Together we will stand: trade unions, cooperatives and the Preston Model

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This chapter makes a case for trade union support for a new wave of cooperative development and charts some of the early instances of collaborative working in this regard framed by the Preston Model. We argue for closer affinities between the trade union and cooperative movements in pursuance of mutual interests of renewal and reinvigoration. We believe this represents both a reconnection with important shared heritage and offers crucial openings for deepening the democratic voice of workers and strengthening the connectedness of trade unions to their communities, links which have been sadly denuded in a recent history of decline. As we write amidst the turmoil of the COVID-19 emergency and ongoing Brexit negotiations, we suggest that trade union and cooperative alliances offer creative imaginings for a progressive future. We illustrate the somewhat uneasy relationship between union and cooperative movements with reference to the progress of dialogue focused upon addressing problems within the care sector and the potential for a mutually agreeable solution that combines cooperative development with union organising.

Arguably, turmoil in the economy, associated vicissitudes in the labour market and recent decline in trade unions' strength and legitimacy point to a need for innovation in the labour movement. Historically, trade unions have presented an attitude of ambivalence to workers' control as embodied in cooperative forms (Laliberté 2013) and co-operatives' suspicions of trade unions also need to be acknowledged (Monaco & Pastorelli 2013). For those with an appreciation of shared heritage, recognising that industrial democracy appears to be, at the very least, implicit in unions' organising mission, antipathies towards cooperative workplaces as a vehicle for worker control seem curiously misplaced. That said, if a more progressive and successful resolution of these tensions is to be attempted, let alone achieved, then demonstrating solidarity and shared interests needs to be a necessary first step. For some, the optimum circumstances would be a sympathetic government looking to the wider labour movement to divine innovatory ideas for regeneration and development with a favourable economic wind behind. Yet, despite most economic and political indicators having been serially against us, perhaps paradoxically the time is opportune for revisiting workers' democracy framed by the co-operative model[1]. Indeed, the social and economic shocks of recent times, not least the COVID-19 crisis and its aftermath, could presage opportunities to renew both the economy and trade unions (Bird et al 2020a). Local developments such as the Preston Model of Community Wealth Building and other 'new municipalisms' represent unique spaces to forge new organisational forms and practices, even if the 'newness' reflects a substantial historical legacy (McInroy & Calafati 2017).

[1] For a more detailed understanding of co-operative approaches see the ICA definition https://www.ica.coop/en/cooperatives/cooperative-identity

Union power, legitimacy and renewal

Trade unions have long sought to bring about a legitimate means for workers' voice to be heard within, and ultimately gain control of, workplaces. Whilst the legitimacy of any claims for democracy in the workplace need to be stood up on a foundation of authentic internal democracy within the union (Gumbrell-McCormick & Hyman 2019) external forces and an over-reliance on servicing as opposed to organising have conspired to throw contemporary unions into a crisis of legitimacy (Hyman 2007, Jarley 2010). Amidst the neoliberal project of deregulation, privatisation and concentration of wealth and power amongst the few, even non-unionised forums for worker voice have fallen out of fashion and unions can appear to be in retreat from historical objectives for industrial democracy. The desirability of inter-union and trans-national solidarity, cooperation, bargaining and action on the part of unions is undermined by the power of globalised capital to both weaken and circumnavigate the state, diminish job security, and expand numbers of workers in increasingly precarious and unrepresented work. Globalisation, structural shifts in the UK economy and hostile legislation have exacerbated downward membership trends (Anderson et al., 2011), undermining collective bargaining and workplace influence; enfeebling previously strong worker identities (Holgate, 2015, Wills & Simms, 2004).

Recent decades have witnessed a consolidation of neoliberalism despite the sort of shocks which ought to have shattered its internal logic and fatally undermined its foundations. Yet, neoliberalism stumbles on, propped up by an unholy coalition of big business, mass media and a series of governments wedded to the assumed virtues of deregulated markets and diminished workers' rights (Crouch 2011, Quiggin 2012). De-industrialisation has produced a servicing economy; with more than ¾ of UK workers employed in the service sector. Service sector employment is not as simply spatially located as manufacturing and industrial work once was, further complicating union organising.

