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**Union learning representatives –
a force for renewal or ‘partnership’?**

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Abstract

Whilst trade unions have a longstanding interest in the education and training of their members, this has received a major boost through the formalisation of Union Learning Representatives (ULRs) in the Employment Relations Act 2002. This paper provides a critical appraisal of the impact of ULRs on learning, skill and control, and on trade union activities in two English regions.

The paper reports the initial findings of an ongoing research project to explore the role of ULRs in the controlling or emancipatory nature of learning, in interpreting the meaning of trade union stances towards 'partnership', and in trade union renewal agendas, in the South East and the North East of England. The paper draws upon accounts of exploratory qualitative research and case studies as it assesses the situation to date.

Union learning representatives – a force for renewal or ‘partnership’?

“There are hundreds of men and women right through the history of the TUC and the unions who will say that they owed their life chances because their union introduced them to education”

(Estelle Morris, Secretary of State for Education and Skills, Speech to TUC Congress 11 September 2002)

Introduction

This paper provides a critical appraisal of the impact of the Union Learning Fund (ULF) and Union Learning Representatives (ULRs) on learning, skill and control, and on trade union activities in two English regions. Potentially the most significant statutory role for workplace unionism since the recognition of health and safety representatives in the mid 1970s, the ULR role, enforced through the Employment Relations Act 2002, is now becoming formalised in many workplaces. This potential may be realised both in the nature of training and skills, but also in the contribution of the ULR role to union membership and activism in the context of decline over the last twenty years. However, the outcomes of such recent union learning initiatives are significantly under-investigated in the literature. This paper is therefore timely in reporting the initial findings of an ongoing research project to explore the role of the ULF and ULRs in the controlling or emancipatory nature of learning, in interpreting the meaning of trade union stances towards ‘partnership’, and in trade union renewal agendas, in the South East and the North East of England. The paper draws upon accounts of exploratory qualitative research and case studies as it assesses the situation to date.

Unions as Learning Agents

Trade unions have a longstanding interest in the education and training of their members. Much of this has been aimed at shop stewards and focused on training related to union activities (Rainbird, 2001). However, more

recently, since the election of the New Labour government in 1997, that interest has been recognised by government through their consultation with trade unions in policy making on learning and skills more broadly (DfEE, 2001). This agenda may be seen in the continued light of employers' unwillingness to consistently invest in training (Keep and Rainbird, 2000) and in light of inequalities in access of and provision to training (Cully et al, 1999; IDS, 1999; DfES, 2001), attributed by some to the failure of the market-driven system in the UK (Ashton and Felstead, 2001).

By contrast, empirical work suggests that training needs are more generally recognised and that the amount of training provided to workers is higher in unionised than non-unionised workplaces (TUC, 1998; Green et al, 1999). Although recognising the limitations of union influence, for example, in terms of the current spread of union recognition, it is apparent that unions may have a unique and positive role to create a supportive environment in pursuit of career progression and personal development and also to provide basic skills training (Smith, 1999).

Thus, from 1998, the government has allocated finance that can only be accessed by trade unions, via the Union Learning Fund (ULF). This fund supports and encourages the development of Union Learning Representatives (ULRs) alongside other learning initiatives that are often developed in association with employers. These initiatives commonly focus on disadvantaged sectors of the community where trade unions can play a critical and unique role in encouraging the development of basic skills. This was recognised in the Moser report (1999) which argued that:

Trade unions have already begun to show how effective they can be at motivating and persuading people to improve their basic skills. (Moser, et al, 1999).

Further, the National Skills Taskforce (2000) suggested that they would like to see trade unions:

Continue the positive steps they have taken to spread workforce learning and to support reluctant and unconfident learners through measures such as the Union Learning Fund.

Union Learning Representatives (ULRs) are a relatively new initiative and have been operating in a largely unofficial basis since 1998. Until recently they have not shared the same status nor enjoyed the same rights as other workplace union representatives (DfEE, 2001), but this has now changed with the Employment Relations Act 2002. In particular, the new statutory rights allow trade unions the right to appoint Learning Representatives in any workplace recognised for collective bargaining purposes, for those representatives to take paid time off to undertake their duties as a ULR, and to train for these duties; and for union members to take time off (albeit not necessarily paid) to access the services of a ULR (ACAS, 2002).

