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British trade unions and the learning and skills agenda: an assessment

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Summary

British trade unions have been afforded a new position of 'stakeholder' within the vocational education and training system and are seen by government as being a key advocate in supporting workplace learning. This issues paper assesses how far unions can use this agenda to promote workers' interests, aid union renewal and further the development of a 'high skills society' in the UK.

Introduction

Over recent years, training and learning has become an increasingly important item on the agenda of British trade unions. The development of a range of union learning programmes, the creation of the union learning representative (ULR), and the forging of new 'learning partnerships' with employers, have been celebrated as a success story and potential force for union renewal. The Labour government, committed to developing Britain as a high-skills, knowledge-driven economy, has supported these activities through the Union Learning Fund and the provision of statutory backing for ULRs. At the same time, unions have been afforded a new role as 'stakeholder' within the vocational education and training (VET) system.

It is perhaps time, therefore, to step back and take stock of what unions have achieved as well as some of the challenges they currently face. How much influence do unions exercise within the VET system? How far are unions able to advance an independent learning agenda centred on employee needs? To what extent have unions managed to carve out an autonomous role for themselves which is not dependent upon state support? How far can the learning agenda help to recruit new members and activists? What contribution can unions make to the development of the UK as an inclusive high skills economy? This issues paper seeks to stimulate debate around some of these key questions.

Unions and the VET system

There is no doubt that union involvement as a 'stakeholder' within the VET system has increased under the New Labour government. Unions now have formal representation on most of the main institutional bodies. These include the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) and the 47 local LSCs, established in 2001, as well as the Sector Skills Councils (SSCs). In sectors where unions have an established presence, they have been involved in the formulation of new sector skills agreements and regional skills partnerships. The Trades Union Congress (TUC) is also represented on the national Skills Alliance, established in 2003 to advise government on the progress and implementation of its skills strategy and promoted as an example of the government's 'social partnership' approach.

While trade unions are certainly better represented within the VET system today, this is perhaps more a statement of the extent to which unions found themselves marginalised and excluded by previous Conservative governments than an indication of their ability to wield significant influence over skills policy.

Both the LSCs and SSCs are framed as 'employer-led' bodies, with trade unions normally offered one seat alongside other voluntary groups, providing little scope to shape how these bodies operate in practice. Although the TUC has welcomed its new institutional role, it openly concedes that there is a 'lack of a robust social partnership approach to skills', insisting that a stronger trade union voice is needed (TUC 2006: 15).

Yet, it is unclear how much of a difference greater representation on these bodies would actually make. The way in which these bodies are funded, together with their terms of reference, indicate that, despite the rhetoric of an 'employer-led' training system, it is the state which is the dominant player. As Keep (2006: 51) argues, these are 'state-licensed entities, receiving their core funding from government and expected to respond (positively) towards delivering national programmes and targets, the design and setting of which they have played no role.' Similarly, the Skills Alliance meets but twice a year and is expected to act as a 'champion' for what would appear to be an already pre-determined skills strategy. It is all a far cry from much of continental Europe, where unions enjoy equal representation with employers on the main VET bodies, and the state devolves considerable decision-making responsibility to the social partners.

Workplace learning

While unions may be somewhat disappointed with their limited involvement at a strategic policy-making level, they have nevertheless been keen to celebrate their new role in promoting learning at the workplace. The central union innovation here has been the establishment of a new cadre of union lay official - the union learning representative - whose role is to help motivate and support workers in taking up learning opportunities. According to the TUC, around 13,000 ULRs have now been trained. Over 450 union learning projects (covering over 3000 workplaces) have also received funding through the Union Learning Fund, with more than 67,000 learners able to access courses each year as a result. In some cases, unions have also been able to engage employers in 'partnerships' for learning and skill development.

It is important to recognise that employers and employees can and often do have different interests with regard to training. While employers tend to prefer the development of firm-specific skills that contribute directly to their business, employees and their representatives favour broad transferable skills that can aid progression and employability (Keep and Rainbird 2003). One important research question, therefore, has been the extent to which unions have been able to advance an independent learning agenda focused primarily on employees' needs.

There is no denying that unions have had some notable successes in this respect. The programmes run by the public sector union, Unison, such as Return to Learn, which focus mainly on general education courses for often disadvantaged groups within the workforce, are among the best and most frequently cited examples. For many individuals, these courses can be a life changing experience, building confidence as learners, opening up opportunities for them to progress in terms of their career and encouraging many to become more actively involved in the union. Yet, such successes have to be seen in the context of the challenges that unions face in attempting to engage with employers over training and learning.

First, it is important not to overstate the impact unions are having on learning and training provision across the UK. ULRs and union/employer learning partnerships are only to be found in those workplaces where unions exist and are recognised. Lay union representatives are present in only 13% of workplaces with more than 10 employees, although they do cover 40% of the workforce (Kersley et al. 2006). However, in those areas of the economy where skills and training problems are often at their most acute – notably in private sector services such as hotels, hospitality and retailing – trade unions and, therefore ULRs, are conspicuous mainly through their absence.

Second, unions are currently without any statutory right to bargain with employers over training. UK employers only negotiate with employee reps (unionised or not) in 3% of workplaces and consult in a further 13%. In three quarters of UK workplaces, employee reps are not even informed about their employers' training plans (Kersley et al. 2006). Even where unions are recognised, research suggests that many employers remain resistant to learning agreements, with ULRs finding it difficult to challenge employer attempts to steer the learning agenda towards narrowly-focused business needs (Wallis et al. 2005).

