

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHAMPTON

AGAINST THE GRAIN

THE POSITION OF BLUE-COLLAR WORKERS IN UNISON:

TRADE UNION MERGER AND GOVERNANCE IN THE PUBLIC SERVICES

VOLUME 1

PAUL HAUNCH

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES

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ABSTRACT

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by Paul Haunch

In 1993, three trade unions in Britain merged to form UNISON. Whilst this re-alignment of the British trade union movement had long been the desire of one of these 'partner unions' - NUPE - the types of members that the partners organised held relatively little in common, which made this particular merger exceptionally ambitious and difficult. COHSE's Health membership, including many nurses, NALGO's white-collar, mostly local government members, and NUPE's low-paid, manual workers would be brought together in the 'new' union which pledged to represent all members better than their old unions.

The socio-economic conditions of the 1980s affected the three unions quite differently which predisposed their respective bargaining positions in the merger negotiations in markedly different ways. This allowed NALGO in particular, to wield a strong and relatively uncompromising hand at the bargaining table. However, the shape and style of UNISON was also influenced by the deep histories of the partner unions which differed as much as the styles of governance and membership priorities that had evolved in the unions in more recent times. All of these circumstances combined to present the new union with a seemingly impossible task of reconciling those differences of membership, including status, class, education and income under a style of governance that would encourage equality of participation and remove structural barriers that would otherwise deny members a fair say in the running of their own union. It is shown that this has not happened in many instances and that blue-collar manual workers have been marginalised in UNISON.

Case studies are analysed by the use of 'Union Form and Union Character' as opposed to more conventional options such as organisational culture. This shows that the formality associated with NALGO's preferred Union Form, has been a strong influence in the development of the governance of UNISON at national level, and that this has been at the expense of the less regulated and more informal Union Character governance that was preferred by both COHSE and NUPE. At branch level, it is seen that Union Form practices are mainly associated with large, metropolitan branches in local government which have witnessed conflict and unrest and essentially remain divided along old union lines. In contradistinction, Health branches, and a small, rural, local government branch have chosen Union Character governance and are seen as united memberships under a UNISON banner. In contrast to all these branches, a large, local government branch has adopted both Union Form and Union Character to govern successfully.

Recommendations are made to help UNISON overcome the difficulties.

This thesis provides the first assessment of the UNISON merger negotiations and with the adoption of Union Form and Union Character as a means by which to analyse union activity offers a unique contribution to knowledge and understanding of union governance.

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## **Preface**

In 1993, three, major trade unions in the public services sector, COHSE, NALGO & NUPE merged to form the largest trade union in Britain. The union would have some 1.3 million members and would represent all grades and disciplines of employee, from unskilled manual workers, through low-paid white-collar clerical staff, to highly skilled, graduate professionals. These members would be separated not just by their employment in health, local government, higher education, the utilities, the private sector and voluntary organisations, but also by differences in pay, status, class and career opportunities. The needs and demands of the membership would be as varied as their employment roles and to organise and represent these members would be exceptionally difficult.

The making of UNISON was an attempt to build industrial unionism in the public services on a massive scale and by any account must be seen as an ambitious attempt to re-order the traditional, British trade union approach to industrial relations. British public services trade unions had witnessed massive growth in the two decades up to 1980, but much of it had been accompanied by poor inter-union relations and competition for members. This merger therefore held out the prospect of eliminating this debilitating and costly friction and the potential for the new union to be an undisputed influence for change and improvement in its members pay and conditions of service.

My own role in this was that of Regional Officer in the North West of England. I had spent many years as a full-time official with NUPE representing low paid, often poorly educated manual workers, but also considerable numbers of nurses. Prior to this I had been a charge nurse running a ward in the Health Service. During my nursing years I had been active in NUPE at local, regional and national levels and had come to have great affection for the union. I had a wide experience of industrial relations in the public services and could attest to the comradeship and co-operation that occasionally surfaced between the three unions, or to be more accurate, the acrimony that usually persisted at most levels within the unions. When UNISON came along it provided me with an unparalleled opportunity to study the making and growing of a 'new union'.



