

The definitive version of this article is published by Blackwell as:
Pike, A., O'Brien, P. and Tomaney, J. (2002) 'Regionalisation, devolution and the trade union movement', *Antipode*, 34.5: 819-828.

<http://www3.interscience.wiley.com/journal/118947112/abstract>

REGIONALISATION, DEVOLUTION AND THE TRADE UNION

MOVEMENT¹

Andy Pike, Peter O'Brien and John Tomaney

Centre for Urban and Regional Development Studies (CURDS),

University of Newcastle Upon Tyne, UK

Published in *Antipode* (2002) **34**(5): 819-828.

Introduction

There is the beginning of a thaw in the theory and practice of trade union involvement in public policy and the institutions of governance in the UK, particularly in the recent context of 'regionalisation' and the devolution of political structures since 1997 {Tomaney, 2000 #44}. Following over two decades of marginalisation and hostility as the UK's political economy was radically restructured in a more neo-liberal vein under successive Conservative administrations, a consensus appears to be forming that since the 1997 election of the Labour government trade unions are now 'coming in from the cold' (CLES 1999; Heselden 2001). Consequently, more attention is being given to thinking through whether and how trades unions can begin to exert a new found – albeit fledgling and uncertain – degree of influence in social and economic affairs at national and, increasingly, local and regional levels (UNISON 2000; Heselden 2001; O'Brien 2001; O'Brien et al. With Referees). Discussion and long overdue debate – that has had only a limited airing since the mid-1970s – is now

developing concerning the role of trade unions in economy, polity and society in the UK.

Building upon Laurie Heselden's (2001) thoughtful piece that highlighted this strategically important area, this intervention is our contribution to moving the debate forward and stimulating further much needed research on such issues. The views articulated here are drawn from research undertaken as part of a collaborative project with the Northern Trades Union Congress (NTUC) in the North East region of England². While shaped by case study analysis of particular regional and national experiences in the North East and North West English regions and Wales, the issues we raise have broader resonance for the trade union movement. Our analysis suggests that trade unions need to reflect upon the substance and terms upon which they have been allowed 'in from the cold', the issue of trade union representation, the close link between trade union renewal and local and regional engagement, the role of trade unions in the context of social partnership beyond the workplace and the differing positions of trade unions amongst the historical and institutional diversity inherent in the regionalisation and devolution processes in the UK. Our argument is that the regional agenda is increasingly placing pressure upon trade unions to afford greater emphasis to adopting a multi-level approach to organisation across a range of scales. This primarily requires the decentralisation of power and authority within the movement – challenging the national and centralised legacy of their collective bargaining history – to facilitate the building of links between trade union renewal and local and regional engagement.

How far and on what terms have trade unions 'come in from the cold'?

There is clear evidence that trade unions have moved closer to the body politic since New Labour's election in 1997. Trade unions' historical political and financial support for the Labour Party has shaped their relations and involvement in public policy debate and the institutions of governance (McIlroy 2000). The post-1997 political project has opened up new opportunities for trade union engagement at the national level, for example on the Low Pay Commission and New Deal Task Force, alongside a renewal of their role in shaping legislation, for instance on employment rights, information and consultation and health and safety. Trade union participation is now perceived as crucial to delivering key government policy objectives in some areas such as training and skills. Doors have been opened at the local and regional level too as trade unions are no longer systematically excluded or, worse, simply ignored.

The character of trade union's relations with the Labour Party and the Labour Government appear markedly different from the tripartite corporatism of the 1970s. On the one hand, the 'modernising' project of New Labour in party and government and perceived shift to the political centre has jarred with the traditional Left in the Labour Movement. Here, the relations between some trade unions and New Labour are often uneasy, and have led to public criticism over internal party and government policy, debates over continued funding and even the questioning of (traditionally guaranteed) political support for Labour candidates in the 2001 General Election (LRD 1999). More moderate elements, especially within the TUC leadership, are pursuing a 'no favours' approach and demanding equality with the private sector in the government's policy programme. Such moderate interests are closely allied to more proactively modernising factions – such as 'Unions 21' – that are pursuing the

social partnership agenda and a role for a constructive, responsible and ‘modern’ trade unionism (Unions 21 2001). Given such differences, the question of trade unions ‘coming in from the cold’ is one of nature and degree. Overall, the extent to which trade unions have been able to engage and the character of their participation has been somewhat limited and closely conditioned by Government. Opportunities to participate have often been grasped with both hands by a trade union movement impoverished by decades of exclusion from mainstream political debates and institutions. Trade unions have perhaps been more likely to take a pragmatic stance and accept whatever role they have been offered as it may provide a bridgehead upon which to move toward the deeper, legislatively embedded relations evident in the national and regional structures of other EU Member States (CEC 1996). The trade union movement therefore needs to reflect upon the substance of how far their relations with Government have thawed.