Such rights were recommended by the DFEE Impact Assessment of 2001, which stated that the main benefits of Union Learning representatives are:

- a) they add value to employers' efforts to develop their workforce;
- b) they help overcome employee resistance to taking up learning opportunities;
- c) they provide a means by which those unwilling to approach their employer or manager can get advice about training;
- d) they help to ensure that training providers met the needs of workers, for instance by arranging provision which is accessible to part-time, shift workers, etc.
- e) they help identify those with basic skills learning needs;
- f) they provide a source of expertise and impulse to action on training in organisations that have a weak training culture or where there is no dedicated training manager (DfEE, 2001).

With the support of this statutory recognition, the number of ULRs in England, Scotland and Wales is estimated to rise from 4,400 in 2001/2 to 22,253 in

2009/10 and the number of employees they have helped into learning to rise from 72,000 to 534,072 (York Consulting, 2001).

Clearly this represents a significant change in workplace learning roles, but one which is significantly under-researched in the literature. For example, a limited number of studies describe the operation of specific union-centred educational programmes (Jacob, 1999; Stoney, 2002), but without exploring the nature and extent of the learning outcomes. In addition, there would seem to be a total absence of studies which link the effects of workplace learning with societal contexts of poverty and deprivation. Although one study focuses on employment aspirations (of young working-class men; McDowell, 2000) and another explores the meaning of lifelong learning in deprived social context (Cloonan and Crossan, 2002), neither of these make the link with potential contributions that workplace training may provide.

Furthermore, it is instructive to note that prior to the 2002 Act, the DfEE Impact Assessment found that eight out of ten learning representatives face some form of barrier in carrying out their duties; they lack time, support from the employer and sometimes from the union (DfEE, 2001). Thus, although the benefits cited by the DfEE are important, it would seem relevant to explore questions around the way that these benefits are achieved, the barriers and constraints faced by ULRs, the ULRs' relationships with the employer, the equality issues raised in the process and the outcomes for learners.

Learning, skills and work control

The nature of the learning engendered by the ULRs and other union initiatives, is clearly one plank of interest in this paper, particularly in the context of the debates surrounding de-skilling embodied in the labour process debate. Indeed the very term 'learning' is not without contention. One often accepted definition describes learning as a relatively permanent change in behaviour that occurs as a result of practice or experience (Bass and Vaughan, 1966). Whilst this may be used in a neutral sense, other work

places the term in an emancipatory agenda, with a broadly humanist meaning (Ainley, 1994; Stewart, 1999).

However, the term 'learning' is often used as a basis for ensuring that effective transfer of training is undertaken, where training is a 'planned process to modify attitude, knowledge or skill behaviour ... to achieve effective performance...in the work situation (to) develop the abilities of the individual and to satisfy current and future needs of the organisation' (MSC, 1981). This may be seen as vital to employers' needs to maximise the difference between exchange and use value of labour, and to thus operate in a functionalist manner that provides an efficient, submissive and obedient workforce (and which in turn leads to maintenance of the social system and modern capitalist industrial economy) (Karabel and Halsey, 1977). Thus the struggle for control of training agendas places consideration of training firmly in the arena of conflict theories, and particularly that of Marxist perspectives on the labour process.

Initial evidence suggests that ULRs may act as signposts to a wide variety of education and training, including broad generic skills and specific skills, accredited and non-accredited courses, and provision that is directly job-related as well as that which is not. Therefore, it is necessary for this paper to consider the meanings, agendas and outcomes of union learning in terms of emancipatory learning and functionalist training and, indeed, to explore whether these two concepts are necessarily mutually exclusive.

A deeper analysis will be gained through an understanding of job control, over work within jobs and of workers' control over job moves, transfers and career progression; and through an understanding of skill. The dimension of skill is important here. Braverman (1974) argued that deskilling is a key part of the capitalist labour process as, in association with scientific management, skills are reduced from general to job-specific and are further fragmented and routinised often in conjunction within technological change and work re-organisation. The importance of skill in management control strategies is further heightened through a dissociation of the labour process from the skills

of the work, separating conception from execution of work, and with an assumed monopoly over knowledge by management (Thompson, 1983) for white collar as well as blue collar work (Hyman and Price, 1983; Smith et al, 1996). More recently, employers are re-conceptualising the meaning of 'skill' to a behavioural and attitudinal emphasis (Grugulis, et al, 2002; Layfer, 2002).