My job as a regional officer in UNISON entailed a range of duties from representation and organisation to recruitment. At various times, I worked in higher education, further education, local government, the ambulance service and the Health Service. In the new union I had to deal more and more with white-collar members and it soon became apparent that I was dealing with issues that had surfaced only infrequently during my days in NUPE. There appeared to be more concern from members about grading, status and 'responsibility', whereas in NUPE matters seemed to be predominantly about basic pay, discipline, grievance, rubber gloves, boots and shoes, and the employer or management attitudes. My new members also looked different, many wore 'Sunday Best' to work instead of protective clothing; they sat at desks in their offices, and what was very noticeable, were much easier to contact at work. It promised to be an exciting, deeply intricate, educative and perhaps even dangerous area of research. In the event, I have not been disappointed and hope the reader is as intrigued as I remain. Like all such research it presents only a snapshot in time and things may well have changed by the time this research is publicly digested. There are no doubt many, interested individuals and groups watching UNISON which will remain an area for continued and ever deepening enquiry as the prospect of further mergers approach.

Of course being an 'insider' in such research can, and does have its drawbacks, as many texts and authors testify; I have no doubt that in some quarters at least initially, I have been viewed as a 'spy'. But it also has had some great advantages that external empiricists rarely get to experience, such as the wealth of literature that big bureaucracies thrive on, and UNISON certainly produced enough written material to keep me occupied, or the contacts that one can establish with relative ease in the research local. In some places I was welcomed with open arms by very kind and helpful people to whom I am very grateful. Many of these said that they would like to see, at least a foreshortened version of this intriguing journey of discovery.

This thesis is not the end of the research, for there are now more questions than ever that require answer; every answer will raise further lines of investigation that will suggest that only the tip of the iceberg has been scratched. Nevertheless, it represents a step forward in the understanding of why and how UNISON was formed and a brief insight into the forces that continue to shape the largest trade union in Britain.

## Acknowledgements

Well where do you start! Without the help and co-operation of the interviewees this research would have not happened. I hope that I have hidden everyone's identity sufficiently well to avoid embarrassment or worse. I also hope that those who read and recognise their own contributions do not feel that I have distorted their original intention.

I also owe a great debt to NUPE and NUPE members who for many years before UNISON provided me with the great opportunities to expand my skills and knowledge in the 'Family'. It was those experiences that started me off on the quest to answer some of the big issues facing UNISON. In particular, I would like to thank Tony Martin, NUPE North West Divisional Officer who allowed me time and facilities to allow me complete my Masters which provided the base for this thesis. To Rodney Bickerstaffe for his unswerving support for my research, I trust that he is not too disappointed with the end result. To my north west colleagues who so generously covered for me during my sabbatical leave. To Bill McMillan for latterly oiling a good few wheels and sharing our academic 'State of the Nation' discussions. And to all the other people in the union who made my research possible, in particular, Bev Hebden who so kindly did all kinds of favours for me without once complaining.

Tony [now] Dr Bennett who shared the long, lonely road of the doctoral student and is now my co-author on a number of academic papers. His friendship and scholarly contributions have helped considerably.

Without doubt, I owe a debt which I will never be able to repay to Bob Fryer. His patience, kindness and incomparable ability to see potential in me where I thought none existed, has throughout five long years, given me an ability to think and write in a way I did not think possible. How on earth he ever fitted me in to his schedule, and so often, will remain a mystery. To Anne, my apologies for keeping him out late so often and for feeding me over the years. I promise to stop it now. I hope that this thesis goes some way to justifying his trust in my ability.

And by no means last, to Dorothy who I have so rudely ignored through my enforced isolation and at times, hermit like existence. She has been absolutely wonderful in her unstinting support for me from the very beginning. I apologise for spending our savings on extending and improving our home so that we could have a study in which I could lock myself away from the 'real' world for days at a time. Without her understanding and love I would have given up long ago and it is to her that I dedicate this work.

