

# **Re-building a trade union movement from below**

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It is no exaggeration to say that the Irish trade union movement is in crisis. Even a cursory glance at trade union density figures demonstrates the depth of the crisis. Just 34% of the overall Irish workforce, and only a worryingly tiny 20% of part-time workers, are members of trade unions.<sup>1</sup>

As a ball-park figure, these percentages should be enough to sound alarm bells among left and libertarian activists who see trade union organisation as being crucial to political organisation. The WSM Trade Union position paper states “Trade union struggle is an absolute necessity. In the course of these struggles workers begin to see their potential power, they can be radicalised and can be brought into the revolutionary movement...”<sup>2</sup>

This is a view that is shared by many on the left. But if two-thirds of the workforce are not members of a trade union, how can we hope that these people can be ‘radicalised and brought into the revolutionary movement’ through ‘trade union struggle’?

## **Aging**

When the figures are analysed further, however, they are even more concerning. Firstly they show that union membership is aging and younger people are less likely to be members. For example, while 47% of workers aged between 45 and 59 are union members, only 27% of those aged between 25 and 34 and just 16% of those aged between 20 and 24 are members.

There is also a huge divergence between public and private sector workers in terms of membership – 69% in the public sector and just 25% in the private sector. This is reflective of the fact that many multinational and transnational companies which have established themselves in Ireland in the last 20 years have been non-union or often anti-union. And there is a massive gap between different economic sectors – Public Administration and Defence has 81% density while Accommodation and Food Services has just 6%.

Looking at educational attainment, it is interesting to note that 40% of workers who have completed third-level education are union members but just 29% of those who have only completed primary education.

So what do all these figures tell us and what implications do they have for those of us who have traditionally put trade union organising at the core of our politics? If large numbers – the majority – of the workforce are not identifying with the trade unions, is it still valid to look to the unions as being the principal route by which working class people can be ‘brought into the revolutionary movement’?

## **Why do people join unions?**

And what of those who are union members? Does membership in reality bring people any closer to the revolutionary movement? When someone joins a trade union in 2011 is it because s/he “recognise[s], to some degree, that he or she has different interests from the boss” (as the WSM

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<sup>1</sup> All figures quoted re trade union density come from the Central Statistics Office Quarterly National Household Survey Quarter 2, 2009 or the ESRI Survey ‘The Changing Workplace: A Survey of Employees’ Views and Experiences’ September 2010

<sup>2</sup> The WSM Trade Union Position Paper can be accessed at [www.wsm.ie](http://www.wsm.ie)

position paper says) or is it more likely that s/he is joining (a) because everyone else in the workplace is a member or (b) to avail of the credit union/discount offers that most unions offer?

The reality is that far too often it is for the latter reason and, further, that many members generally see union membership as being more like an insurance policy whereby their paying the union sub on a weekly or monthly basis gives them a type of ‘cover’ against any trouble they might get from their boss. If that trouble does come along people wonder what is ‘the union’ going to do about it, rather than seeing themselves as the union and asking what are ‘we’ going to do about it.

This is an attitude that most union leaders are more than happy to encourage. Unions are run by a plethora of full-time union officials, usually on huge salaries that have no real relation to the members they are supposed to represent. These officials see themselves as professional ‘fixers’ out to sort out any industrial relations problems that arise. Increasingly, many of these people have never actually worked in a real job, they study ‘industrial relations’ and they understand how the state’s industrial relations machinery works. But they seem to forget that their role should not be to fix the problem, their role should be to represent the members of the union. Unbridgeable?

This situation of having a huge gap between the full time officials or bureaucracy and the ordinary members of the union is not new. But as unions have developed in recent years, the gap has grown to a point where it now needs to be asked whether it has actually become totally unbridgeable.

Ireland’s largest union, SIPTU, is a case in point. In 2009, SIPTU’s Biennial Conference approved what was described by the union leadership as “a plan to transform our Organisation”. The union structures have changed from being based on what were in effect general branches to “an organisation based on specific industrial sectors”<sup>3</sup>

This change in structure was explained and justified as follows:

*“By focusing on particular sectors we can enhance the specialist skills and knowledge of our Shop Stewards, Committees and Officials. This will improve our capacity to run coherent industrial strategies across each industry and service. Our members in each sector will have the support of a national sector committee that will enhance, co-ordinate and lead initiatives for, and with, the members in the particular sector. The sectors will be supported by sector-based shop steward training, research, information and communications. The same principle will apply to the new Divisions. Each of the five Divisions named in this brochure has responsibility for leading and coordinating union organisation and member representation at every level. Focused specialist support will sharpen the effectiveness of shop stewards and activists and will enhance worker solidarity across the various employments”<sup>4</sup>*

## **Power**

But while the pamphlet outlining the changes talks about enhancing worker solidarity and sharpening the effectiveness of shop stewards, the net effect of the new structures is to take even more

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<sup>3</sup> SIPTU pamphlet “SIPTU – Changing to win for Working People”, 2010

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*

power away from the grassroots members of the union, and their elected representatives, and place it in the hands of unelected (and therefore very difficult to hold to account) full-time officials.

To try to simplify what seems to be quite an unwieldy structure: The union is organised into 5 Divisions – Health; Manufacturing; Public Administration & Community; Services; Utilities & Construction. Each Division is divided into a number of Sectors e.g. the Services Division is divided into 4 Sectors – Security & Contract Cleaning; Hotels, Catering, Arts, Entertainment & Related; Wholesale & Retail Distribution & Related; Insurance & Finance, Print & Media & related.