Whom do trade unions represent?

Despite its complex history – in the sense of ‘being present’ and ‘standing for’ particular interests (Williams 1983), representation is a somewhat abstract but nonetheless critically important issue. For trade union strategic activity, Hyman (1997) has argued that unions must clearly determine *whose* interests they represent, *what* interests they represent and *how* such interests should be represented (emphasis in original). Our research into the involvement of trade unions in public bodies echoes these questions of whose interests unions are articulating and ‘representing’. Historically, what limited involvement trade unions maintained in the wilderness years from the mid-1970s has often been through the nomination – rather than

election – of (often senior) individuals to sit on the boards and committees of public bodies (e.g. Regional Development Organisations, Training and Enterprise Councils, Further and Higher Education Institutions) (O’Brien et al. With Referees). Trade unions were sometimes (but not always) included alongside the private sector (that has been given a privileged position since the 1980s) and the voluntary sector. This arrangement was often welcome involvement in the institutions of governance for the trade unions and it largely satisfied the need amongst public bodies to appoint ‘representatives’ of their local and regional civil society to their own governance structures.

A deeper look at representation reveals it to be a complex and problematic issue that continues to present challenges for the trade union movement following Lord Nolan’s enquiry and the subsequent guidelines governing individual appointments to public bodies (Committee on Standards in Public Life 2000). In the past, traditional arrangements raised the question of whom the individual trade unionist involved in the public body was actually ‘representing’ at such meetings: the labour movement? The regional TUC? Their trade union? Their own individual views? Such questions are critical because when it comes to any particular issue – economic and monetary union, National Minimum Wage levels, pension rights, equalities and the allocation of public funds – about which a ‘trade union’ view is sought a diversity of different views might be expected, and, in the spirit of critical debate, be welcomed. There is no necessary nor direct linkage between the views of the population – men, women, black, white, working, unemployed, retired – and trades unions – whether members or non-members. Similarly, even within trades unions there is often a similar diversity of views between the ‘grass roots’ and the officials, between lay and active members,

between different trade unions, between affiliated trade unions and the TUC and so on. Considering the ‘representation’ of trade union interests as if it is an unproblematic and homogenous entity risks simplifying a complex issue and doing a disservice to the diversity of voices within the movement. There is no single, common worldview held by working people, the unemployed, trade unionists and so on that could be articulated and represented in public policy institutions. What trade unions have to say about public policy needs reflection. The common ground that may exist – around a broadly progressive agenda – needs to be thought through and expressed. In the more complicated and multi-layered governance system emerging within the UK’s constituent territories, the issue of whom trades are representing in their engagement with public policy and the institutions of governance at the local and regional level needs careful consideration.

The close link between trade union renewal and local and regional engagement

There is a strong link that can be drawn out between the fundamentally significant debate about trade union renewal and local and regional engagement (see Heery 1998; Wills 2001). While the discussion has rightly focused upon the need to organise amongst formerly ignored social groups, sectors and areas, the emergent possibilities for trade union involvement in local and regional policy and institutions suggests broader opportunities for influence and the illustration of the role and contribution that trades unions can provide to economy, society and polity. Making trade unions relevant, credible and worth both joining and listening to in public policy institutions can be furthered by demonstrating meaningful local and regional engagement.

Moreover, public policy can be better designed to meet particular local and regional

concerns if shaped by the contributions of local and regional partners. Trade unions have a potentially important role to play in broadening the range of issues considered by governance institutions.