To Dorothy

### **Abbreviations**

AEEU	Amalgamated Engineering and Electrical Union
AEU	Amalgamated Engineering Union
BIFU	Banking Insurance and Finance Union
BMA	British Medical Association
CCT	Compulsory Competitive Tendering
COHSE	Confederation of Health Service Employees
EETPU	Electrical, Electronic, Telecommunications and Plumbing Union
GMB	The name of the general union formerly also known as the National Union of General and Municipal Workers [NUGMW]
MSF	Manufacturing, Science and Finance
NAG	NALGO Action Group
NALGO	National Association of Local Government Officers
NUPE	National Union of Public Employees
NUT	National Union of Teachers
SWP	Socialist Workers Party
TGWU	Transport and General Workers Union
TUC	Trades Union Congress
UCATT	Union of Construction, Allied Trades and Technicians
UNISON	The name given to the union formed from the merger of COHSE, NALGO and NUPE
USDAW	Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers

## Chapter 1

### Introduction: From Competition to UNISON

#### Introduction

This thesis examines UNISON a new, public services, trade union that was formed from the merger of the three 'partner unions', COHSE, NALGO and NUPE in 1993. The research has a longitudinal aspect and covers from the partner unions' early histories, through the periods of expansion in the 1960s and 1970s, to the years of decline in the 1980s and the start of the formal merger negotiations in 1987. The analysis continues through an assessment of the merger process itself and an evaluation of UNISON's first seven years. The thesis ends with conclusions that draw upon the evidence across the full period of examination and makes recommendations about the future of UNISON.

Initially, I had been drawn into the research because of what I saw as the need to advise the new union about the future of manual or blue-collar workers in UNISON. However, as the research progressed it became clear that the once, seemingly simple problem of manual worker under-representation was linked to a much wider series of issues concerning the kinds of trade unions in the merger, just as much, if not more so, as the kinds of members organised by those same unions. This thesis is the story of how my journey of discovery for 'the truth' was derailed time and again by awkward, inconsiderate, and often concealed, facts. It has also shown me that in research whatever you may think is your destination, that is almost certainly not where you are going.

**Chapter 2. Change in British Trade unions: Some Motives for Merger**, looks at the compositional changes in British trade unions in the 1970s and 1980s and charts the rise and subsequent fall in union membership. The differences in union density<sup>1</sup> between the public services, private services and private manufacturing are used to show that the slump in union membership was not uniform across those sectors.

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<sup>1</sup>A measure by which the trade union membership is judged.

There was also variation within the sectors. Some trade unions were more adversely affected than others, whilst other unions at this time experienced growth. The complexity of this phenomenon, was not simply related to public versus private, or manual versus white-collar, for as the chapter shows, there was marked variation within many of these categories. Neither were the differences associated solely with those unions affiliated to the TUC, for within those organisations that have remained 'free-standing' there was considerable divergence on growth and contraction.

A variety of socio-economic and political factors were responsible for the shifts in the contours of British trade unionism in the 1970s and 1980s and it is essential to understand how those influences impacted upon the decisions of COHSE, NALGO and NUPE to contemplate merger. In some respects, the differences in the fortunes of the three partner unions' fortunes resemble the general overview of the changes that were taking place at that time in the British trade union movement; that is, a sharp reduction of members in blue-collar jobs and an increase in membership in [nominally] white-collar employment. Additionally, these processes contributed to a radical shift in the gender balance of the workforce with women forming half the paid labour force. In turn this generated change in the composition of the membership of many unions.<sup>2</sup>

Legislative changes had an impact on trade unions generally, but as the chapter demonstrates, it was the impact of other State inspired measures, most notably the introduction of Compulsory Competitive Tendering [CCT] that led to a critical reduction in membership for at least one of the partner unions - NUPE. This, and the loss of political influence since 1979 following the election of the Thatcher government accelerated the pre-disposition of the union to seek structural reform through merger.<sup>3</sup> The chapter concludes with an assessment of how the structural reforms have altered the size, shape and composition of British trade unions.

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<sup>2</sup>Nolan and Walsh. 1995. p54.

<sup>3</sup>Waddington. 1995. p14.

**Chapters 3A [COHSE], 3B [NALGO] and 3C NUPE** are about **The Making of UNISON** and deal with the origins and early influences of the three partner unions. These three chapters constitute a fulcrum for understanding key elements of the merger. These separate histories also deeply influenced UNISON's eventual structures as well as the policies and practices of the union. Turner has argued that the effect of such seminal experiences has greater impact upon trade unions than has been generally recognised.<sup>4</sup> The importance of those deep histories of the partner unions and how they contributed to the eventual outcome of UNISON dictated that a detailed inspection of their pasts was undertaken. But this was not done as an alternative to a systematic sociological analysis, rather as a prerequisite to that analysis. As C. Wright Mills simply, but so eloquently put it,