For decades, overall trade union strength and density has been in decline, with total union members falling from a highwater mark of around 13 million in 1979 to a current figure of 6.44 million (Roper, 2020), with unions insufficiently recruiting younger and ethnic minority workers, arguably most vulnerable to employee discrimination (Holgate, 2004). These sobering numbers hide, however, something of a resurgence in the last three years with membership increasing by around 200,000 since 2017. Unison, the large public service union, claims to be a growing union, with over 114,000 members joining in the previous year (Unison 2020). Membership growth needs to be seen in net terms, with overall totals the result of overall gains in a context of other losses. Much of the recent growth has involved women joining unions, with 2019 alone seeing 170,000 new women members. Regardless, such examples of union resilience are unevenly spread across the economy, and particular sectors are beset with low membership density and precarious work. Related to this has been the emergence of new unions responding to precarity and new forms of work and employment, which to some extent hark back to older syndicalist forms and reflect a more general turn to defining union identity in terms of organising (Heery 2015, Simms et al. 2019). Despite a common interest in growing representation, the new and old unions are variously engaged in conflictual or competitive relations, though some collaboration does take place (Meardi et al. 2019).

For some time now, trade unions have acknowledged that representing members via servicing models fails to engage new members. The servicing approach effectively considers the majority of members as consumers of union services, with their representation needs served by a smaller

number of activists and paid officials. A detrimental impact upon internal solidarity and social capital has been noted with, in the extreme, union members located in a private relationship to the union with minimal connections to other union members or union democratic structures. Arguably, this resulted in a hollowing out of unions as solidarity organisations into what Jarley (2005: 6) has dubbed 'a union of strangers'. Recognising these threats, unions have sought to reverse servicing patterns and shift towards various organising approaches to re-find their purpose, renew their vitality and re-establish legitimacy (Simms et al., 2013, Murray 2017, Fiorito & Jarley 2010, Gall 2009, Heery & Williams 2020).

Organising programmes enacted by individual UK trade unions were supported by the TUC establishing an organising academy for activists in 1998 (Simms et al. 2013). Most successful organising aims to re-invent social capital within the union, connecting rank and file members to each other, members to activists, and members and activists to officers and union leadership (Jarley 2005). Innovations include an emphasis on strengthening and building relationships (Hoerr 1997, O'Halloran 2006, Saundry & McKeown 2013) and locating unions more dynamically as community actors with shared social movement interests beyond the workplace (Wills & Simms 2004, Tattersall 2010). Thus, organising, although it explicitly involves recruitment and recognises the malaise of singularly focusing on servicing, is neither only about recruitment nor a complete rejection of servicing: recruitment gains will be pyrrhic without more fundamental shifts in union culture and members will still require some degree of servicing, albeit members will also be more autonomously and powerfully engaged within union responses (Reich 2012, Vandaele 2020). Recent decades of organising practices have engendered adaptions, involving: organisational strategies for innovation; re-imagining union structures germane to novel representative spaces; expansion of collective action repertoires; and improving connectedness, engaging with a diversity of social actors and interests (Murray 2017). These strategies can be understood to create 'a larger narrative and practice about the role of unions in society' (Murray 2017: 11) which may redefine 'the union as a mobilising structure which seeks to stimulate activism … and wider social justice' (Heery et al. 2000: 996) building a 'movement of movements' (Brecher & Costello, 1990: 331).

Simms et al. (2013) argue that many commentators and protagonists associated with union organising appear confused over what is meant to be achieved: increases in coercive power or enhanced legitimacy? That said, there appears to be substantial consensus that organising is about more than increasing representation; revitalisation and renewal of trade unionism in the workplace and beyond must be the goal. These authors note how matters of democracy have become problematic in debates surrounding union organising. Certain aspects of union structures may be seen as an impediment to the grassroots, democratic mobilisation of resources and activism, especially if an objective is transformations beyond simple representation (Carter 2000). Stephen Lerner (2003), activist in the *Justice for Janitors* campaign, suggests that, particularly in conditions of low density, internal union democracy may be meaningless or an impediment to extending organising and membership to marginalised, exploited and non-unionised workers. Critical allies such as Crosby (2005) bemoan the extent to which matters of democracy have been alternately trivialised and fetishized in union discourses, and whilst agreeing with the case for improving density at all levels suggests that transformative and democratising objectives are equally important and can go hand in hand with increasing union strength.