All of this potentially lessens worker power. However, other work also recognises that general moves to deskilling are not uncontested and that job control may be retained by workers even after a period of deskilling (Thompson, 1983). Nevertheless, workers' control over gaining and utilising skills through workplace training is key in an understanding of power relations in the workplace (Heyes, 2000), in particular in relation to the level at which jobs are able to be controlled, and thus importantly the wages and conditions available.

Recent work (Forth and Millward, 2001; Hoddinot, 2000; Rainbird, 2000) has critiqued a consensus commonly portrayed by government and employers that low wage and low productivity is caused by a skills supply deficit which workers culpably contribute to. Rather, this identifies that low skills are a product of employer strategies to create lower-skilled jobs, that workers in general possess qualifications beyond the level of their jobs, and thus the problem lies with a lack of demand for skills by employers. For example, the Moser report clearly identified the skills shortfall in literacy and numeracy (key focus for ULRs) and yet the proportion of employers offering learning opportunities in either of these areas is just around ten per cent (Clarke, 2002).

Another study (Forth and Millward, 2001), has focused on low-skilled jobs, defining such occupations and commenting upon their pay levels. This work recognises the limitations of low-skilled jobs for skill development and career enhancement, for example because of the relative lack of training provision and the relatively greater ease of employers practising a hire and fire policy. However, Forth and Millward focus primarily on the effects of trade union

wage bargaining on pay levels, rather than on training and career development outcomes.

In summary, although clearly a significant area of practical activity, the study of the nature and outcomes of the learning, for both employees, employers and other stakeholders, appears greatly under-researched. It is therefore clear that issues of ownership, form of delivery, qualification, subject and purpose will be key to exploring the nature of the learning provided by ULRs, particularly in considering their re-skilling or de-skilling role.

The union role and agenda: renewal or partnership?

The other plank of this paper is the focus on the implications of initiatives such as the ULF and ULRs on union renewal and partnership developments, an aspect that is important for our understanding of contemporary work relations. Although some studies have focused on the role of training in terms of workplace industrial relations and management outcomes (Munro and Rainbird, 2000; Forrester, 2001; Payne, 2001), there has been little consideration of the effect on union membership and activism. Such consideration is important given the context of trade union decline in membership since the early 1980s.

The election of the New Labour government in 1997, saw an emphasis, at least rhetorically, on a notion of workplace 'partnership' agreements between trade unions and employers. This was, to some extent, reinforced by statutory recognition rights for trade unions contained in the 1999 Employment Relations Act.

However, studies on union partnership tend to focus on the benefits to business, rather than to trade unions and their members. This focus may reflect the political imperative to demonstrate a legitimate role for trade unions as positive partners rather than 'wreckers', language which is still prevalent today. Other work is more descriptive of the various learning initiatives and employee development programmes themselves (Rainbird, 2001). Where

more critical studies have been undertaken, partnerships are criticised as distant and divorced from the key partner – the employee (McBride and Stirling, 2002; Stirling and Wray, 2001). This raises the question as to whether ULFs and ULRs provide the potential for partnerships (whether formal or informal) with ‘win/win’ outcomes. Further, the importance of local union leadership is seen as central to union renewal initiatives (Fairbrother, 1994; Fosh, 1993; Calveley and Healy, 2003); the augmenting of local union activists with ULRs may have the potential for furthering union revitalisation.

The study

This paper draws upon an account of exploratory qualitative studies in the South East and the North East of England, including interviews with key TUC and union officials, a pilot study of union learning representatives and a number of case study insights derived from both primary and secondary data. The two regions of the UK are economically distinct and therefore provide a valuable basis for a comparative study. Each region has learning strategies which are regionally and locally tailored to meet the needs of their businesses and their populations.