*To fulfil their tasks, or even to state them well, social scientists must use the materials of history ....We need the variety provided by history in order to ask sociological questions properly, much less to answer them. ... [and] We often have to study history to get rid of it.*<sup>5</sup>

To have skirted over those histories or treated them perfunctorily would have misdirected the thesis because it would have reached conclusions partly based on assumptions rather than facts. It was not sufficient to know that the partner unions were different, but it was essential to ask why they were different and how those differences subsequently manifested themselves during the merger process. Indeed, if we are to understand the ways in which power and authority now manifest themselves in UNISON it is necessary to recognise and deal with how power and authority was vested and wielded in the partner unions. This approach was emphasised by Newby who stressed the key role played by the historical context of agricultural labour in his study of the development of the consciousness of agricultural workers and the structures of power relationships through which this consciousness developed.<sup>6</sup> And it is the different contexts in which the partner unions developed that prompted their individual styles of governance which made for potential conflict in UNISON.

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<sup>4</sup>Turner. p14.

<sup>5</sup>Mills. 1959. p159 -182.

<sup>6</sup>Newby. 1977.

As the partner unions evolved they adopted practices to meet the needs of their discrete memberships. COHSE's NHS membership [mostly nurses], the white-collar, predominantly local government members of NALGO and the low-paid, blue-collar membership of NUPE, made for potential dissonance across several fronts in the proposed new union. This is set out in **Chapter 4, Convergence and Divergence: The Potential for Conflict**. The chapter also investigates the similarities and tendencies on some fronts for the new partner unions to move towards convergence. A comparison of these similarities and tendencies suggests that whilst there was a greater willingness to co-operate than had traditionally prevailed and whilst some of the unions' structural features were broadly similar, the cohesion between the partners was limited and fragile. When examined, the dissimilarities reveal more fundamental schisms that would be difficult to reconcile and which would be exacerbated in the new union if they were not specifically dealt with as part of the merger process. The divisions in class, status and income are indicative of the profound differences that separated the unions, but which the rhetoric of the merger promised to diminish or overcome.<sup>7</sup>

No less profound were the ways in which each union carried out its business. The member-led ethos in NALGO contrasted sharply with the articulation that had evolved between members and officers in both COHSE and NUPE and which on the face of it appeared to produce insoluble difficulties and become a primary source of conflict. Understanding the very different concepts of union governance and the ardour with which they were sometimes held, is central to our understanding of the emerging nature of UNISON and why conflict in the new union may have been inevitable.

A mapping of the three partner unions' annual conference agendas for selected years is used to determine the issues with which the partner unions were most concerned prior to the merger. This shows that, of the three partner unions, NALGO had the greatest concern for matters that dealt with the internal

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<sup>7</sup>COHSE, NALGO, NUPE 1992 [1].



relationships of the union and those of a structural nature. By contrast, COHSE and NUPE were relatively free of the internal disharmony and fragmentation that sometimes characterises trade union democracies, and although COHSE sometimes had a degree of constitutional wrangling, the issue never attained sufficient prominence to disrupt the union's general approach to governance.

The merger negotiations themselves are analysed in **chapter 5, Top Lines and Bottom Lines: The Merger Negotiations**, not as a chronological account, but by tracing the progress of key issues which were seminal to UNISON's processes, structures and ethos. Essentially, these matters revolved around an agenda, largely set by NALGO, that was aimed at preserving NALGO's way of doing things and involved lay member democracy, branch campaigning, branch autonomy and finance, and union structures. This was in marked contrast to the 'official' merger rhetoric of the three partner unions which claimed that UNISON would be, 'a wholly New Union with its own objectives and character'.<sup>8</sup>

The theme of lay member control is set against the active participation of delegates in UNISON's national conference and charts how blue-collar workers were marginalised from the beginning in this forum, which was unduly weighted against ex-COHSE and ex-NUPE members. Evidence also shows the UNISON national conference to be overly influenced by the union's local government membership and controlled by a small number of branches intent upon re-ordering the union's internal relationships through rule changes and other structural measures. The data also indicates that men, not women, dominate at conference, albeit women forming two thirds of the membership, and that far left groups have a disproportionate influence at this premier forum of the union's governance