Cooperative development in Preston

Out of the ashes of neoliberalism's financial crisis was born the new municipal responses to regional neglect and startling inequalities for a rich western nation. The Preston approach to community wealth building has always considered cooperative enterprises as a key plank of the overall approach. The council commissioned a report into the potential contribution of cooperatives (Manley & Froggett 2016), complementing encouraging economic and policy analysis from the Centre for Local Economic Solutions (CLES) (Jackson & McInroy 2015), and advocating establishment of a locus for cooperative development support in the city. Notable figures within Preston City Council (PCC) and other anchor institutions have been inspired by international connections and exchanges between Mondragón in the Basque region of Spain and similarly disposed allies from further afield, including Cleveland, Cincinnati, and New York in the US.

There have always been cooperatives and co-operative like organisations in and around Preston. Notably, *Gateway,* the city's social housing organisation and important anchor institution, emerged from the tradition of housing cooperatives that began in Wales. Indeed cooperatives have been historically important for the economy of Preston since the Rochdale pioneers. For example, *Preston Industrial Co-Operative Society* was established circa 1880 and survived until 1970. In the early part of the 20th century the Preston Society published an informative magazine, the Preston Co-op Record, describing the range of cooperative activities taking place and produced other literature to coincide with Preston Guilds. The significance of cooperative trade and its social corollaries was reflected in the national Co-operative Congress being held in Preston In 1907. Cultural relevance and an intriguing glimpse of the value placed on education for cooperation is to be found in the fact that a booklet on cooperatives was produced for school children in the town around this time.

PCC supported the start-up of a small artists' CIC, Birley Arts, including providing premises close to the civic buildings. An example of a worker cooperative is The Larder food cooperative, which has a café located opposite the Town Hall and is utilised for informal meetings by councillors, co-operators and community groups. The Larder is more than just a café and is engaged in broader efforts to counteract food poverty; work that has become ever more vital in the midst of the COVID-19 crisis.

The *Preston Cooperative Development Network* (PCDN) was established to take forward this aspect of the wider Preston Model (Manley 2018). More recently, the *Open Society Foundations* awarded a grant to support the establishment of 10 new worker cooperatives, training and consultancy from Mondragón and the USA, project support, and associated evaluation. The Basque Mondragón cooperative ecosystem, whilst emerging in quite unique circumstances, has been pivotal in inspiring activists and anchor institutions in the formation of the Preston Model, particularly the commitment to cooperative development. In short, the Mondragón system comprises a networked confederation of cooperatives with three key organisational pillars: education, manufacturing and banking, all organised cooperatively. Workers' democratic control is seen as central to delivering a just society, and the primacy afforded to education reflects a foundational ethos to sustain a cooperative culture as a necessary precursor to establishing a successful cooperative economy. Each cooperative is democratically controlled by its worker members and a Social Council also forms part of the governance structure to balance broader worker interests so that, for example, basic worker rights are not eroded by particular strategic or operational decisions. All individual cooperatives are democratically interlinked and subsidiary to an overarching General Council. This allows for attempts

to maintain full employment by sharing workforce between cooperatives (Barandiaran & Lezaun 2017, Morris 1992, Whyte & Whyte 2014).

Early developments in Preston include a digital coop and a black cabs taxi coop. There are plans for a cooperative in the construction sector linked to substantial investment in building a new civic cinema. Local health and criminal justice commissioners have also been enthused by the potential for building cooperatives in and out of prisons to provide employment for prisoners and ex-prisoners, with the income and democratic character of the labour process perhaps well suited to nurturing prosocial behaviour and desistance from offending (Weaver & Nicholson 2012, Weaver 2016). This has been stimulated by interest in trailblazing criminal justice social cooperatives established in the Emilia Romagna region of Italy (Thomas 2004).

One of the ten new OSF funded cooperatives is mandated to be a cooperative education centre for Preston. [CROSS REF WRIGHT AND MANLEY IN THIS EDITION]This would provide education on cooperative skills and principles, both on a practical level and theoretical basis and at different levels of attainment to support the development and sustainability of cooperatives, trade union education, and learning for other activists and interested people. The notion of a cooperative education centre is grounded in the Mondragón ecosystem, within which education is paramount, recognising that successful enterprises must be grounded in a cooperative culture. Work is ongoing, supported by the Cooperative College, UCLan staff and community activists to merge these developments with other plans to operate a franchise of a new federated Cooperative University, offering degree level study relevant to cooperatives and modelling a critical and social pedagogy congruent with the act of cooperation.

