paper 'UNISON's approach to lifelong learning', which will appear in Terry (forthcoming). Our analysis is also informed by ongoing work with the union's Department of Education and Training on two further projects. The first is a DfEE Union Learning Fund project, which is creating training materials to enable former Return to Learn students to become lifelong learning advisers within their branches. The second involves an examination of policy issues concerning lifelong learning, new forms of activism and 'the new learning agenda'.
2. Kennedy's report was based on a postal questionnaire of 356 students, from which 288 responses were received, an 81 per cent response rate. In addition, a number of interviews were carried out with twenty-one former Return to Learn students, some of whom had become voluntary activists in the Workers' Educational Association (Voluntary Education Advisers/VEAs).
3. Personal communication, Steve Williams, Department of Education and Training, UNISON.

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