

Recognition

v. 2019.1

These works identify how the work relationship justifies workers organising as union members. That in itself is a major step forward towards a fair society. But for workmates to actually organise, as a group of real people, is a process that needs examining. And we need to frame it more accurately by examining the crucial stage of getting an employer to recognise the union. Before that stage, you and workmates can be union members but that's only between you and the union. Recognition means the employer agrees to bargain with you as a group, to accept you as a negotiating body with whom they have to agree most working conditions; and they agree to recognise your representatives for that purpose and for them to represent individual members who need help. It's shocking that these issues are so little discussed.

Business people are allowed to organise. They are even allowed, by limited company protection, to walk away from their responsibilities. Business organisation dominates our world. When people talk of capitalism, free markets, free trade and neo-liberalism, business people's organised activity is the centre of it all.

As of December 2019, this writer intends to produce a work that can help the process of workers getting recognition for their organisation. There's a Bill before the US Congress Right now, 'Protecting The Right To Organise', that I think addresses a crucial issue - for union organisers to have the right to go into workplaces and address the staff and invite them to join the union. Without this, there's a tricky situation where those who want to organise, particularly the leaders, can be victimised and sacked by anti-union bosses. There's excellent accounts of some experiences of organising in the US in this book <https://www.amazon.co.uk/No-Shortcuts-Organizing-Power-Gilded/dp/019062471X> (Yes, Ok, Amazon, anti-union employer.)

The TUC in the UK has an Organising Academy. They should know of best practice and this writer will be looking for it.

In the meantime, here, below, are three pieces where he has covered it in the works Look At The System and The Right To Organise In Unions. It includes his own experience of trying to organise a workplace. An interesting experience! Everyone should try it! Put it on your bucket list!

Campaign For Organisation

This book starts with 'There's little point complaining or campaigning about each separate political issue because the political system grants us little power to affect them.

And likewise, there's little point grumbling about each problem at work. The *real* problem is our weakness in relating to business and public sector employers and managers. So argue and campaign instead to change these relationships, so our views on political issues carry weight, and at work we have the power to bargain effectively. That's what's needed to make lasting progress on any of the issues.' So here's how we could do that.

(Maybe you could do with reading the book first. But it wouldn't be right to bury this, the main practical alternative argued, at the back.)

There are millions of people, union reps and activists, with a strong commitment to improving

society. They expend a lot of energy on campaigns and demonstrations on each of the current political issues. They include millions of retired members and activists. This writer is one.

These campaigns usually aim to influence government. That's a waste of time when many other people have passed up the chance, by simply voting, to prevent us getting governments like we do get. The activists should re-direct their campaigning to organise the huge numbers of unorganised fellow-workers, who need the benefits of being organised; and through being organised influence each other to help change the power relationships that cause them to suffer on each of the normal issues, like the NHS, education, social insurance and so on.

Historical note – it's been done before. This writer observed, while growing up, those workers in Britain who had suffered the First world war, the depression years of the Thirties, and the Second world war, and, while collectively subjected to mass slaughter and unemployment, found out how essential it is to organise.

Develop large-scale organising activity and networks. They would be led by the unions. In the UK they have a central body, the TUC (Trade Union Congress). The TUC has an Education Department that provides training for union reps and activists. There are also local mini-TUC's, the Trades Councils. In the US, the central body is the AFL-CIO. There are equivalent bodies in most countries.

The TUC has organising officers. So do the unions. Their function needs expanding dramatically. They could train and co-ordinate those activists mentioned above. Retired activists and members in retired members branches, would be a great resource and would have something enormously useful to do with their time and experience. The union organising bodies could link with Citizens Advice Bureau's, so they could provide information to those many millions who aren't organised, on how to go about it.

Through these networks, the huge numbers of unorganised and very badly treated workers would be provided with the powerful arguments for the right to organise and act – maybe strike - summed up in the *Twenty-page Read* of this book, and laid out thoroughly in the book itself and in *'The Right To Organise'*. **The key argument is that the 'Many Others' mechanism makes organisation completely right, normal, unexceptional and respectable.**

It would include advice on how to take care when organising, like maybe recruiting quietly and, when there are enough members, getting the outside union official – who managers can't threaten - to approach management for you, for recognition of you as an organised body. It would include information on which unions would be appropriate to join, for the jobs and trade you are in. It would include information on what you get with unionising, such as agreements made with employers for better pay and conditions. It would include information on how you organise inside the workplaces – union reps for each department or job group who organise and defend members, negotiate with departmental managers, meet in worksite committees, and how they can get trained with the union or the TUC.

Guides to the right to organise would be produced. They could be handed out outside workplaces, football matches, and music gigs. School students are introduced to the world of work by having people in from business bodies and unions. Local union reps, trained by the TUC, provide sessions on the rights they should have in work, including the right to be organised and be represented.

This and the other activities are a far better use of time and effort for those who currently do things like going on demonstrations, which, when you look at the permanent, everyday power structures that business people use to control society, is a futile form of action.

The campaigners for organisation would use social media to make and discuss the case for organising and the right to organise. Facebook pages, e-mailing of links and guides to the right to organise, along the lines of this writer's three documents, the *Twenty-page Read* and the two books.

Lastly, the *Organisation Campaign* would spread the view that organised workers are fully entitled to act together as political organisations. It is through *their own* organisation that business people dominate not only working relationships but also politics, political relationships. That's mainly

doing all right, the 'one-man bands', maybe because they're on slightly more pay or better work than the rest; and others who are timid in the face of management authority. They include 'company men', management's favourites - or those who would like to be.

