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Britain

Building grassroots trade unionism – Troublemakers

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Troublemakers at Work is a network of union activists who organise an annual conference and meetings about union organising, focussed on grassroots organising by lay union activists. It explores areas such as how to get started building a union in a workplace.

In the UK, while trade union organisation has survived in the public sector and in some parts of the private sector, it has been under pressure from decades of anti-union laws, the growth of small to medium size enterprises (SMEs), casualised employment and the gig economy, including various forms of pseudo self-employment. The period of lockdown early in the Covid pandemic accelerated a rise in home and remote working, which can make it harder to organise workers who do not have an identifiable workplace.

Troublemakers at Work is one of several initiatives, from trade unions and left organisations, which seek to encourage unionisation and rank-and-file activism. Troublemakers at Work is built around the principle that the members are the union, resisting service-providing models of trade unionism.

It also provides a space for discussing how to resist bureaucratisation in trade unions. Over 100 activists attended the third Troublemakers at Work Conference held in Manchester on Saturday 27 July 2025.

As one participant commented: “I thought it was a very useful, thoughtful event and really lived up to its claim that it was what the participants had to say that mattered, not some wisdom handed down from some talking heads on a platform.”

Connecting economic and social struggles

The opening plenary featured speeches from workers in struggle, including a resident doctors on the second day of their recent five day strike, a Birmingham bin-worker the day after the second successful megapicket Jenny Black local government worker and UNISON NEC member speaking primarily about the attacks on trans people at work and more generally. Sally Heier from Troublemakers in chairing the session made a strong link between the need to fight for conditions and pay at work and the broader fight for social justice whether it be in opposition to racism or in support of the Palestinian people.

There were then short breakouts by industry for activists to meet and network with other workers in their sector of employment while at lunchtime there were breakouts by trade union for people to meet up with fellow members of their own union. Some of the main takeaways from these, and indeed from some of the workshops, were around how to build cross-union co-operation in fighting austerity and speed ups and how to deal with regional and national union bureaucracies which obstruct rather than facilitate taking industrial action.

The workshop on ‘Fighting for Equality during the ‘war on woke’ proved the most popular of the day. The first section gave participants the opportunity to hear from Andy Cunningham, an activist from Chorley in Lancashire where Reform surprised everyone by winning the majority on the county council in May. Andy explained the strategy of the local NEU branch and trades council and some of the difficulties posed by other local government unions more partnership approach. Important issues for all active trade unionists to grapple with whatever our current local situation.

The second half of the workshop, as had been flagged up on the publicity, was to break into groups and discuss a case study. This was an effective way of making sure everyone did get a chance to contribute – though inevitably some had more to say than others. Another issue that came up in my group of seven is that all but two of us were members of the same union – and that meant a tendency especially amongst younger activists to assume that the same rules and structures apply everywhere – which they very definitely don't.

Defending equality and public services: resisting the far-right internationally

One issue surely of interest to many activists at the conference (and beyond) is how the US labour movement is surviving and organising in the context of growing fascism in the USA. Eileen, a federal government worker from the USA, spoke about the attacks on the public sector and on equality and diversity in the USA. Eileen's job is in consumer protection. Doing such a job well involves sensitivity to the diverse needs and experiences of members of the public.

The session was encouraging, in that it was clear US unions are still present and organising, despite the traumas of the attacks they have suffered. In the USA federal government workers were legally banned from taking strike action by Reagan Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization (PATCO) went on strike in 1981. But they have developed the inspiring example of 'information pickets': sessions in which union activists inform the public of the value of the work they do and why public service jobs are needed. This is done sensitively recognising that public services are not always working perfectly for everyone and need improvement.

For US federal government workers putting the case for public services is a major union priority, in a context where the federal government is trying to slash public service jobs. This means both explaining the benefits to the public of regulatory bodies and other federal government agencies, while acknowledging the public are often not getting a good service and that things could be better.

It was clear too from Eileen's presentation how much overlap there is between defending public services and defending equality and diversity principles. As a result of the Civil Rights Movement and the Women's Liberation Movement and decades of affirmative action, principles of equality, inclusion and respect for diversity are deeply embedded in the organisational culture of many work organisations. Telling workers in public services that they cannot pay attention to EDI (equality, diversity and inclusion) is tantamount to telling them they cannot do their jobs properly.

There was also some horrible stuff which came out in this session about the work of ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) and the location of detention facilities, for allegedly illegal immigrants, in government buildings. We have mostly heard in the mainstream media here about the attacks – and the resistance – in Los Angeles where huge numbers of Latinx people live and work especially as agricultural labourers. Eileen made it clear that ICE is also rounding people up in New York City – and undoubtedly throughout the country. This creates a very threatening working environment for federal government workers and can lead to people being harassed by immigration officials while at work. This is a reminder that US workers need solidarity from the international labour movement.

New left party?

This question was a backdrop to a lot of the discussions at the Troublemakers at Work conference, but did not

dominate. Whatever happens in terms of the development and direction of a new left party, workers need strong and effective trade unions. For many activists at the conference resistance to the austerity policies of the Labour Government provided much of the context of their work. It can of course be expected that a new left party will campaign for repeal of all anti-union laws and a positive framework of employment rights.

What is equally important is that its MPs and other leaders are prepared to attend picket lines and support workers in struggle. That is to say, the new left party must have an understanding of politics which is not only about contesting and winning parliamentary and council elections.

Prospects

Between its 2024 and 2025 conferences Troublemakers at Work held a number of evening online meetings about topics such as a four-day week and support for workers in struggle and it is likely that this pattern will continue over the coming year so long as enough activists put in the necessary work. The bigger question however is whether the pattern of annual national conferences should continue or not? Some of us think regional events might draw in more people than another national meeting – but this also begs the question of resources and what precisely the relationship is between national, local and even specific union structures. A post conference meeting on August 6 will begin to tease out some of these questions.

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Source: [Anti*Capitalist Resistance](#).

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