

# Unions need to focus on jobs of the future

**Time-consuming internal committees are less and less likely to attract active and dynamic young people**



**Michael Skapinker**

When I was a trade union committee member in the 1990s, my experienced colleagues drummed a lesson into me: never get involved in a dispute unless you know how you are likely to emerge at the other end.

It is not clear that the leaders of Britain's postal workers, who staged a two-day strike last week, understood what effect their action would have, but others did. Many people inconvenienced by the strike – companies whose payments were stuck in the mail, parents who could not submit their children's school applications – no doubt resolved to use the internet in future.

More important, rival companies used the opportunity to take a chunk of the online-shopping delivery business that represents the best chance of a future for the Royal Mail and its workers.

Amazon told its customers that it was "taking extensive measures and working with a wide range of carriers to minimise the impact on deliveries across the UK". Those rival carriers are unlikely to be heavily unionised.

But then increasingly few companies are. The proportion of British employees who belong to unions fell from 44.8 per cent in 1970 to 29.3 per cent in 2003, according to a 2006 study by the US Bureau of Labor Statistics.

In the US over the same period, trade union membership fell from 23.5 per cent to 12.4 per cent. In France, it declined from 21.7 per cent to just 8.3 per cent. There were more sharp falls in countries from New Zealand to Japan to Germany.

The only countries in which union membership rose, the bureau said, were Finland, Sweden, Denmark and Belgium. There was a reason for that. "These four [countries] happen to be the only ones in which unions are involved in the administration and execution of unemployment insurance," the bureau said.

I take no pleasure in this. Independent trade unions are a mark of a free society. No tyrannical regime tolerates them.

The case for worker representation remains strong. The decades of union decline have been accompanied by the rise of a class of managers whose earnings have grown enormously compared with those of their

employees. Rising executive pay has not been matched by any obvious increase in competence, as the financial crisis has so clearly demonstrated, but both governments and shareholders have struggled to hold managers to account.

There are some signs of renewed interest in joining unions. In the US last year there was a small rise in membership, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, but the proportion belonging to unions was still well under 13 per cent.

Why has union membership fallen so sharply? The main problem appears to be not so much old members dropping out as new ones failing to join. Young people are far less likely to be union members than their elders. There are various reasons. Young people stay longer in full-time education. Their rate of unemployment is higher and, when they are hired, it is more likely to be on temporary contracts.

There are cultural changes too. A report by the European Trade Union Institute pointed out that the younger generation was less interested in union solidarity. "The majority of young people are not unsympathetic to the unions' cause", the paper said, but they were used to a service culture and preferred to pick and choose from a range of choices, made online. Also, the report said, "time-consuming internal committees are less and less likely to attract active and dynamic young people".

Richard Trumka, the newly-elected president of the AFL-CIO, the US union federation, acknowledged in a speech in August that when young people "look at unions, too often what they see is a remnant of their parents' economy". Unions needed to adjust. He pointed to a union that had begun among temporary Microsoft workers and spread online, helping IT staff with issues such as job security and healthcare.

Old-style unionism is not dead. As most union members are now in the public sector, we are likely to see more unrest as governments respond to high deficits by slashing public spending.

Union leaders need to come up with intelligent strategies. They should concentrate on the jobs that will survive in the internet age. What employees need is frequent training and the flexibility to compete for what jobs are actually available.

Complaining about management's peremptory behaviour, as the postal leaders have done, will not impress those in the private sector who are

used to that, and know that managers face their own pressures. Nor will the sort of appeal that a postal worker made to this newspaper on Friday: "We just want job security," he said. Few of us today have that.