A manifesto for union coops

A group of UK cooperative developers, academics and union activists, including representation from Unison and PCDN, have come together to draft a manifesto for union coops, launched in July 2020 (Bird et al. 2020b). The Union Co-op is a fully unionised, worker co-operative, owned and controlled by the workforce. Worker's control, democracy and equality are built into the model which counters mainstream economic narratives in offering a cooperative solution to inequality and injustice both in and outside the workplace. The governance structure reserves a place for the trade union to represent worker interests alongside the place where worker members manage the business they own.

Pivotal to the manifesto is the clarion call contained with International Labour Organisation Recommendation 193[2] that joint action between trade unions and cooperatives ought to be brought to bear in the achievement of decent work for all. The union coop is a worker cooperative that places the trade union at the heart of its governance structure. As in any coop, the workers are in democratic control and own the business, but the trade union has a formal role to represent worker interests and as a check and balance against worker members acting against established union principles. To the latter extent, the trade union role mirrors somewhat the Social Council aspect of Mondragón cooperatives, which ensures that member decisions are not contrary to the interests of the workforce in the workplace. For example, in case the other workers in management positions get 'beyond themselves' and forget that they are equally worker members in the same organisation.

[2] ILO https://www.ilo.org/empent/Publications/WCMS_311447/lang--en/index.htm

Different international case studies of worker coops have been included within the manifesto, to learn the lessons of how best to organise collaborations between the cooperative movement and trade unions.

The manifesto envisages the union coop as having the potential to form successful and sustainable organisations in their own right but also to contribute to more transformative social change as credible democratic vehicles for ensuring job security, enhancing terms and conditions, and contributing to local economies rather than extracting from them. The union coop approach is informed by ten international cooperative principles, seven belonging to the International Co-operative Alliance (2018) supplemented with three new principles addressing decent work, workers' rights and fair remuneration (Bird 2015). These ten union cooperative principles form a binding ethical framework and can be summarised as follows:

1. Open and voluntary membership
2. Democratic member control
3. Member economic participation
4. Autonomy and independence
5. Education, training and information
6. Cooperation amongst cooperatives
7. Concern for community
8. Subsidiarity of capital to labour
9. Solidarity and fairness in wages
10. Commitment to union coop development

Principles one-four bind the cooperative to ideals of democracy, fairness, equality and autonomy. Anyone within the workforce can be a member and the members are in democratic control of the co-operative. This democratic control is exercised on the basis on one member one vote, this representing a key alternative to the way in which power is distributed in the typical capitalistic business, concentrated in the hands of the wealthiest larger shareholders. Instead, with power equally distributed amongst members and capital collectively owned, decisions about surplus are made democratically. Thus, in a worker cooperative members can choose whether to invest a surplus to grow the business, return it to the members, set a portion aside in reserve, or allocate to other community activities.

Principles five-seven commit the union co-op to positive relationships with other co-operatives and the wider community. Hence, education for all interested stakeholders about the value of and means by which cooperation can be achieved is a central endeavour, as is the desirability of forming a mutually supportive eco-system of networked co-operatives. The commitment to the wider community highlighted in principle seven includes efforts to develop sustainable business practices and, in the case of union co-ops, addresses matters of union legitimacy. Trade unions can thus improve their public image and appeal to future members by demonstrating that union concerns extend beyond the workplace and workplace issues to broader action on social justice.

Principles eight-ten have been directly inspired by the Mondragon worker cooperatives located in the Basque region of Spain. These are a crucial supplement to the generic International Cooperative Alliance principles because they explicitly address workers' rights and fair remuneration directly within the cooperative governance system. Subordinating capital to labour consolidates workers' control as opposed to external investors, with decisions being taken at the lowest practical level

within the organisation. Flowing from this principle is the understanding that capital is there to serve the interests of the workers in the context of enabling development of the cooperative; not to control them. Worker control and democracy is ensured by the fact that they must own at least 51% of voting shares. Principle nine addresses fair wages and pay structures within the union cooperative, with a commitment to decent pay for decent work. Pay differentials are also important. Whilst top earners' wages might reflect the size and success of the cooperative, flattened ratios between wages at different levels within the union cooperative are expected, and a structure of complete pay parity across the organisation is possible. More usually, there is a commitment to not exceeding a specific ratio, with 12:1 between highest and lower earners being the absolute limit. Lastly, principle 10 supports the development of other union cooperatives by insisting on a minimum 10% levy on pre-tax profits, in cash or kind, for this purpose. Such a commitment potentiates the eventual creation of a supportive eco-system of cooperatives; again inspired by the Mondragon experience.

