

Rank & File Participation and International Union Democracy

by Vasco Pedrina

Trade union democracy and active rank & file participation are two sides of the same coin, both nationally and internationally. Historically, trade unions were built and operated almost exclusively by workers who devoted their spare time to the union cause. Along with the growth in their membership and the development of their economic strength, trade unions developed administrative and technical structures whose operation has increasingly been ensured by full-time union officials. Ultimately, this organisational transformation often led to bureaucracy, and the weakening of rank & file participation and trade union democracy. This transformation was characterised by an ever-increasing delegation of tasks from the active union base to the full-time union officials, a shift in union activities from the field to trade union offices, and a weaker trade union presence in the workplace.

From trade unionism in a booming economy to trade unionism in hard times¹

During the economic boom of the "30 glorious years" that followed the Second World War, the impact of these developments was not very serious for the workers in countries with strong trade union traditions. For workers in such countries it was not too difficult to negotiate socially progressive agreements with the employers or the state at the bargaining table. Born from the ashes of a terrible war, the "Spirit of Philadelphia"², which gave rise to the "European Social Model", provided the guiding framework for the relatively calm labour relations characteristic of the period (at least in developed countries). The neoliberal offensive of the '80s and '90s, together with the first serious signs of systemic crisis, radically changed the situation. Many unions found themselves like "The Naked King", paralysed by their bureaucracies, powerless in the face of the trends evolving in the consumer society, and confronted by a new generation of US-style managers and hard-right politicians, who had no time for social dialogue. In short, trade unions were no longer being taken seriously as a countervailing power.

For union leaders who took leadership in the early '90s, the question became, and remains, how to ensure that trade unions would regain strength and respect from employers and politicians in social and political matters.

The Swiss response from both the inter-industrial union Unia and the confederal Swiss Trade Union Federation has had some success with its political-organisational response to this challenge, aiming at two objectives:

- Professionalising trade union operations by applying NGO-style management methods, with the dual objective of improving benefits/services to individual members and raising the effectiveness of invested resources so as to release additional resources for the real work of building up trade union-

ism, especially in the "trade union deserts" of the private services sector and female-dominated sectors;

- Reactivating the trade union base by (re)gaining a presence in workplaces, with the aim of creating a new generation of committed and combative activists for our causes.

A critical question arose, however: how does one reconcile the two approaches of professionalisation and participation, which at first appear contradictory? Indeed, professionalisation of union structures requires management to be based on clearly hierarchical rules, as in any enterprise, whereas active participation of the rank and file cannot flourish in a strongly hierarchical context, but only in a strongly democratic one.

Our experience in the restructuring of the Swiss trade union movement shows that this is not only possible, but even that such an approach - carried out consistently and systematically - is a condition for the revival of a combative and attractive trade union movement.

From a trade union of full-time union officials to a trade union of activists ...

To become a trade union movement that is capable of responding to the challenges of neoliberal dogma, of defending itself against social demolition, and instigating real societal change, our active trade union bases must take charge of their organisations' destiny, conferring upon the full-time union officials the roles of coach and back-up in trade union struggles.

It is with that line of thinking that three years ago we launched a new project to transform the organisation, under the banner of "Unia Forte" (a strong Unia). We condensed this new challenge in the formula: "From a trade union of full-time union officials to one of activists." A second slogan guiding us is "Promote rank & file-based democracy, not apparatus-led 'substitution unionism'." We envision a trade union that knows how to combine its role of being a combative social movement with that of a highly professional non-profit services organisation. The table below outlines the full list of objectives.

Unia Forte (a strong Unia)

1. General objectives of action with the activists

A) Primary objective (vision)

In the trade union Unia, the activists active in enterprises, industries, social and political movements, and in trade union bodies fight for more social justice. They are supported by committed trade union officials.