The south-east fieldwork focuses on London and Hertfordshire. The area as a whole is relatively prosperous, but includes pockets of great deprivation (Feloy and Payne, 2001, DETR, 2000). There are wide social variations with, for example, youth unemployment (age 16-24) of more than 10 per cent in twelve North London wards with unemployment of 18 per cent among black and minority ethnic residents in Haringey (9 per cent for white residents) (Feloy and Payne, 2001). There is a significantly higher level of long-term unemployment amongst those with no qualifications, in low-skill trades and in black (compared to other) minority ethnic groups (London North Learning and Skills Council, 2001).

In Hertfordshire, five wards feature in the category of 'most deprived' as calculated by Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD), placing them among the 25 per cent most deprived wards in England (DETR, 2000; in Hertfordshire Health Authority, 2001), prompting a focus on education, training and careers through Single Regeneration Budget (SRB) and European Union (EU) funded initiatives such as the All Saints Centre for Employment and New Directions (ASCEND) in South Oxhey and West Watford (Hertfordshire Prosperity Forum, 1999).

Across the region, skills strategies and targets have been drawn up (LDA, 2002, Hertfordshire Prosperity Forum, 2000) and skills projects based on partnership between community and workplaces instigated (CLLP, 2002).

This recognises a need to not only develop high level skills for a 'knowledge economy', but also a need to better equip the population with basic skills and education, so-called aspects of 'soft infrastructure'.

By contrast, 'One North East', (the Regional Development Agency) stated:

no other English Region suffers from a scale and concentration of deprivation as the North-east' (One North East, 2002)

and that deprivation is entrenched and continues to grow. 28 per cent of adults have problems with basic numeracy and literacy and the Region has the lowest participation rates in further and higher education (Stone and Brailsford, 2002). On the TUC's 'want work' rate the North East has the highest level at 17 per cent and the South East the lowest at nine per cent (TUC, 2002).

There are a range of regional initiatives and responses, but in particular relation to skills and learning, One North East is working with the Framework for Regional Employment and Skills Action (FRESA) to offer effective and inclusive initiatives in the area of skills development, the Government Office North East has established a Regional Basic Skills task Group (jointly chaired by the Northern TUC). The TUC itself, in conjunction with the four Regional Learning and Skills Councils has established a Learning for All Fund worth £0.5m to encourage unions and employers to work in partnership on skills development. This has already supported 13 projects, which have attracted over 6,000 new learners and developed or supported eight learning centres (TUC North, 2002). Greater regional involvement is likely to follow the transfer of administration of ULFs to the Learning and Skills Councils.

ULF projects provide evidence of trade unions extending their training development activities beyond the workplace into projects that also involve local communities such as the Byker Library project in Newcastle upon Tyne that encompasses the City Council, Union learning Representatives and a community outreach project based in an area high on all measures of social deprivation (TUC North, 2001). In the South East, the array of ULF projects is

extensive ranging from the Mirror Learning Centre in Watford, the Ford Adapt, the MetroBus, the PCS Learning Centre in Victoria.

This paper reports findings of research in progress, which is aimed at exploring and initially identifying issues. The work so far can be characterised, in the South East as tending to focus on information from trade union sources and at a regional level, and in the North East as being through a focused study of a particular case. However, the study has also incorporated information from sources outside of these particular foci.

More specifically, in mapping the ground in the South East part of the study, research has been undertaken through: document analysis; participant research at two regional TUC conferences; an interview with a regional TUC official; two interviews with regional union officers; five interviews with workplace ULRs; and interviews with two training providers. This work has been undertaken in relation to both the public and private sector, for a variety of skill groups, and through involvement with a number of trades unions including GPMU, USDAW, Prospect and PCS.

In the North East, initial empirical research is based on a qualitative analysis of a ULF project and associated developments at Newcastle upon Tyne City Council. The research methodology comprised a document analysis of all the materials related to the project and observation of committee meetings concerned with managing learning within the City Council. Interviews were carried out with national and regional union officials, the regional TUC, workplace ULRs and shop stewards, City councillors and officers, training providers and participants in the training programme. Overall 21 interviews were conducted between October and December 2002. The project as a whole is planned to include more extensive research with both ULRs and learners themselves.

The paper now draws upon the research in order to firstly consider the nature and role of the ULR in the workplace and then provide a critical appraisal of ULRs in practice. It will contemplate the extent to which ULRs are able to

promote equality of opportunity through learning, and the extent to which this learning is circumscribed by employers seeking a more skilled, and arguably more flexible, workforce.