Recognising the possibilities of union cooperatives offers trade unions a number of potential benefits. A union co-op does not displace the union, rather it puts unions at the heart of the governance of the cooperative as well as opening up the prospect of a 100% unionised workforce; a form of consensual closed-shop. We are advocating union co-ops as one means of organising worker control and workplace democracy, but not necessarily to the exclusion of other worker cooperative models. In general, worker cooperatives offer a range of advantages even if they do not fully realise the union co-op model. Worker co-operatives have successfully organised workers in sectors typified by precarious work, sectors usually typified by low union penetration and density. They can deliver improved wages and other terms and conditions by eliminating top-slicing by external owners. Management becomes a function not a position of privilege or status, and union co-ops have flatter salary ranges, some even going for a flat rate of pay for all. Many worker co-operatives that are not full union co-ops also create openings for unions and ally themselves to the union movement. Ultimately, the democratising turn represented by worker cooperatives can bolster union renewal and organising campaigns, including the revitalisation of links to communities (Martin & Quick 2020).

The writing and launch of the Manifesto stimulated much interest, including making or rekindling contacts with international trade unionists and cooperators from Europe, the US and Canada. One such constellation of reciprocal interest includes activists and organisers from the American SEIU, *1Worker1Vote*, the Welsh Foundational Economy group and allies, and comrades from Kirklees, all engaged in activism regarding cooperatives in the care sector, to which we turn next. This development work and activism need not necessarily manifest itself in the emergence of union cooperatives but there is an undoubted imperative that trade unions and their members working in the sector are thoroughly engaged in the process.

The care sector: ripe for innovation and transformation

Given its uniquely relational character, the care economy is crying out for more sustainable and humane alternatives to the failing private enterprise model. Arguably, a vision for a transformed post-neoliberal society would transplant the logic of profit with a central organising principle of care (Howard 2020). The care sector is, arguably, an important place to begin to imagine novel and innovatory labour processes and the relationship between unions and cooperatives. Precarity of work in the sector has indeed prompted some trade union engagement with the idea of cooperatives offering a potential solution for decent work (Conaty et al 2018). The public sector

unions were undoubtedly correct to fathom an incipient privatisation tendency in right-wing government policies such as the advancement of mutuals, social enterprises and co-operatives within the taken for granted public domain. UK trade unions have thus implacably opposed anything that smells of privatisation and, wherever possible, sought to bring previously outsourced provision back in-house. The TUC (2010: 18) declared:

> *It is our view that through its democratic accountability, unique funding mechanism and long term integrated approach, that the public sector is best placed to provide public services.*

Yet, for those on the left interested in workplace democracy and community relations as key aspects of union organising and renewal, an uncritical statism (when the state has been captured by neo-liberalism), with absolute opposition to mutual or cooperative forms of organisation represents a missed opportunity, neglectful of labour movement heritage (Taylor 2014, 2017) and denying radically improved social solutions. Earlier generations of fruitful intersection between trade union and cooperative movements are reflected in rich expressions of working class culture such as workers' educational associations, mechanics' institutes, brass bands, arts and theatre, and the deep seated community connectedness of syndicalist forms of organising (Burgmann 2005).

Trade unions are actually not strangers to relatively recent policy making regarding cooperatives, engaging constructively, for example, in the millennium Co-operative Commission, set up by the Blair government. Interestingly in consideration of potentials afforded presently in a context of UK devolved government, it is worth noting various productive union-cooperative alliances in Wales. Looking back to 1982, the Welsh TUC established the Wales Co-operative Centre (WCC) and both groups have maintained a strong relationship across the intervening decades. With a robust commitment to social and sustainable ends, the WCC has maintained its links with Welsh trade unions helping to realise healthy mutual benefits across the board. There is also a growing membership network, the Social Cooperation Forum, focused upon cooperative developments in the social care sector.