The merger negotiations produced a number of mechanisms to try and prevent the creation of 'structurally disfranchised' members, specifically manual workers, who might be excluded from taking part in UNISON's democratic processes because of the inbuilt dominance of certain groups. This chapter highlights the failure of those mechanisms and confirms that low-paid, manual workers have apparently

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<sup>8</sup>COHSE, NALGO, NUPE. 1990 [1]. p7.

withdrawn from the union's governance, or at least have disappeared from key fora. Data from elections to UNISON Service Group Executives and National Executive identify the declining participation generally by UNISON members in the running of their union. At the same time, self-organised groups,<sup>9</sup> principally based on those groupings that previously prevailed in NALGO, have migrated their influence into UNISON where they have a potentially divisive influence and are perhaps seen as irrelevant to workplace concerns.<sup>10</sup> The chapter concludes with a review of the circumstances surrounding the Affiliated Political Fund [APF] and the attempts by some sections of UNISON's membership to break the formal link with the Labour Party, despite the specific arrangements agreed through the merger process.<sup>11</sup>

This thesis is not an investigation of the idea of organisational culture, but as culture was sometimes used by the merger negotiators to assist their bargaining positions<sup>12</sup> it is important to have a clearer understanding of what is culture and if it is the most appropriate mechanism by which we may comprehend the processes in the merger. **Chapter 6, Understanding Trade Unions: Culture, Form and Character** outlines the difficulty of reaching an agreed definition of organisational culture and suggests that, in any case, much of the investigation of culture has been derived from studies with an inbuilt bias towards a managerial standpoint. Hence, there is relatively little research that has been conducted specifically on trade union 'culture' and as such there is a need to question the seemingly general acceptance that it is appropriate to judge trade unions by the same measures that we judge employer centred bodies, or indeed other discrete communities.

A 'cultural web' approach to deciphering the inner workings and links in an organisation was used by Brewster and Lloyd,<sup>13</sup> but this was also rejected because like culture, its roots were firmly embedded in a management focus. Another

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<sup>9</sup>UNISON has structural provision for women, disabled, lesbian and gay, and black members to promote their specific interests.

<sup>10</sup>Munro. 1999. p203.

<sup>11</sup>The APF is that proportion of UNISON's membership affiliated to the Labour Party.

<sup>12</sup>Fryer 2000. p38.

<sup>13</sup>Brewster and Lloyd. 1993.

attempt to understand trade union 'culture' was Blackburn's 'unionateness',<sup>14</sup> but as the chapter shows, this would be inadequate in a study of union merger as the concept deals with the general 'outward facing' features of unions rather than the internal mechanisms and practices that are more commonly associated with organisational culture.<sup>15</sup> In 1962, Turner introduced the view that trade unions could be said to have a 'personality' and 'character';<sup>16</sup> The chapter assesses this idea and concludes that the original, innovative text did not sufficiently expand the theme to enable it to be used effectively as an aid to analysis

A recent evaluation of our understanding of trade unions emerged with Fryer's concept of 'Union Form' and 'Union Character' as a measure by which to determine how trade unions conduct and project themselves, and how they are perceived [principally] by other trade unions.<sup>17</sup> This is a particularly suggestive work in that it was built around an early analysis of the UNISON merger and has provided me with the opportunity to re-appraise this approach and to adopt and develop it as a mechanism to analyse data from two case studies. [see chapters 7 and 8]

As I attempted to analyse the three 'partner unions' similarities and differences, it became apparent that the rhetoric of the 'new' union was very much concerned with transcending, or even denying those differences and positing instead the creation of a unified UNISON 'culture'. Chapter 6 identifies options by which the new union might seek to achieve conflict resolution. Addressing the issue of internal union conflict is central to the recommendations contained in chapter 9 of this thesis. But as Handy reminds us, resolving conflict is not simply a matter of a public relations exercise.

*The strategy for resolving the conflict must be related to the disease, not the symptom. Diagnosis, therefore, differentiating between symptoms and cause, is the key to the proper management of conflict.*<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>Blackburn. 1967.

<sup>15</sup>See Schein 1985 for overview of organisational culture.

<sup>16</sup>Turner. op cit. p14.

<sup>17</sup>Fryer. 2000. op cit. Fryer. 1998.

<sup>18</sup>Handy. 1985. p235.

Therefore, this chapter forms a cornerstone of identifying any remedial action that UNISON may need to be taken to bring about a more cohesive union.