Union Learning Representatives in Action

The following section considers the role of the ULR in the workplace, highlighting evidence of equality and learning agendas, learning centres, development programmes and other initiatives. It also considers union organising abilities within the context of ULRs.

Reasons given by unions for embracing the ULR concept are concerned with developing basic skills, career development and, particularly, with equality. For unions generally, enhancing opportunity for black and Asian members and for part-time and low paid members, acknowledged as being mainly women, is a particular priority. This relates very much to an agenda of enabling workers to overcome disadvantage by being able to hold down jobs, get on at work and to change jobs when it suits them.

Generally speaking, provision of workplace learning appears to rely on named initiatives such as University for Industry (Ufi), National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) and the TUC/Union Gateway to learning initiative and union 'learning' membership schemes such as Employee Development Programmes (EDPs) and 'learning' credit unions (linked to Ufi and formerly to Individual Learning Accounts (ILAs)).

Notwithstanding this, it is clear that a key rationale for ULRs' work is their role in the context of lifelong learning as is evidenced by the following quote:

"lifelong learning is about the right – not just the opportunity – to the time, facilities and the resources to acquire the skills and knowledge we believe we need and we know we want . . . the right to do that at times and in ways which suit us throughout our lives" (USDAW, 1999).

However, it is clear that unions view such learning as an opportunity for workers to develop their own knowledge and skills, rather than for employers to manipulate their learning:

“we have our own interest in skills training and acquiring knowledge. We have our own learning needs which extend well beyond paid employment (where) no-one else should take us for granted, decide our needs for us or presume to know what’s in our best interest . . . This is about real learning, learning from and guided by each other, not just by experts; learning what we want to learn, not just what we’re meant to know; learning about what we’re interested in and what’s useful to us, not what passes for being clever in someone else’s world” (USDAW, 1999).

Some further light is shed on this through the methods of delivering union learning. In the South East, there are examples of learning centres which provide for learners in workplaces and in the wider community. One of these is that of Mirror Group Printers and GPMU. This is described as a partnership established between Mirror Colour Printers, GPMU and the South East Regional Trades Union Congress (SERTUC) Learning Services. A learning centre linked to learndirect through the trade union hub at the Mirror Colour Printing works at Watford. Twenty ULRs have been trained to encourage all employees to engage in learning and provide a progression route for staff to achieve NVQ level 3. It also gives workers from other local employers and members of local community groups access to opportunities, and so “encourages lifelong learning in the community” (SERTUC Conference, 2002).

A further example is that of a company and union jointly-run Employee Development Fund to finance courses on and off site, in which employees can apply for grants of up to £100 per year. Applications are made to a joint union/company committee. On site provision is in such subjects as IT, with Spanish to fit in with shift patterns (presumably outside paid employment time). Off site provision includes French, first aid, brickwork, and garden

design. Other schemes use IT facilities in local libraries (out of work hours in lunchtimes and evenings) and a union learning centre in a local FE college.

In the North East, there are currently around 600 ULRs spread across the Region providing guidance and support as well as the opportunity for networking. A detailed example of ULRs in action is the Brinkburn project in which the TUC and local unions worked with Newcastle City Council. The project had a number of dimensions that developed alongside each other but of critical importance for our discussion here is the union learning project focussing on manual workers in Citybuild – Newcastle’s direct labour public works department. In this respect the key feature of the programme was the development of basic skills in literacy and numeracy following the City Council’s Literacy Strategy of 1998. As the City’s second largest employer, the Council saw their own employees as one of its ‘six target groups’ and viewed itself as playing a significant role in enabling its staff to improve their literacy skills while at the same time benefiting from increased efficiency and effectiveness.

This project provides an example of the importance of the role of the ULR and their enthusiasm for the project. In this case, the TGWU convenor is also the convenor of the joint union committee in the City Council despite his union being a minority one. As such, the convenor became a key player in the development of union learning projects. He was instrumental in developing ULRs by becoming one himself and then becoming an enthusiastic advocate; he had a key role in developing a united union approach even where UNISON was taking the lead. As a Citybuild worker and as an experienced and longstanding union representative he had the necessary links to sympathetic labour councillors. Personalities within the unions and their particular enthusiasm became a key agency in project development. Working alongside the convenor was an equally important player from a significantly different background, a female UNISON representative from the City library who was eventually to be funded by a successful ULF bid to act as co-ordinator for the Brinkburn project.