Our research revealed an array of relevant examples. Despite requiring rather more critical scrutiny than hitherto, social partnership refers to a wide range of union activities (Heery 2002) that are primarily based on the ideals of moderation rather than militancy (Kelly, 1998). In addition to company-level partnership agreements, which have been the main focus of attention in the UK, trade unions also appear to be growing into the role of ‘social partners’ – although see below – within the partnership-based relations between governance institutions fostered in the UK’s territories. While it is some way off the structures and clout of the national, corporatist models evident elsewhere in Europe (Waddington, 2001), trade unions are closely involved in – amongst other areas – consultation on the Regional Development Agencies’ Regional Economic Strategies (Pike and O’Brien 1999), the allocation and management of national and EU local and regional funding (Bache and George 1999), policy implementation – especially relating to learning and skills (CLES 1999), furthering the equalities agenda (Stirling 2001) and territorial coalitions bidding for funding (O’Brien 2001). Demonstrating the relevancy and credibility of trade unions through their involvement and contribution to local and regional public policy and governance institutions reinforces their role in civil society and may support existing arguments for joining and/or maintaining trade union membership. Such examples suggest a positive inter-relation between trade union renewal and local and regional engagement. Looking beyond the workplace may underpin efforts to renew trade unionism (Wills, 2001).

Trade unions as one 'social partner' amongst many

Following their re-emergence from a prolonged period of marginalisation, the new political and institutional context in which trade unions now find themselves is profoundly different from the era in which they last wielded a degree of power and influence. The 1970s were characterised by 'hit and miss' attempts to develop tripartite corporatism by both Conservative and Labour governments, typified by the National Economic Development Office (NEDO) and the 'Social Contract' (Taylor 2000), that were centralised at the national level. Under such arrangements, organised labour, through either individual, often sectoral, trade unions and the national (and, to a much lesser degree, regional) 'peak' association the Trades Union Congress, were included as (more or less) equal members alongside Government and the private sector. The tide turned against organised labour in the late 1970s as they were seen as complicit elements in the diagnosis of the 'British Disease' of conflictual industrial relations, weak management and national economic under-performance (Coates 1994). Simultaneously, the role of the private sector was privileged and expanded in concert with the growth of the unelected 'Quango' state (Weir and Beetham 1999). While trade unions retained a residual role and influence in historically strong Labourist regions such as the North East (Shaw 1993), their position had been weakened and relatively marginalised as the corporatist arrangements were unravelled.

After 1997 the situation has changed both at the national and local and regional levels – the 'coming in from the cold' discussed above – but the new institutional context and decision-making structures are somewhat different: more decentralised, plural and

inclusive in character. Mirroring European models of social organisation, trade unions now find themselves considered by public bodies as just one social partner amongst numerous others, including the private and voluntary sectors, often with no more legitimacy nor influence. Given the uneven but nonetheless historically high levels of influence enjoyed by trade unions, this realisation has proved uncomfortable³. In particular, it grates with the movement's long history of organisation, traditionally centralised and national outlook, internally democratic and accountable representative structures and claim to legitimacy as a representative regional voice of its constituent trades unions – in contrast to the more fragmented private or voluntary sectors. Nevertheless, working with a plural array of agents appears to characterise trade union engagement with local and regional policy. The pursuit of sectional organised labour and/or trade union interests – sometimes stoked by inter-union rivalry – might therefore have to be tempered in the pursuit of alliance building and collaboration to pursue a progressive agenda. Following their joint endeavours under the guise of the 'third sector', there are signs that this may be happening between the Northern TUC and the voluntary sector in the North East region (Pike and O'Brien 1999). The challenge is whether and how such new and often complex ways of working – a social partnership beyond the workplace – can be grasped and utilised more broadly.

Recognising diversity in the nations and regions of the UK

The unfolding experience of 'regionalisation' and devolution in the territories of the UK is profoundly asymmetrical, building upon their particular configurations of inherited institutions, political culture and histories. Each territory is, therefore, diverse in its relative openness (or closure) and attitudes to trade union engagement.

The political and administrative structures and institutions present both common issues and significant differences in the constituent nations and regions of the UK. Each territory is at different stages in relation to trade union involvement and engagement, although this is not to suggest a linear progression toward a tighter grip upon the levers of power. Our research suggests the reality is somewhat more uneven, messy and diffuse.