Management heard through this last group of people that we were recruiting people to the union. So they put about a rumour that we were about to lose a major contract servicing OCL's container fleet trailers to a rival trailer company. The message was that there was going to be less work, so you'd be better off not associating with the union agitators. So I asked one of the rumour-mongers - Woody, we got on Ok, but you shit - where this rival company was based, and looked there. There was no rival trailer company. It didn't exist. Just anti-union mind-games.

They also tried another thing managements will do when threatened by independent union organisation - they revived a *Works Staff Committee*. Nobody had heard of it, it hadn't met for years, but they put on fresh elections for Staff Reps. We thought about standing for election to it. But the 'reps' weren't *really* reps, accountable to the workers on the shop floor. They'd just be put there and then could speak for themselves for a few years. So we kept out of it and carried on recruiting for a real, proper, *independent Trade Union*.

A couple of weeks after we started signing up a few people to the union, preparatory to *claiming recognition*, they sacked one of us who were organising. He'd had time off work. Then he damaged an oil seal surface on an axle. It was an expensive thing to do, either unfortunately, carelessly or deliberately. Management claimed it was deliberate. They had no evidence for saying it was, just saying that 'it had to be'. So Dave (a different one) was sacked and even I thought perhaps that was reasonable, and that was that, Dave was sacked.

But Dave was in the Socialist Workers Party. They believe in actively supporting workers when they are *in Dispute* with employers, to assist in the dispute and as a way of building workers organisation. It's more definite than just sticking leaflets through neighbours doors at election time. Next morning they'd organised a picket of four of their members who were union activists from local workplaces, who argued we should organise and support Dave. Les, the SWP organiser, came into the canteen at morning break without management knowledge or invite. He argued that the sacking was unfair because Dave had no representation to help him put his side of the story. His case wasn't considered. Now that is a *big* issue - the ***Right to be Represented***. In fact, it's the biggest. It applies in courts of law, the right have somebody on your side. Even murderers as guilty as hell get that right. So Les convinced me and a few others.

Next day the small but plucky picket consisted of only two young women, Maxine and Debbie. They gave out a leaflet as people went in to work calling for us to come outside at morning break to discuss the sacking and the need for a union. Five or six of us did. It was a big thing for me - it felt risky. I'd been estranged from family for a decade, had no other income than what I got myself. It was a lifetime significant thing to take the risk and to go out and do something, instead of carrying on the whingeing and moaning about conditions there.

Every walk-out I've ever been on it's been instructive to see who'll go out. Some of the people with the biggest mouths, some of the toughest sounding, fold when it comes to actual action. Others, often the quietest people, turn out to be the strongest, and act. I like that - one of my biggest discoveries about people, ever.

So five or six of us were out, after break had finished. The business had three owners and one of them, who wasn't involved in day-to-day management of the works, was more decent than the other two. He came outside to discuss the issues with the picket. People are often scared of going out because they feel, often with good reason, that managers will then treat them even worse, perhaps sack them; there and then or later, for some trumped up reason. No confidence in winning. You do have to weigh that up. But, what I found was, he was prepared to discuss things, listen to our arguments, prepared to discuss the rights and wrongs of Dave's sacking, and even - sweetly! - to claim some Socialist credentials because his full name was Robert OWEN Parker! - the factory owner in the

19th century who tried to treat his workers fairly and thought everyone could. But it doesn't work since you've got cheaper competition from those who won't.

The people who'd come out gradually drifted back in but me and another guy stayed out through to dinner-break. If you're talking to a director and him to you, it must be Ok to be there, surely - it's *Negotiations*. My first experience of them. In the end he actually conceded our argument – said if we really wanted a union they'd have to accept it. Back in the canteen where the rest were now having their dinner we tried to announce the good news. But were they all up for it? Afraid not. Some were cowed by the situation, just kept their heads down eating their chips and playing cards. Including some who you'd think, and they liked to think, were tough men, hard-drinkers. There was a dead sound Polish guy, though, who would mimic their attitude as that of mediaeval peasants, wiping his cap off his head as if deferring to a feudal lord. Others said they'd join but what was the point unless most people did?

So it didn't happen. It was disappointing. And Dave stayed sacked. But personally I survived the scary bit about standing up and fighting and found I didn't get victimised but instead got respect from management, and, more importantly, from myself. And those of us who'd tried got a feeling of satisfaction and comradeship that is worth a lot, a real good feeling. At least we'd had a go.

Millions of us do stand up, organise, and the sky doesn't fall on our heads. Managers often recognise, Ok, these people are serious, civilised, have a case, we'll negotiate with them. You get respect from them. You get it from yourself too, for having got off your knees. You're no longer just an operative, one of the lads or lasses off the shop-floor. At least in being able to sit down and argue cases with them, you *are* their equal.

I've only just realised, writing this thirty years later – we didn't save Dave's job but on getting a union there we actually won!

I left there soon after to work at GEC, then the biggest UK industrial company. The factory was one of the biggest, best union-organised factories in the world, well-known, built by Westinghouse and variously owned by Metro-Vickers and AEI. Became a union activist there and learned about *Trade Union Organisation* from some very fine, strong, civilised class-conscious working class people - Manchester Engineering workers of that time. From the Shop Stewards and Reps, in particular, who aren't the wild militant troublemakers of media myths, but just wonderful, lovely, tough people who see the unfairness and oppression at work and get up and do something for everybody.