What is clear from the project is that any potential rivalries or animosities between the different unions in the City were overcome by an enthusiasm for learning as a vehicle for delivering a new service for members. This was particularly so in relation to the Citybuild literacy campaign where immediate benefits were seen and celebrated by union members, representatives' managers and City councillors alike. The contested terrain of workplace learning that we discussed earlier in the paper appears to have been overcome through successful partnerships between different unions and unions and employers. This form of partnership is based on rectifying the failure of the market-driven approach to training which has led to a low skill and lack of basic skill economy.

As a further illustration, delegate discussion at a SERTUC conference emphasised learning outcomes of ULF/ULR provisions. Although organising agendas were not a major part of the discussion, arguably, the growth in ULR numbers and their statutory recognition heightens the profile of workplace unionism. Therefore with ULRs increasingly involved in workplace learning, this can promote union activism and growth, indeed, one speaker, but a sizeable minority of delegates, saw an agenda of union renewal:

“Of trained ULRs, 10 per cent are new activists, and they tend to be more women and younger members; reviving workplace activism” (TUC National Officer – Learning Services, SERTUC Conference, 2002).

The above has provided examples of ULRs in action in the workplace, however, ULR initiatives are not unproblematic as the following section demonstrates.

An assessment of ULRs in Action – partnership or renewal?

As discussed above, ULRs are seen as a mechanism for promoting equality of opportunity in the workplace, partnership between employers and trade unions and possible union renewal. However, a cautious approach must be taken when considering the nature and depth of such 'achievements'.

Although the union agenda is to promote equality of opportunity for learning, this is not always the case. For example, in one organisation, a Government Agency in the South East, it was apparent that the union representing the more 'highly' skilled professional and technical staff was wholeheartedly embracing the ULR role, whilst in contrast there was minimum support (i.e. one representative) in the union representing the 'lower' skilled workers. Although this is not necessarily the case in other workplaces, it illustrates both inequality of access to ULRs and, interestingly, that benefits are not solely for low grade workers improving basic skills, but also for the already relatively advantaged. An example of the latter perhaps being a ULR for the National Union of Teachers (NUT).

In considering the role of the learning engendered, the nature of learning outcomes being emancipatory or functionalist needs further consideration. Thus, in campaigning for lifelong learning, one union states this as being

*“about people continuously learning, acquiring and developing useful knowledge and know-how throughout their lives”
(USDAW, 1999).*

This clearly begs the question of what is 'useful', and to whom, in emancipatory or functionalist contexts.

In observing a SERTUC conference, it was revealing that the majority of delegates expressed views that learning is inherently good, without really exploring its meaning. These views came from some unionists, government agencies (particularly Learning and Skills Councils (LSCs) mindful of their own targets), government departments and employers (HR and T&D Managers) who were also represented. Nevertheless, there was some scepticism about whether this is 'training' imposed by the organisation "for individuals to fit the mold", or whether it is 'learning' for "individuals' own ambitions" (Delegate, SERTUC Conference, 2002). Some delegates felt that learning is tied to vocational qualifications which are often task specific and vocational in nature, thus implying an "employer agenda". This is echoed in broader critiques of initiatives such as NVQs (Stewart and Hamblin, 1992)

which suggest a constraint on worker development as such qualifications are only available at the level at which the employee is currently working.

Our analysis of this discourse indicates that it is not possible to clearly differentiate between learning for emancipatory or functionalist outcomes, as basic skills can sit comfortably in both categories. This is evidenced in the example cited above regarding provision of such subjects as IT, Spanish, first aid, brickwork, and garden design under an Employee Development Fund. Although not all directly job related, such learning may clearly follow a unitarist approach to engendering employee commitment.

Indeed, the ULR literature produced by one union provides insight into tensions between 'real' learning referred to earlier (humanist, emancipatory) and more functionalist training. For whilst the ULR is "someone completely independent who can be trusted", the role of the ULR is also to "improve the skills and employability of the workforce helping them become more adaptable to change" and to "increase participation in workplace training".