By 2012 the TUC worked with Co-operatives UK to develop a common agenda to defend workers' interests amidst ideologically-inspired privatisations stemming from the coalition government. Activists from the both the union and cooperative wings of this dialogue, notably the Worker Co-operative Council, were acutely aware of attendant risks, not least the potential reputational damage of offering even qualified support to an initiative that could result in poor quality business not well placed to deliver either decent work, good quality services or worker democracy. Unsurprisingly, union anxieties coalesced around the dangers of cooperatives representing a stepping stone to investor-led financialisation and privatisation in a public sector the government was committed to shrinking. The main risk in this regard would prove to be erosion of affinities for cooperatives in the eyes of many trade unionists. Nevertheless, this engagement between the union and cooperative movements did prove fruitful and a common statement of best practice for worker cooperatives was produced (Monaco & Pastorelli 2013)[3].

[3] Other evidence of UK collaborations between union and cooperative movements includes https://www.uk.coop/sites/default/files/uploads/attachments/tuc_co-operatives_uk_-_guidance.pdf https://www.thenews.coop/39882/sector/retail/co-operatives-uk-and-tuc-team-protect-public-service-mutuals/

In recent times unions have not always been central to wider labour movement strategizing regarding cooperatives as evidenced in the Greater Manchester Co-operative Commission report of 2020[4] which is strong on community-led and place-based economic development but barely mentions potential or actual trade union contributions and no trade unionists figured amongst the Commission membership. Conversely, Liverpool City Council with the support of local MPs and the trade union Unison have recently published a policy document addressing insourcing of care (Clarke et al. 2020). Interestingly, this also acknowledges the potential for a plurality of ownership and delivery approaches. Similar work to define alternatives to the failing care economy have been advance by the New Economics Foundation with input from the OSF (Button & Bedford 2019).

The nature of care work also suggests that the organisational form a cooperative could take might not lend itself to a pure worker or union co-op, with a need for balancing the democratic voice of multiple stakeholders, including care recipients, families as well as workers. This may arguably be best served by a multi-stakeholder cooperative structure, but such a model could result from hybridisation of the union co-op approach and, at the very least, involve unions significantly. Furthermore, in a context of inter-connected cooperative development, such as envisioned within the Preston Model or enacted in parts of the US, modelled to some extent on a Mondragón inspired cooperative eco-system, a key role for trade unions thoroughly allied to the local community is the way forward. As we have argued, such linkage of union, workplace and community interests is highly compatible with progressive approaches to organising and social transformation.

Quick and Martin (2020) outline the economic disarray that constitutes the care sector under neoliberalism and urge trade unions to take up the challenge of leading its transformation. This financialised, debt-laden model built upon waves of deregulation and privatisation, makes its profits from a combination of payments provided by the state and exploitation of masses of mainly women, often migrant precarious workers. Despite there being numerous small, family owned businesses the sector is now dominated by large equity based multi-national firms. On the occasions that such firms have declared bankruptcy, they have had to be bailed out by the state with multi-million pound rescue packages to save tens of thousands of care recipients and jobs.

Alternative approaches to organising this vital work are urgently needed and could comprise novel mixtures of public sector and cooperative provision to de-financialise and democratise the sector and, crucially, drive up quality (Goodwin et al. 2020, Quick & Martin 2020). New technology offers distinct opportunities for workers to secure higher wages and better terms and conditions by self-organising their work utilising digital platforms capable of redistributing profits to them rather than private care operators. The US *Cooperative Care Homes Associates* is an example of a fully unionised worker cooperative, employing over 2000 care workers and 90% owned by women of colour. This cooperative has made common cause with the umbrella organisation 1Worker1Vote, itself formed with the support of the MONDRAGON Corporation to advance cooperative ecosystems within the US with particular support for union co-ops. Since 1985 Cooperative Care Homes Associates have improved wages and provided high quality training and development, a rarity in the sector.

On a smaller scale, but with ambitions of growth, community activists in Kirklees have advanced a plan for a local multi-stakeholder domiciliary care co-op to the point of organising a successful

[4] A Cooperative Greater Manchester: People and Communities Working Together to Improve the Environment, Create Good Jobs and Sustainable Growth. https://gmcommission.coop/report-published

community share issue, and these activists are committed to supporting developments in Preston via links between the respective councils and cooperative groups with input from PCDN. A small grant from the Co-operative Councils' Innovation Network underpins relevant knowledge exchange. The Kirklees business plan includes commitments to improve the terms and conditions of the care workers, but local unions have been relatively absent from the community engagement that has democratically informed the planning.

A care cooperative for Preston?