B) Strategic objectives (organisation)

- Unia is an effective force in the workplace, able to rely on activists ready to act, who organise themselves collectively and are capable of conducting concerted action and of defending Unia's values and objectives in the workplace. The activists also organise their fellow workers in the enterprise.
- In industries and sectors, the activists delegated by local activists' groups decide industrial and sectoral policies.
- Trade union campaigns are jointly developed and carried out by activists and trade union officials.
- Unia bodies (local groups, sections, regions, national bodies) are directed by elected and competent activists

C) Strategic objectives (activists)

The activists have the necessary motivation and capacities to exercise their functions.

2. Specific Objectives 2013-2016

- A. Strengthening the network of activists is an integral part of each activity, campaign, meeting,
- B. Close to 3,000 new activists and supporters are involved with the trade union officials in organising trade union actions.
- C. There is a specific training programme for activists; for trade union officials, there is support in working with activists.
- D. Developing groups: there are functional groups at least in the largest firms. There are industrial groups in the regions/sections. The national industrial delegates are elected by the local groups.
- E. The activists participate in member recruitment.

Achieving this vision presupposes profound cultural change in the entire organisation, in its functioning and in its practices. Needless to say, cultural change is difficult for a trade union organisation to achieve. The paternalistic (and frequently manipulative) style of behaviour of the union apparatus towards the active base must give way to a practice where the full-time union officials act as coaches to activists and unionised workers, promoting their empowerment and their willingness to accept responsibilities in union activities. This cultural change is also needed within the rank & file, who have grown accustomed to the services of union officials (especially when there is a need to show courage, namely during concerted trade union action). It requires new training concepts, great perseverance, and continuity.

...with exemplary trade union officials in their role as coaches

The process of political-organisational transformation forces new questions and critical discussions. One worthy of mention is the "self-awareness" of the full-time union officials. It is clear that a re-orientation of the trade union movement to become a force that is credible and trustworthy, independent from political parties and from employers, with a combative spirit, and embodying guiding principles for another society based on equality and social justice presupposes having full-time union officials who meet high moral integrity requirements, who see their occupation as a vocation, act as coaches for active workers, and exemplify our values (equality, solidarity, social justice, democracy, peace, sustainability). At the same time, the model of the generalist trade union secretary must give way to more differentiated models, taking into account both the evolution of society and the specialisation needs of trade union organisations facing increasingly complex demands.

An internationalist spirit and practice as levers for the revival of a democratic and combative trade union movement

The integration of the internationalist perspective into the trade union revitalisation movement means approaching the subject in terms of both national and global unions – even the counter-globalisation social movements.

Starting from the belief, based on historical experience, that genuine and positive trade unionism cannot be anything but internationalist – especially in an era of capitalist globalisation and the growing importance of regional or continental inter-governmental organisations – the question for each national trade union is how to promote within its ranks an internationalist spirit and practice. This question is especially relevant in Europe, since, following the current financial crisis and the Euro crisis, one is compelled to note a "national retreat" among unions. This is particularly worrying in the political context of a surge in the populist and nationalist forces of a profoundly anti-union extreme right. Those trends can be countered only by trade union leaders who work to promote:

- cross-border actions targeting multinational companies and industries or multiple industries;
- co-operation projects and international solidarity campaigns, in which the union rank & file are actively involved, such as in the construction industry's "Fair Games – Fair Play" campaign for the Football World Cup 2010 and 2014;
- opportunities for exchange and training, (through European Works Councils or trade union networks in multinational companies).

To fulfil their role to promote strong and combative trade unionism based on an active trade union base, global unions should follow a "debureaucratisation" measure to redirect resources towards the exchange of "best practices" and initiatives that have the potential to move the entire trade union movement in the right direction, namely towards internationalist trade unionism capable of contributing to the necessary change of course towards a societal alternative to the permanent threat of social barbarism. United we are strong!

1 Vasco Pedrina: «Member Recruitment and Organising – Rules for the Trade Union of the Future» and «New Approaches to Trade Union Organising in Europe», in *Organising in the Building and Wood Industries*, BWI, 2008

2 Alain Supiot «A legal perspective on the economic crisis of 2008», *International Labour Review*, 6/2010; Supiot, Alain «L'esprit de Philadelphie»: «La justice sociale face au marché total», Paris, Seuil, 2010

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