In addition, the provision of learning must be seen in the context of a capitalist industrial economy. So for example, the agendas of Government agencies involved appear very much linked to market demand and shortage i.e., London Development Agency (LDA) priorities in manufacturing & design; creative and cultural industries; tourism, hospitality & allied sectors (LDA, SERTUC Conference, 2002). This may indicate a prevailing functionalist and market-driven context.

Nevertheless, from the Brinkburn case discussed above - which can arguably be seen as an 'ideal type' of learning project - we can see that there is a common recognition that basic skills development offered positive outcomes for workers, unions and the Council as employer. However, the generation of a demand for learning will not remain confined to areas where there is consensus as different groups seek different types of training and development.

Also, as much of the development of the Brinkburn Project was underpinned by successful external fundraising, not only did that reduce the burden on the City but it gave the trade unions the opportunity to develop a positive role as fund raisers themselves. External funding in this area is often pump-priming, time limited and exhaustible. Funding further learning developments will put demands on the City's resources in a situation of local authority funding where there are competing demands for scarce resources.

In this case, time off work for training was able to be effectively managed in a full time workforce where there was management support for the programme and some interchangeability possible between skills and working times. This will not always be the case in for example Schools or residential care establishments. In those situations time off work for what may become the whole workforce will raise volatile negotiating issues. Indeed, this was evidenced at the SERTUC conference where the view was expressed by a number of delegates that, in reality, it was difficult to take time off for ULR duties, even when agreements are in place. The lack of statutory training rights, both individual and collective, was seen somewhat pessimistically as an overall inhibitor.

There is also the issue of gendered inequality in relation to training. The Brinkburn pilot project at Citybuild covered a predominantly male workforce. Equivalent basic skills deficits can be anticipated in a range of areas where women predominate in the workforce and where part time working and inflexibility in relation to attendance will be key issues. The questions will then be in relation to managing 'cover' if women are to be given learning opportunities in working time or payments if the learning is to be carried out beyond normal working hours.

In relation to each of these issues there remains the opportunity to develop solutions through partnership but it is equally easy to see the emergence of traditional adversarial bargaining relationships as employers and unions negotiate about the distribution of the scarce resources of time and money.

Arguably, an increase in workplace bargaining and activity could increase trade union profile and promote workplace union renewal.

Despite this, the feeling from one key unionist speaker at the SERTUC conference was that ULF/ULR provisions would make rather limited progress towards union renewal because, with there being no statutory right to bargain on training “we are doing this with one hand tied behind our back”.

It is also apparent that there are problems in organising ULRs and learning centres. For example, in one organisation in the South East, it was difficult to organise more widely outside of the head office and to serve the national field-based workforce. Currently only one ULR serves this wider group of staff, and he is thinking of resigning from the ULR role. Similar views were expressed by a number of SERTUC conference delegates. For example, in the construction industry, there are problems organising learning centres in fragmented workplaces. A GPMU representative was sceptical about the scale of ULR take-up. With 80 per cent of employers in occupations represented by GPMU having 20 employees or less, there was great difficulty organising.

Further practical problems are apparent. Although there may be an assumed consistency in support for ULRs across trade unions, in reality there would appear to be a variety of views towards ULRs by shop stewards. For example, the branch official of one union had simply added the ULR role to his other union duties, whilst another union pushed for separate and full ULR recognition and training for a number of ULRs. From the information available, this appears to be a reflection of the priority given to the role in each of the union’s headquarters, partly, but not entirely, explained by the relative size of the two unions’ memberships.

In considering roles and union and employer identities, the study so far has highlighted an interesting example of conflation of union and ‘management’ roles. One ULR is also a trainer in the organisation’s T&D department, is an ex-shop steward, but clearly a current union member. The head of the organisation’s T&D department is also a union shop steward. Between them

they organise ULR training for their own union in and outside of that particular organisation, and for other unions represented in that organisation. What is more, they run this from the organisation's own (management) training centre.

Clearly, further analysis needs to be undertaken here, particularly to investigate the extent to which such conflated activity follows management-controlling or union-activist agendas. In addition, there are issues around the extent to which ULR provision may be replacing rather than adding to the total training provided in the organisation.