Much research remains to be undertaken but some early indications of this diversity are emerging. In Scotland, the Scottish TUC – crucially a body independent and largely autonomous from the TUC national centre – has become closely involved in the Parliament and Executive and has been inundated with demands for engagement – from evidence to committee hearings to membership of independent commissions (Speirs 2001). In recognition of these new demands, the Scottish Executive has seconded a senior civil servant to the STUC to assist with research and policy. In Wales, participation has been growing with the help of the National Assembly-funded Wales Social Partners Unit and the Wales TUC has expanded its staff and capacity following increased support from the TUC national centre (O'Brien et al. With Referees). In London, the Mayor has a progressive attitude toward trade unions and has opened up an array of representative opportunities for the regional TUC and trade unions to fill (Heselden 2001). In Northern Ireland, the Northern Ireland Committee – Irish Congress of Trade Unions has worked closely with the broad-based civic forum. In the case of the North East region, although significant progress has been made, the Northern TUC remains very much a 'junior' partner in the regional partnership and faces the challenge of improving its organisational structure, financial resources and capacity to intervene effectively in regional debates (O'Brien et al. With Referees).

Echoing debates about trade union's utilisation of different scales of influence (Herod 2001), our research in the constituent territories of the UK suggests that there is a greater need on the part of the trade union movement to recognise diversity and to work toward the decentralisation and autonomy to allow trade unions at the regional scale to engage with the particular institutional structures in their own specific patch. Any more generalised, universal approach to regionalisation and devolution misses the point.

Conclusions: taking the regional agenda for trade unions seriously

In the context of regionalisation and devolution in the UK, our analysis has raised several key issues for trade union engagement in public policy and the institutions of governance: the thaw in relations between trades unions and government, representation, renewal and engagement, social partnership beyond the workplace and institutional diversity. Analysis of these issues points toward the clear need for reversing the historically centralised character of trade union bureaucracies in the UK (Taylor 2000) – both within the TUC and its affiliated unions. Without the decentralisation of resources and authority, the regional engagement of trade unions and their degree of influence in shaping public policy will necessarily be limited and constrained (O'Brien 2001; see also Bache and George 1999; CLES 1999). Perhaps only through recognising and building upon the link between trade union renewal and the demonstration of local and regional influence can national trade union centres be encouraged to take the regional agenda seriously. Winning the argument for the regional agenda in trade unions can help win the argument about public support for trade union engagement – albeit within the context of a broader conception of social

partnership beyond the workplace. Signs of openness amongst regional institutions and the commitment of the TUC and trade unions in the regions are growing. For example in the North East (O'Brien et al. With Referees), North West (CLEs 1999) and the South East and London (Heselden 2001) with the emergence of funding support for capacity building through training materials, posts and secondments (often secured through successful bids to European, national and regional funds) bolstering research capacity through linkages to regional Universities, undertaking research and participating in debate about mechanisms for engaging the social partners. Trade unions have a role to play across the economic, social and political domain of regional governance. Barriers, albeit not insurmountable, still exist, including organisational structure, cultural traditions, the level and flexibility of financial resources and research capacity (Copeland and Philo 2000; O'Brien 2001). The evidence suggests, however, that trade unions and those committed to the labour movement need to rise to the challenge of the regional agenda while the current thaw in the UK continues.

References

- Bache, I., George, S. (1999). *Towards Inclusion: Trade Union Participation in EU Structural Fund Partnerships*. Sheffield, Department of Politics: University of Sheffield.
- CEC (1996). *At regional level on behalf of Europe's regions: developing a new field of trade union activity*. Luxembourg, Office for the Official Publications of the European Communities: 312 pp.
- CLES (1999). "Coming in from the cold: trade unions in economic development partnerships." *Local Work* 11(March).
- Coates, D. (1994). *The Question of UK Decline*. Hemel Hempstead, Harvester Wheatsheaf.