Third, in terms of union renewal, there is evidence that where unions advance an independent learning agenda and are able to open up access to learning opportunities that directly benefit employees, they clearly have the 'potential to revitalise workplace trade unionism' (see Munro and Rainbird 2004: 165).

However, much would seem to depend upon the prior-existence of a strong and supportive union and

the willingness of union officers to capitalise on the interest generated to recruit new members and activists. The ability of the learning agenda to revitalise trade unions in weakly organised workplaces may, therefore, be limited.

Finally, questions might be asked about the sustainability of the union learning agenda, given that the state is now bankrolling most of these activities and programmes through the ULF. Would unions still be able to maintain their current role in workplace learning were a future government to decide to cut or withdraw public funding?

Developing an inclusive high skills economy

For the most part, the union role in the skills agenda has been confined to that of improving the supply of skills and learning. It is important, however, to consider what role unions can play in raising employer demand for, and usage of, skills. A number of commentators argue that the UK is trapped in a 'low skills equilibrium' (Finegold and Soskice 1988) where firms compete in relatively low quality, low cost markets and, thereby, require only limited skills from the bulk of their workforce. This is said to be a systematic problem in which the nature of financial markets, management approaches, systems of work organisation, labour market deregulation and the structure of domestic demand, all play a part in limiting employer demand for, and utilisation, of skill

Unions are clearly aware of 'demand-side' arguments and the need to address the challenge of skill utilisation. Traditionally, theoretical perspectives on the role of trade unions in skill formation have been informed by the examples of North European 'high skills economies', in particular Germany and Scandinavia (see Streeck 1992). Particular emphasis has been placed on the ability of strong trade unions, operating in relatively well regulated labour markets, to close-off low wage, low-cost approaches, forcing companies to compete on the basis of product quality and skills.

After twenty years of trade union decline and the collapse of multi-employer bargaining, the ability of British unions to 'block-off' low wage competitive strategies remains limited. Unions have instead focused on trying to influence government policy. In 2003, for example, the TUC argued that the government needed to do much more to tackle weak employer demand for skill through 'support for innovation and through encouraging organisations to raise their game, including a higher national minimum wage to wean management off its low pay crutch' (TUC 2003: 18).

Can unions advance a 'demand-side' agenda and encourage government to move beyond a skills strategy that remains narrowly focused on boosting the supply of qualified labour? Unions clearly face a number of challenges in this respect. One difficulty is how to critique the current supply-side orthodoxy, while being seen to remain a committed partner and loyal stakeholder within the government's skills strategy. While unions have welcomed government initiatives aimed at boosting skills supply (the 50% higher education target, Employer Training Pilots, Train to Gain), these have not always been subject to full critical scrutiny. This is despite evidence suggesting that ETPs have experienced major problems with 'deadweight' (Abramovsky et al. 2005), effectively subsidising training that employers would have paid for anyway, while there have been growing concerns that there may already be a shortage of 'real graduate jobs' for the existing numbers going through university. Unions appear to welcome each new supply side initiatives, yet fail to stress that the critical factor is how to ensure that there are enough jobs created at the requisite skill level for these workers to occupy.

The current ideological and political parameters within which skills policy is currently being played out further constrain unions' ability to advance a demand-side agenda. The UK Labour government has ruled out any form of active industrial policy that might allow the state to shape the direction of the economy and its skills trajectory, on the grounds that such investment decisions are best left in the hands of individual firms. Furthermore, commitment to the 'flexible labour market' has meant that, notwithstanding initiatives such as a low level national minimum wage, the government has tended not to view regulation as a means of establishing, what Streeck (2004) calls, the 'beneficial constraints' that are needed to push more firms away from cost-based competition.

If the government is an unlikely ally, are there ways that unions themselves could try to influence the demand for skills? One approach might be for unions to link their 'learning agenda' to wider initiatives around job design and skill utilisation in the workplace. This might be something that union learning reps could be encouraged to undertake by raising issues with management over the way that jobs could be reconfigured to promote better utilisation of workers' skills and capabilities.

To date, their role has not been identified in this way, reflected in the lack of courses and guidance on issues of work organisation. Providing ULRs with

awareness and training in this area does not mean, however, that management will respond positively. Many employers may not welcome an enlargement of their role to include issues of job design and unless unions are well-organised they are unlikely to be able to make significant progress. Despite these difficulties, it would seem essential that unions attempt to link up learning activities to a wider agenda around workplace and work organisation development.

Conclusion

Trade unions have been given a new role as stakeholders within the VET system and are seen as making an important contribution to the government's skills strategy. At the same time, unions can point to many examples where they are making a real difference to people's lives by helping individuals to take up learning opportunities at work. That such initiatives have the potential to aid union renewal is not in doubt. The union learning agenda is, in many ways, therefore, a 'success story' worthy of celebration.

Yet, unions confront many challenges in engaging with the skills and learning agenda. The union role within VET is considerably weaker than in other European countries, while UK unions have no legal right to bargain with employers over training. There are questions to be asked concerning the sustainability of union learning initiatives given the dependence on state funding, and the tensions surrounding their role as both supporter and critic of government skills policy. Perhaps the most difficult set of questions, however, revolve around how unions might help to develop a 'demand-side' approach to the UK skills problem.

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