Each Sector is divided into Sections. It is at Section level that a lay member of the union would hope to first become active. Section Committees meet quarterly and for a worker who joins SIPTU and wants to become an active union member and perhaps attempt to have input into union policy, getting elected to this Committee would be her/his first objective.

## **Labyrinth**

This may not be as straightforward as it seems however. Discovering where or when your Section meets and the procedure for getting yourself elected to the Section Committee can introduce you to the labyrinth of bureaucracy. And if you're lucky enough to manage to negotiate your way through that labyrinth, Rule 44 of the Union makes it very clear how much power you can expect to yield at Section Committee level: "The Section Secretary shall control the affairs of the Section, subject to the supervision of the Section Committee and subject also to the instructions of the Sector Organiser and Sector Committee."; No room for misinterpretation there that the members of the Section could have the temerity to believe that they might control their own affairs! And Rule 45 even makes it clear that the members of a Section shouldn't be thinking about anything that doesn't concern them! – "The business transacted at a Section meeting shall be confined exclusively to the affairs of the Section, unless the Sector Committee expressly provides that some specified items of general Sector business may be transacted at Section meetings."

Looking at the Rules and at the labyrinth of structures in place it seems as if it would be almost impossible for a lay member or a group of members to identify an issue, propose a motion at local level, lobby support for it throughout the union and see that motion eventually discussed at National Conference.

These are relatively new structures and how they work out in practice remains to be seen but one thing is clear – they are certainly not designed to maximise democratic participation or to encourage the members to take responsibility for, or control of, the day-to-day affairs of the union. The opposite is in fact the case. These structures are there to ensure that the leadership, those who – in their view – know best, retain real decision making power for themselves.

## **Reform or Rebuild?**

One thing is certain. If trade unions did not exist, we certainly wouldn't invent SIPTU. What it has become is the opposite of a representative workers' organisation, there to control rather than organise. The question is whether it is reformable in any way. Whether the potential exists for members of SIPTU to democratise it, by putting structures in place that will allow for members'

control. Or, in effect, whether we have to start again and build alternative structures to organise workers to defend our interests.

And while it may be worse than other unions, SIPTU is not really an exception. All of the main trade unions, and their collective gathering together in the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, are unwieldy undemocratic institutions. There is not the space in this article to analyse the structures of other unions in any great depth but suffice to say that across all unions there is a huge democratic deficit and that union 'leaders' see their role not as that of representing the views of members but of controlling them. Their attitude to the views of members was summed up very well by a speaker from the floor at a recent Conference of my own union, the Irish National Teachers Organisation:- 'When we want your opinion, we'll tell you what it is'

And yet, the reality for those of us who want to see opposition built to the economic policies being pursued by this and the former government is that the trade union movement is the only body which has the ability to bring large numbers onto the streets. The only large protests that have taken place have been those called by the unions and those of us on the left have had to content ourselves with being a fringe movement on these protests. The fact that these protests have been much more about controlling, rather than organising, the anger of workers at government policy, is something that we have analysed on many previous occasions (see for example "ICTU can't be trusted to organise a general strike" [www.wsm.ie](http://www.wsm.ie)).

But the challenge now is how do we move past simply saying that what we have in terms of unions isn't good enough and we must build something different/something better. What are the practical steps that might take us in the direction of re-building a movement that actually sets about the organisation and representation of workers' interests in a real manner?

2013 is the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of the trade union movement in Ireland. The 1913 lockout pitted workers against their bosses in a life-and-death struggle. As we move towards its centenary, all of us concerned with reclaiming and rebuilding the legacy of Larkin and the workers who took on the might of William Martin Murphy and his fellow bosses in that great struggle, should use the opportunity to do some real in-depth questioning of where the trade union movement is at today. And futher, what we can now do to take it out of the hands of the bureaucracy which is crushing any aspect of real democracy or members' ownership of our movement.

This is deliberately not a fully worked-out idea. It is put out as a call to collective thought. The centenary of 1913 should be marked by a whole series of events, both historical – in the sense of looking back at the methods and tactics of organisation used then – and current – in the sense of looking at the huge challenges facing us as workers and trade unionists today.

Hopefully the year can be marked by a series of events which will reclaim the spirit of Larkin. Events which will set out to organise the unorganised and which will re-establish a trade union movement which has a clear vision. A vision that when the bosses and politicians talk about the 'national interest' we respond clearly that workers and the boss class do not have a common interest and that we will fight to establish our interests.

This call to collective thought and collective action needs input from as many sources as possible. I hope that this article will stimulate some of its readers into contributing ideas to ways in which the centenary of 1913 can be marked, and which might help lead to the re-birth of a genuine members-controlled trade union movement. Looking forward to hearing from you...

In Larkin's own words: "This great fight of ours is not simply a question of shorter hours or better wages. It is a great fight for human dignity, for liberty of action, liberty to live as human

beings should live, exercising their God-given faculties and powers over nature; always aiming to reach out for a higher betterment and development, trying to achieve in our own time the dreams of great thinkers and poets of this nation — not as some men do, working for their individual aggrandisement.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> From Larkin’s message from prison to workers published in *Irish Worker*, 1 November 1913, quoted in Padraig Yates, “Lockout: Dublin 1913”

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