- Committee on Standards in Public Life, 2000, *Reinforcing Standards*, 6th Report, Vol. 1 Report, Cm 4557 (The Stationary Office, London)
- Copeland, R., Philo, P. (2000). *Strengthening Co-operation between University Research Institutions and Trade Unions*. London, Centre for Trade Union Studies: University of North London.
- Heery, E. (1998) "The relaunch of the Trades Union Congress" *British Journal of Industrial Relations* 36 (3): 339-360
- Heery, E. (2002) 'Partnership versus organising: alternative futures for British trade unionism', (forthcoming) *Industrial Relations Journal*.
- Herod, A. (2001) *Labor Geography: Workers and the Landscapes of Capitalism*, New York, Guildford.
- Heselden, L. (2001). "Coming in from the cold: the role of trade unions on public policy bodies at a regional level, with a focus on London, the Southeast and the East of England." *Antipode* XX(XX): 753-762.
- Hyman, R. (1997) 'Trade unions and interest representation in the context of globalisation', *Transfer*, 3: 515-533.
- Kelly, J. (1998) *Rethinking Industrial Relations: Mobilization, collectivism and long waves* London, Routledge.
- LRD (1999). "Do Unions Hold Any Sway?" *Labour Research* 88(10).
- McIlroy, J. (2000) "The new politics of pressure - the Trades Union Congress and New Labour in government" *Industrial Relations Journal* 31 (1): 2-16
- O'Brien, P. (2001). *Devolution and the Trades Unions*. Newcastle Upon Tyne, Centre for Urban and Regional Development Studies (CURDS): University of Newcastle Upon Tyne.
- O'Brien, P., Pike, A., Tomaney, J. (With Referees). "Devolution, the Governance of Regional Development and the Trades Union Congress (TUC) in the North East Region of England (Special Issue: Geographical Challenges and the Future of Organized Labour)." *Geoforum* XX(XX): XX-XX.
- O'Brien, P. (2001). *Bread and Roses: Trade Unions and the Newcastle/Gateshead Capital of Culture Bid 2008*. Newcastle Upon Tyne, Northern TUC.
- Pike, A., O'Brien, P. (1999). (1999) *The Third Sector in the Northern Region*. Newcastle Upon Tyne, CURDS: University of Newcastle.
- Pike, A., O'Brien, P. (1999). *The NTUC Response to the RDA's Regional Economic Strategy*. Newcastle Upon Tyne, CURDS: University of Newcastle.

- Shaw, K. (1993). "The Development of a New Urban Corporatism: The Politics of Urban Regeneration in the North East of England." *Regional Studies* 27: 251-259.
- Weir, S., Beetham, D. (1999). *Political Power and Democratic Control in Britain*. London, Routledge.
- Speirs, B. (2001). Debating the new institutions. *Morning Star*. London.
- Stirling, J. (2001). *Tackling Barriers to Skills and Learning*. Newcastle Upon Tyne, Northern TUC.
- Taylor, R. (2000). *The TUC: From the General Strike to New Unionism*. Basingstoke, Palgrave.
- Tomaney, J. (2000). "End of the empire state? New Labour and devolution in the United Kingdom." *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 24(3): 677-90.
- Unions 21 (2001). *From reassurance to radicalism: challenges facing trade unions in Labour's second term*. London, Unions 21.
- UNISON (2000). *Towards Regional Government*. London, UNISON.
- Waddington, J. (2001) 'Articulating trade union organisation for the new Europe?' *Industrial Relations Journal* 42(5): 449-463.
- Williams, R. (1983). *Keywords*. London, Harper Collins.
- Wills, J. (2001) 'Community unionism and trade union renewal in the UK: moving beyond the fragments at last?' *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 26: 465-483.

¹ This research was supported by the ESRC Studentship (Award No: S00429937051), held by Peter O'Brien in CURDS and the Northern TUC. Thanks to: the participants in the research project; the supervision committee (Gill Hale (UNISON), Paul Nowak (NTUC) and Kevin Rowan (GMB)); and, Jane Wills and Neil Brenner for their encouragement to write this intervention. The usual disclaimers, as always, apply.

² The research project examined trade union engagement and intervention in regionalisation and devolution in the UK. Between 1999-2001, interviews (80) were conducted with trade union officers, activists, politicians, public officials and private sector representatives in North East England, North West England and Wales. In addition, analysis of secondary sources and participant observation at a variety of meetings, seminars and conferences.

³ For example, although a long-standing supporter of the Scottish Civic Forum, the Scottish TUC has been keen to secure recognition from the Scottish Executive of the 'unique' role of trade unions within Scottish society. To this end, the STUC is said to be in the process of securing an exclusive 'partnership' agreement with the Scottish Executive.