

Bridging the Gap between Public Service Unions in East and West

By Prof. Simon Clarke

From Knowledge Transfer to Mutual Learning

The collapse of state socialism presented the trade unions in the Former Soviet Union and in Central and Eastern Europe with the massive challenge of adapting to their new role as independent representatives of employees in a global capitalist economy. This required trade union officers to develop new conceptions of trade union work and to develop new skills of organization, representation and negotiation.

The new and the traditional trade unions of Central and Eastern Europe were (sometimes cautiously and gradually) welcomed into membership of the international trade union federations, which established representative offices in the region, and seminars, workshops and training programmes for trade union officers were provided directly or through the ILO. Such programmes had a significant impact, although they were constrained by financial limitations, so the trade unions of Central and Eastern Europe had to learn mostly from their own experience.

Fifteen years ago it was understandable that western unions should feel that they had much to teach their brothers and sisters in the East, and not much to learn from them. In the past fifteen years, the confidence of the western unions has been dented by the setbacks they have suffered. Meanwhile, the trade unions of Central and Eastern Europe have not only had the time and opportunity to learn the basic lessons of trade union work under global capitalism, but they have also had fifteen years experience of 'shock therapy' and attempts at the neo-liberal reform of public services on a scale which often far surpasses anything that their western colleagues have faced. The radical neoliberal reform of public services is not so much a challenge which has been passed from the West to the East, it is rather a challenge which the neoliberals and their paymasters are trying to impose on the East, in anticipation of exporting it back to the West.

Trade unions East and West are facing the same challenges, many aspects of which are new for everybody. If trade unions are to defend the provision of public services and the working conditions of public service workers, it is vital that they should co-operate and learn from each other in order to develop a common struggle.

Why is international trade union collaboration in public services so important today?

Systems of public service provision were established throughout Europe in the post-war decades on a national basis. In each country, the system of public services reconciled the needs and aspirations of citizens for a wide range of public services with the interests of those who worked to provide those services.

The specific arrangements differed from one country to another but, primarily as a result of the efforts of national trade unions, they were all based on the recognition that quality service provision depended on the professional commitment of public service workers, which in turn depended on satisfactory wages and working conditions, quality training, secure employment and good career prospects.

Growing international competition since the 1960s – and in a new quality since the fall of the Berlin wall - has put public services under increasing pressure, as national governments have sought to limit the growth of public spending. The attack on public services has been launched under the banner of neo-liberal 'reform', which has sought to cut public spending by privatizing,

decentralising, deregulating and subcontracting public services, eroding wages and undermining working conditions, cutting back on training and career opportunities and replacing public financing with private insurance-based financing of services. Services are increasingly provided not on the basis of need, but on the basis of capacity to pay, with unequal provision being justified in the name of “choice” and “flexibility” and costs reduced to the minimum at the expense of the jobs, wages and working conditions of public service employees.

The outcome of the struggle to defend public services is not only determined at the national level, it is determined by the changing balance of forces at the international level. Every advance of neo-liberalism in one country, every defeat suffered by the trade unions in one country, strengthens the forces of neo-liberalism on an international scale. Every time the private companies contracting and subcontracting to provide ‘public’ services, and the insurance companies financing such services, make gains in one country, they acquire more resources to fund their search for new feeding grounds elsewhere. This is why trade unions in each country have a vital interest in the ability of trade unions to withstand the neo-liberal onslaught in every other country. The struggle to defend public services and the working conditions of public service workers is no longer a national struggle, it is an international struggle.

The election of Margaret Thatcher in Britain in 1979 marked not only a serious setback in the struggle to defend and improve public services in the UK, but also on a European scale. The collapse of the state socialist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe was accompanied by a sharp decline in public services, which opened the door to neo-liberal consultants and their paymasters in the western ‘public service’ and insurance companies to try to sell their wares in the new market economies, while the trade unions were not able to take advantage of the new democratic opportunities to press the case for public services. We are living today with the consequences of these setbacks at international level, not least in the attempt of the so-called ‘new Europe’, orchestrated by the British government, to impose its neo-liberal panaceas on the so-called ‘old Europe’.