The thesis then uses Union Form and Union Character to analyse two case studies. **Chapter 7, A Case Study of UNISON: a National Perspective** concentrates mainly on interviews conducted with national officials from the partner unions, some of whom were party to the merger negotiations, who were asked about the merger process and their opinions on how they now perceive UNISON. Interview data demonstrate how elements of Union Form are often seen as a stronger, more reliable form of union governance than the more elusive concept of Union Character which relies on relationships and informality to order discipline. The strengths and weaknesses of Union Form and Union Character are debated and it is shown that UNISON has become controlled largely by the practices of Union Form. This is manifested in the bureaucracy that has been established to support the participation of lay activists in the union's governance. Details of a UNISON meetings calendar identifies the union as heavily reliant on formal, committee type fora to administer the union's business and that much of this bureaucracy is the preserve of a small core of activists who have a considerable and disproportionate influence on the union.

Prior to merger, NALGO had elected to run its affairs via Union Form and the union's superiority in numbers and membership skills identified in the earlier chapters, has eased the passage of Union Form into UNISON. It is also suggested that some blue-collar activists have traded 'extramural' benefits as a quid pro quo for support of Union Form activities. Notwithstanding this, it is argued that the certainty associated with Union Form, especially in times of change, such as merger, ensured that it emerged as the preferred concept of governance. The importance of key personnel in defending Union Character is also discussed in this chapter and how it may be necessary to use Union Form techniques to ensure that Union Character qualities are not overwhelmed by the aggressiveness of Union Form.

The second case study, **Chapter 8, A Case Study of UNISON: A Branch Perspective** uses data from interviews with lay representatives/members and from observation at meetings at branch level. Differences in '*UNISONisation*' are apparent between the large, local government branches and two Health Service and a small, rural, local government branch. It is argued that two of the large, local government branches have a tendency to governance by Union Form, whilst the informality of the Health and small, local government branches are indicative of the preference for union governance through Union Character. Where Union Form prevailed, relationships in the branch were confrontational and often reflected a split along old union lines - that is, NALGO v NUPE. In these branches it was difficult to discern a 'UNISON' nature of inclusiveness and shared aims and values. Instead, activists frequently resorted to explaining their views through the language of a power struggle. Where a Union Character type of regime existed, the informality of the relationships had contributed to a *UNISONisation* of the branch with activists more concerned with members' problems and the relationship with the employer, than internal structures or the division of power. This had resulted in a more inclusive model of unionism than that in the Union Form branches where parties saw their participation through rights and obligations rather than on the basis of collective consent. A third, large local government branch had traits of both Form and Character as the adopted and preferred form of order. It is significant in this case that the new, unified branch ran the procedural aspects of the union by Union Form type practices, but at the same time, its relationship with key personnel and members reflected Union Character practices.

In **chapter 9, The Conclusions** draw together the major themes of the research. It looks at the reasons for the merger and how they affected the negotiating stances of the partner unions. The contribution of the 'deep' histories and the contemporary practices of the merger partners are summarised in relation to the 'bottom lines' that each union insisted upon for the new union. In themselves, these issues were a product of the 'old' unions' ways of working and the ethos by which they set their standards, nevertheless they made a significant impact on the shape and disposition of UNISON. Union Form and Union Character as a tools of analysis have shown

that the stronger '*culture*' of NALGO was inevitably going to become the dominant form of governance. And in this respect, if we judge UNISON by the test that it set itself - that the union would be a 'genuinely 'new' union - then UNISON has failed. The chapter also contains recommendations to UNISON that it is hoped will help the union to secure its future by improving the union's ability to respond effectively to members' needs.

How the research was first considered and the struggle to identify the key question is dealt with in **Chapter 10, Methodology**. My originating question was seemingly simple and straight forward, 'why were manual workers a declining section of UNISON's membership?'. Now it seems that the very process of carrying out the research led to its refinement and restatement. The methods adopted to conduct the research were linked to that original, key question and the subsidiary questions that arose from that initial, central proposition about the inclusion/exclusion of manual workers in UNISON's affairs. Why I chose to use largely qualitative methods rather than a quantitative approach is addressed through the appropriate use of techniques that are best suited to the wide ranging nature of this enquiry.