Efforts to develop a cooperative in the care sector in Preston are at an early stage. Recognising that unions ought to be central to such developments necessitated that early energy was invested in initiating a dialogue with union members, activists and officers largely focused upon the North West Regional office of Unison and local branches within Preston. From the outset, the push to persuade trade unionists of the value of a cooperative approach had a mixed early reception. Despite some knowledgeable and informed support there were also various counter-arguments and resistances; though, as in any large complex bureaucratic organisation, viewpoints are heterogenous and unevenly spread. The political context in which the early dialogue took place was helpful, coinciding with much positive interest in the Preston Model and a degree of rank and file optimism in the Corbyn project within the Labour Party.

Ostensibly, the major public sector unions are committed to public sector ownership models. This is reflected in activism within campaigns such as *We Own It*[5] and appreciation for arguments supportive of bringing contracted-out services back in-house made by groups such as the Association for Public Service Excellence (APSE)[6]. An ecosystem of cooperatives in a locality could, however, form a route back into the local public sector for some concerns, such as care, if there ever was to be a national shift to state provision of a national care service, in line with another of Unison's campaigning objectives. This would require substantial changes of political will on the national stage, even within the Labour Party, and would have to be legislated for. There would also have to be agreement on the part of members within any new cooperative care enterprises, who may be reluctant to surrender the positive benefits of democratic control in the workplace. In-house management of health, care and education, for example, has hardly had a glowing track record of empowering workers voice in neoliberal times; as the union activists who have often struggled against new public management approaches, been exhausted by seemingly endless disciplinaries and grievance casework, fought horrendous cases of bullying, and faced cycles of impotence and marginalisation within bargaining structures can attest.

Trade union anxieties about a cooperative specific to the care sector are not only framed by established anti-privatisation policy with its commitment to public ownership and insourcing of previously contracted out services. More nuanced versions of this standpoint recognise that businesses already, and often always having been in the private sector, can be important sites of union campaigning and potential recruitment growth. Problems with market structure and funding shortfalls are also serious hurdles to be overcome. Thus, dialogue in Preston has shifted somewhat from simplistic adherence to insourcing objectives to raise important issues of how to make

[5] https://weownit.org.uk/
[6] https://www.apse.org.uk/apse/index.cfm/research/current-research-programme/insourcing-a-guide-to-bringing-local-authority-services-back-in-house/

provision for such matters as workers' pensions across piecemeal development of small-scale cooperative businesses. Union leaders are also quite reasonably nervous of placing precarious and vulnerable members of the care workforce in the front-line of organising in a context where some quite nasty employment practices are endemic. Other points of contention for certain activists have included:

- Attachment to traditional left-inspired partnership approaches to urban and regional regeneration, ideally being informed by Labour Party, union and TUC policy formulations and offering union and Party officials a seat at the table of regeneration boards. That said, such top-down initiatives have always lacked a democratising impulse and have seldom benefited small municipalities such as Preston – indeed, the failure of traditional regeneration and private sector investment was one of the important motivators for the Preston Model in the first place.
- Sectarian objections on both the right and the ultra-left of the union. On the right, a scepticism towards ideas associated with the Corbyn programme and on the left a visceral antipathy to anything which troubles attachment to an arguably simplistic statism.
- Negative experiences with public sector mutuals created in the 1980s and 1990s in waves of local government outsourcing. From a union perspective, these organisations have invariably failed to deliver any meaningful democratic worker voice and have actually eroded union influence and terms and conditions for the workforce. Many were simply a stepping-stone to eventual full blown privatisations.
- Pointing to the failure of 1970s Bennite worker cooperatives in the private sector; which arguably did not fully democratise decision making, albeit often consolidating hierarchical trade union power. For many, the change of ownership was initiated as the business was in economic crisis, so the future viability was compromised from the start.
- Similar failures of worker buyouts, which to all intents and purposes were management buyouts, with an eventual goal of asset stripping and further sell-off to private concerns. Unions were often indifferent bystanders, led by job protection rather than democratisation imperatives.
- Perceived failings of retail co-ops and the Co-operative Bank.