Conclusion

This paper has begun to explore what is clearly an under-researched area. Although in its early stages the research has identified a number of interesting and important issues, allowing us to draw some initial conclusions.

Clearly, the ULF and ULRs are a breakthrough for trade union involvement in the workplace. This is the first time since the Health and Safety at Work Act in 1974 that unions have been acknowledged as having a positive and significant role to play in the workplace. What is of interest here, is the fact that this role is seen as being very much in partnership, with both employers and the Government, as recognised skill shortages are universally addressed. The setting up of the union learning fund implicitly acknowledges that employers have failed to deliver training across the board and that unions have an important contribution to make (DfEE 2001). This recognition offers the promise of greater opportunities for the development of union representation emerging from training and potentially the scope for union renewal. It also indicates an acknowledgement that the formal incorporation of trade unions into the labour process is seen as necessary to develop a skilled labour force and forces a consideration of the extent to which this is a fundamental and desirable shift in the union role.

However, consideration must be given to the extent to which unions and their members will be allowed to shape the direction of their learning in an

emancipatory manner, rather than being 'forced' down a functionalist route in order to compensate for employers' previous under-investment in skill development. As yet, ULRs are in the early stages of development, however, it might well be considered that this is an area where workplace control becomes contested.

It must also be recognised that it is difficult, if not impossible, to clearly delineate between functionalist and emancipatory training. Although employers will undoubtedly benefit from workers developing their skills in a functionalist way, the evidence gathered from the research above clearly identifies the benefits of such learning for the workers. Indeed, it is evidenced in both areas that there is much enthusiasm for the various schemes. Nonetheless, as funding begins to disappear, this may well prove to be an area in which workplace negotiation takes on a new phase, particularly if employers are looking to use what funding is available to promote 'skills' development whilst workers have their own learning agendas. We may well see a transition whereby the initial unitarist partnership approach to learning is replaced with a pluralistic confrontational approach which might promote workplace union renewal.

What we have seen from the research is that not only do the Government perceive trade unions as having a positive role to play, it is clear that to some extent ULRs do help overcome employee resistance to taking up learning opportunities. There is also some evidence, albeit limited, that they provide a means by which those unwilling to approach their employer or manager can get advice about training, and that ULRs help to ensure that training providers meet the needs of workers, for instance by arranging provision which is accessible to part-time and shift workers, those often disadvantaged from a workplace training standpoint.

An interesting finding is the fact that that ULRs provide assistance to workers across the range, including highly skilled professional and technical workers. Further investigation is required here as although ULRs may be filling a basic

skills gap, they may also be perpetuating the UK's training culture (as Ashton and Felstead, 2001) of those whose need is least, benefiting further.

At this stage of the research, there is inconclusive evidence about whether ULRs provide a source of expertise and impulse to action on training in organisations that have a weak training culture or where there is no dedicated training manager. Indeed, there is much evidence so far to suggest that ULRs are operating in organisations that already have an established training culture, and that they find it difficult to organise in those that do not have such a culture. Further research is required on this matter, together with exploration of the extent to which ULRs prompt additional learning and training activities or may simply duplicate or replace existing provision.

The initial research findings presented here have demonstrated an energy and enthusiasm by trade unions in making bids and implementing programmes under the ULF initiative, and in recruiting and training ULRs, showing a positive and determined commitment from them. This is clearly an area of importance to the study of trade unions and the contestation of control in the workplace, indicating the importance of a serious and critical appraisal of these initiatives.

The policy implications of the wider research project described in this paper are wide ranging. Whilst previous studies have provided valuable descriptions of innovative projects and others have provided extensive statistical data on union learning representatives, the significance and transferability of these studies has not been developed nor deeply analysed. The project will bridge that gap and provide insights and policy directions for the key agents involved with learning representatives. It will provide insights to Government on national policy implications at the regional level and will provide the TUC and the National and local learning and skills councils with a thorough analysis of the contemporary development of unions learning funds and practices of union learning representatives. All of these agencies will benefit from the hearing the voice of learners (hitherto neglected) and their views on overcoming exclusion. The regional analysis will form a central plank of the

project's analysis by differentiating between what might be considered 'best practice' in one region and may be less effective in another.

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