Trade unions at the national level have resisted these pernicious ‘reforms’ of public service provision, using a wide range of different tactics and with greater or lesser degrees of success. International trade union collaboration can play a vital role in allowing trade unions to learn from the successes and failures of one another’s campaigns around public services.

What are the most effective campaign methods?

Public service unions have used a wide range of methods of campaigning for public services. International collaboration can help them decide which are the most fruitful methods under their own particular conditions:

Bureaucratic methods: public service unions in many countries have traditionally had close relations with public service managers, and have sought to defend their services in collaboration with managers. Such methods have proved less effective against neoliberal attacks because the neoliberal assault on public services has been able to exploit dissatisfaction of service users and employees with bureaucratic forms of provision. Moreover, public service managers have been by-passed and bought off with prospects of high salaries, many now heading the privatised public service companies which are the leaders in neo-liberal globalization.

Political lobbying: public service unions have traditionally had close links with social democratic parties through which to press the claims of public services. But this strategy runs up against its limits when their political allies suffer election defeat and/or abandon traditional commitments in the hope of winning middle class votes.

Publicity campaigns to affect public opinion. Public service unions have been isolated by the neo-liberal ideology, which has persuaded much of the general public that their taxes are being wasted on inefficient bureaucracies, so that spending on public services can be reduced without

those services suffering. Public service unions have sought to publicise the case for public services by publishing reports, paying for press advertising and so on. Such campaigns are very expensive and probably best play a supporting rather than a leading role. Public service unions need to lay strong foundations for their attempts to persuade the general public by first persuading their trade union colleagues. The first priority of public service unions should be to secure support and cooperation with unions of other sectors, for the sake of both. There needs much to be much more awareness in daily trade union work of the need to develop of mutual understanding as the basis of union solidarity.

Mobilisation of the trade union membership. Mobilising members is not easy, but is potentially the foundation of everything else. Members of public service unions make up a significant proportion of the electorate, they can make the case for public services to their friends and relatives, membership participation throws up creative ideas for the improvement of public services, participation helps to unify the members by making it possible to articulate and reconcile conflicts of interest within the public service workforce. Mobilisation of the membership can also have a substantial impact on organizing and recruitment, increasing the resources at the disposal of the union. There have been many innovative approaches taken to the organization and mobilization of the membership of public service unions across Europe and there is considerable scope for mutual learning in this sphere.

Negotiating change. The strength of the neo-liberal attack on public services does not merely reflect the increasing global power of capital, it also engages with changes in the aspirations and expectations of the public. This raises the question of whether public service trade unions should merely resist change or whether they should seek to negotiate change. This is an area in which there is enormous scope for creative thinking and exchanges of ideas and experience within the trade union movement at national and international levels. It is essential that public service unions should claim their place at the negotiating table wherever public service reform is discussed, not only by national governments and the European Commission, but also within the OECD and the World Bank.

What are the best forms of international collaboration?

Trade unions in most countries have historically not seen international collaboration as a priority and have allocated very limited funds for international activity (of course, in many cases a large part of spending on international trade union activity is funded by national governments). The situation has changed somewhat with the development of the social dimension of the European Union, but it is vitally important that this positive development is not limited to the boundaries of the EU. Globalisation means that international collaboration is central to all aspects of trade union work, at local and national as well as at international level. At the same time, trade unions do have limited resources and this makes it vitally important that the forms of international collaboration adopted are those which are most cost effective. It is also politically important that spending on international collaboration should provide tangible benefits for all parties. From this perspective at least, exchanges of experience and joint campaigning are more productive than unilateral flows of assistance to support trade union organizing and campaigning.

Modern information technology provides unprecedented opportunities for the exchange of experience and information at minimal cost. There is already a wide range of trade union databases which make a mass of useful information available to activists at all levels of the trade union movement, including the PSI database on best practice examples for quality public services, the databases of the European Trade Union Institute (ETUI) and of the European Industrial Relations Observatory. Almost every national trade union provides an accessible website with an enormous amount of information relevant not only for its own members, but for activists in brother and sister unions looking for campaigning ideas. However, there is not much evidence that these resources are extensively used by trade unionists as a means of exchanging information and experience so as to do their own work more effectively. One reason for this may

be the limited range of languages in which such information is provided, another may simply be the fact that there is too much information for overburdened trade union officers, who always have more 'urgent' short-term demands to meet. A very simple and practical solution would be for trade unions to take on student internees who could identify information needs, review the information available, prepare topical reports and so on, which the students could use as the basis for their own diploma and dissertation work.