On refection, these objections could actually open up a constructive debate regarding learning historical lessons, strategy and intentions of worker co-ops. Union activists attempting to service members and organise campaigns in the private or voluntary care sector are fully aware that this is often a thankless task of dealing with aggressive employers in a context of poor employment relations or outright lack of recognition. Organising campaigns are tough in these circumstances, especially in striking a balance between the pitch of an organising union, which demands degrees of autonomous action and self-protection, and a servicing offer which precarious and beleaguered workers may crave. There is, therefore, ample motivation to try something different and devise an approach which challenges conventional trade union thinking. Matthew Brown, PCC leader, has urged unions to consider cooperative options within debates around ownership structures, as not to do so risks failing to adequately challenge the status quo, leaving intact extractive businesses and thus surrendering the initiative on long term issues concerning low pay and job security.

Key figures within North West Unison, including importantly Kevan Nelson, the Regional Secretary, have, whilst maintaining some caution, supported the possibility of working towards a concrete

example. This has involved direct meetings with Matthew Brown, key council officers and other elected representatives. Grassroots activists and organising personnel have also met to advance the potential for such developments to connect with a defined organising project in Preston care sector. One of the important supportive factors pertaining to the locality is that the North West Region of Unison, under the leadership of the Regional Secretary and other notable activists, has been in the vanguard of efforts within the union to transform itself into an organising union. The North West region has sponsored various imaginative and effective organising programmes and is not absent from organising in the care sector, including constructive utilisation of the union's Ethical Care Charter7 and pursuance of living wage demands within a *Care Workers for Change* campaign[8]. Consequently, the region leads the union in membership recruitment.

Conclusion

One of the main casualties of the neoliberal hegemony has been a crisis of legitimacy for democracy itself. Diminished public trust in political and democratic institutions has been matched by unashamed corruption and manipulation of electoral and information systems poorly protected from the influence of dark money amidst a dirty politics practised by neoliberal insiders (Geoghegan 2020). As faith in democracy wanes, trade unions are caught up in increasingly important struggles to re-establish their own legitimacy and renew themselves as potent agents within the state, workplaces and communities, and perhaps, reverse the losses surrendered to decades of neoliberal power. The answer is not to give up on democracy but to seek to establish more and better democracy. There is a need to both reinvigorate attachment to enfranchisement and offer more deeply democratic, participatory opportunities for people to express their wants and will in a range of contexts. The world of work represents one such opportunity and focusing union organising campaigns on worker cooperatives offers one set of democratic solutions.

Union organising programmes are themselves implicitly democratic, enhancing employee voice within the workplace and bolstering the ties of solidarity between workers. But such extensions of democracy only go so far. Worker and union co-ops place democracy at the heart of union organising and, within opportune environments such as provided by the Preston Model, have the potential to extend democratic participation beyond the workplace into communities. Sectors of the economy under stress or typified by market failure, such as the care sector, offer real opportunities to explore union sponsored worker ownership. Despite the large UK unions operating in the care sector being committed to insourcing and public ownership, the development of cooperatives remains a viable alternative where this is not possible.

Castell's claim (1996: 354) that workers' movements are 'unable to remake society' was arguably premature, but unless union renewal programmes succeed, and deepen solidarity with wider community interests, the legitimacy crisis for unions will persist. Forms of worker or union co-ops offer the labour movement one way to shift from the defensive, rear-guard fight against neoliberalism to the vanguard of reshaping the very organisation of work along cooperative and democratic lines. Such a shift is arguably best supported in the context of broader union renewal programmes, ideally those which balance workplace and community organising to connect with

[7] Unison's Ethical Care Charter https://www.unison.org.uk/content/uploads/2013/11/On-line-Catalogue220142.pdf

[8] North West *Unison Care Workers for Change* https://www.unisonnw.org/care_workers_for_change

other progressive social movements and, in alliance with these, locate the realisation of workers' rights with other social rights and societal transformations. Achievement of such goals would represent something of a resurgence of older syndicalist ideals and emphasis upon class identity as a crucial axis for movement politics and action (Burgmann 2005).

The Preston Model, and other new municipal approaches to create fairer economies, provide an advantageous context for enacting such change, eventually linking workplace democracy to progressive civic engagement and a more active, participatory democratic involvement of all citizens in the local polity. Furthermore, in line with the objectives of the Preston Model, worker co-operatives can form an integral part of such local and regional regeneration initiatives, helping to fight inequalities, protect the environment, support sustainable local economic growth, and ensure the locally-created wealth never leaves the area. The development of new worker co-ops in Preston is at an early stage, but the efforts of local activists, in solidarity with significant national and international allies, has laid a substantial foundation and exciting times lay ahead. Solidarity lies at the heart of the labour movement, so should therefore also represent its future.

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