The use of secondary data to inform the theoretical background to the research is explained along with the need to collate and analyse data from a comprehensive set of primary sources to contribute to our understanding of 'why' and 'how' the merger occurred and the consequential implications for UNISON.

The choice of UNISON as an appropriate research site is looked at in the context of previous and current trade union mergers. The chapter also demonstrates that interviews with key personnel at national level and in selected branches were linked to key questions and not randomly chosen. Alongside this, was the collection of data from observation at certain meetings which again is seen as a response to answering key points in the thesis.

Importantly, because I was conducting the research as an 'insider' it was essential to ensure that as far as possible that I did not build bias into the thesis through a

poorly framed methodology. The advantages of my 'professional' experience as a full-time officer of the union were used to enhance the *Theoretical Sensitivity* of the research.<sup>19</sup> The chapter shows that this was done through a consideration of the advantages and disadvantages of internal researching and through a calculated process of selection of foci of investigation within UNISON. The difficulty of conducting interviews with many of the participants who were senior, line managers to me is examined and ends the chapter.

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<sup>19</sup>Strauss and Corbin. 1990. p42.

## Chapter 2

### Change in British Trade Unions: Some Motives for Merger

#### Introduction

The UNISON merger was part of a clear strategy that originated in NUPE to bring together public service trade unions under the umbrella of 'industrial unionism'. It also represented a turning point in the way British trade unions organised themselves in that this was a merger that had both an industrial and political logic. The merger also developed during a period of high instability for trade unions following the election of the 1979 Thatcher government from when union political influence has waned.<sup>1</sup> To understand fully the contribution made by the political climate at that time and how it impacted upon the decision of COHSE, NALGO and NUPE to merge, it is necessary to take a more holistic view of trade union organisation and not see the merger in isolation from activity in the trade union movement generally, or the wider socio-economic environment.

This chapter reviews 7 major elements in the climate that surrounded the UNISON merger.

- ♦ the trends in union membership show that the substantial rise in numbers during the 1970s was atypical and therefore the subsequent membership loss in many unions, including NUPE, from 1979 onwards, was perhaps more in-keeping with long-term patterns of organisation.
- ♦ State and economic influences. The industrial strategy pressed by successive Tory governments after 1979 brought about substantial change in the workplace, which as the chapter shows was indirectly responsible for a downturn in trade union membership in the private sector.
- ♦ the State and public services. The State was also determined to alter the level and focus of public services and through this reduce the influence of public service trade unions. Consequential changes in the patterns of trade union organisation were not consistent across the public services but as the chapter shows, it is difficult to discern a clear trend[s] that would explain the disparity.

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<sup>1</sup>Waddington. 1995. op cit. p14-15.



- ♦ the State and the partner unions. Specific measures adopted by the government to indirectly regulate trade union activity in the public services through the introduction of 'market testing' for a range of state provision had a damaging effect on [especially] NUPE's membership. In turn this loss of membership had a direct bearing on NUPE's desire to merge.
- ♦ the change in the balance of power in industrial relations. Additionally, an assessment is made of the comprehensive industrial relations legislation introduced during this period to determine how it contributed to the subsequent, increased marginalisation of trade unions in the workplace.
- ♦ occupational shift in the labour force. The above changes also had the effect of contributing to, and accelerating compositional change in trade unions themselves as their memberships began to reflect more accurately the gender of the restructured workforce.
- ♦ trade union mergers. The realignment of British trade unions has altered the parameters of organisation and increased diversity and divergence within trade unions. This had implications for the three partner unions whose memberships were widely separated across services and occupations.

The changing nature of trade union organisation now shows that a union member is now just as likely to be female, white-collar and in the public services. This represents a considerable shift from the once traditional image of trade union member as a male, blue-collar employee working in heavy industry. Clearly this had implications for UNISON which would have to combine both blue-collar and white-collar members in a union that would be operating in a workplace where there was an *observable drift of occupational and labour market change towards more white-collar employment and less manual employment*,<sup>2</sup> and where issues of status and class would have to be confronted.