Other opportunities for international co-operation are provided by external sources of funding, particularly from national governments and the European Commission, and there is scope for national unions and international federations to lobby for such funding, particularly in association with technical assistance programmes targeted at public service reform. It should become the norm that all such programmes should include funding for trade union participation.

In the face of very scarce resources, it is important that there should be strong co-operation and a clearer division of labour between the various international trade union organizations. This will become easier if and when the ICFTU/WCL merger is concluded. For example, the issue of trade union and labour rights is an important issue which confronts all trade unions throughout Europe and there is probably room for more effective co-ordination of activities in this direction. The relationship between global and European trade union organizations also needs to be handled carefully since, with EU expansion, there is a danger that trade unions in the European states which are not expected to become EU members will be marginalized.

Which forms of international collaboration are most appropriate for what purposes?

Bilateral exchanges: Short bilateral exchange visits of national and local negotiators and organizers can provide the basis for invaluable exchanges of experience through direct participation. Reports of such visits, and more broadly of the experience of foreign unions facing comparable challenges, in union publications and on internet sites can spread such experience to the membership. Bilateral activities can often more easily secure funding from national governments or foundations than can multilateral activities, although they are most effective if they are coordinated within a multilateral framework, which can perhaps co-ordinate networks of "twinning" relationships between national trade unions.

Multilateral measures: Multilateral seminars and workshops can provide a broader exchange of experience, though their agendas and participants are often more remote from practice. I think that there has been a tendency for East-West collaboration to take the form of regional and subregional meetings (often with a sectoral focus) of Central and Eastern European trade union officers (often from the international department of the relevant trade union) with Western European experts, so that the tendency has been to promote a one-way flow of information and experience, rather than a genuine exchange, at a rather general level, remote from practice. The challenge is how to organise such events in such a way as to engage with front-line activists and encourage a two-way exchange of experience.

International intelligence. The internationalisation of insurance and public service contracting is proceeding at a very rapid pace, and the companies involved are very aggressive in promoting their public image and their private interests. It is very important for trade unions faced with these companies to have accurate and up-to-date information about them and their activities, particularly their employment practices, in other countries. This information can then provide the basis for appropriate action at the national and international levels. This is another area in which student internees might be recruited to collect, analyse and report the information at national and international levels.

Cross-border collaboration. With the rise of multinational public service contractors, public service employees in different countries increasingly find themselves facing the same employers, or find some public services contracted out to employees in another country. It is important to track these connections and to establish contacts between the relevant trade union organisations

with a view to developing mutual support in collective bargaining and even collaboration in cross-border collective agreements.

New Challenges Need New Thinking, in East and West.

One lesson that I think has been brutally brought home over the last thirty years is that it is not sufficient to try simply to defend what we have already got. The neoliberal assault on public services has exploited areas of dissatisfaction of both the users and the employees of public services and the trade union response to the neoliberal assault has to take these areas of dissatisfaction into account, to come forward with solutions that meet the needs of users and employees in ways that neoliberalism never can. This is why PSI's global campaign for Quality Public Services should lie at the heart of the action programmes of all public service unions at national and local levels, not just in the form of campaigns for more spending on public services and more pay for public servants, but also in the form of campaigns around public service delivery to ensure that public service provision is responsive to the needs of the public.

The kind of new thinking that is needed to bring in new ideas is promoted by the steps taken to address PSI's objectives of equality, equity and diversity, because these steps are seeking to draw new people into trade union activism, with different perspectives, who can be the bearers of new ideas. I think that this is particularly the case with young people, who are not burdened by the legacies of traditional thinking and traditional ways of doing things, and for this reason I think that the European Youth Forum can play a central role in developing international collaboration.

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