### **Assessing Change in the Membership of British Trade Unions**

A cursory analysis of British trade unions since 1979 may suggest that their membership has entered a period of terminal decline. However, membership has

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<sup>2</sup>Fryer, 2000. op cit. p25.

rarely been stable and from the early days of collective organisation the number of trade union members has ebbed and flowed. At the same time the number of trade unions organising those members has generally fallen with some rare exceptions. Table 2.1 emphasises this phenomenon.

table 2.1 TUC Membership 1878 - 1928

<u>year</u>	<u>No of unions</u>	<u>No of members</u>
1878	114	623,957
1918	262	4,532,085
1928	196	3,874,000

TUC Report 1928 p 8

Following the end of the second world war which heralded a Labour Government, trade union membership began to increase steadily in a political and economic climate generally more favourable to recruiting and retaining members than in previous decades. It rose from 7,875,000 in 1945 to 10,218,000 in 1964 when Harold Wilson led Labour to victory at the general election that marked the start of an era of unprecedented trade union growth. However, the increases had not been inevitable with a number of the intervening years marking an absolute decline in numbers and density.<sup>3</sup>

From 1949-68 membership amongst manual workers declined more rapidly than potential membership, but for white-collar workers the reverse was true. In contrast, from 1969-79 union density<sup>4</sup> increased dramatically for both groups: from 49.8% to 63% for manual workers; and from 32.6% to 44% for white-collar workers.<sup>5</sup> In 1979 TUC membership stood at an all time high of 13,289,000.<sup>6</sup> This

<sup>3</sup>Bain and Price 1983 p5 show that between 1949 and 1963 that there were 10 years when membership grew and five years when it fell; those being 1949, 1950, 1953, 1958, 1959. It is also worth noting from this evidence that even in some years when absolute numbers grew that density sometimes fell. e.g. 1954 and 1956. This indicates that union recruitment was not keeping pace with an expanding workforce.

<sup>4</sup>Trade union density here is taken as the number of members in trade unions compared to the number of employees in the active labour force.

<sup>5</sup>Bain and Price. op cit. p9-10.

<sup>6</sup>Gallie et al 1996 p1

was to be the last year of increase for more than two decades. By 1984 membership had dropped to below 11 million and by 1989 was nearer to 10 million. Table 2.2 charts the decline of [TUC] trade union membership from 1979 to 1989 - often referred to as the 'Thatcher years'.

table 2.2 TUC Affiliated Trade Union Membership 1979-89

year	union membership [000s]	density %
79	13,289	56.9
80	12,947	57.8
81	12,106	56.1
82	11,593	54.9
83	11,236	53.1
84	10,994	51.5
85	10,821	50.5
86	10,539	49.3
87	10,475	47.7
88	10,376	45.5
89	10,158	44.2

source: Kessler and Bayliss. 1992. p138.

#### **Sectoral Differences: Comparing the Private and Public Sectors**

Decline in absolute membership and trade union density was not evenly distributed across the private and public sectors for reasons which will be explained later. The 1990 Workplace Industrial Relations Survey [WIRS]<sup>7</sup> showed two very distinct themes: first, an overall decline in trade union density; and second, a much slower rate of decline in the public services than in the private sector, lending weight to the contention that two types of unionism may be developing - a private sector one in terminal decline, and a public services one where density is seen to hold up rather better. Table 2.3 lists some key changes.

<sup>7</sup>WIRS 1990.

table 2.3

## Trade Union Density: Private and Public Sectors. 1984 and 1990

broad sector	all employees %		manual employees %		non-manual employees %	
	1984	1990	1984	1990	1984	1990
private manufacturing	56	48	70	60	32	22
private services	30	27	40	32	32	22
public services	80	72	82	72	79	72

source: WIRS 1990, p59

This shows that less than half of all employees in private manufacturing were trade union members in 1990, a fall in density of 8%. Density amongst manual [blue-collar] employees in this sector had fallen by 10% during this period to stand at 60% in 1990. During that time, white-collar [non-manual] also fell by 10% to stand at 22%, or just one in five employees, in 1990. From this we can say that at the start of the last decade of the twentieth century, British trade union members in private manufacturing were almost three times as likely to be blue-collar members than white-collar employees. In the private services sector a similar picture for white-collar workers emerges to that in private manufacturing but here union members comprise just one in three blue-collar employees.

The most noticeable differences are in the comparison with the public services where trade union density generally had held up remarkably well but where the early signs of a divergence between manual and non-manual densities was beginning to show. Manual density had fallen by 10% and non-manual by 7%. The slower rate of decline in the white-collar division was undoubtedly due to the effects of Compulsory Competitive Tendering of ancillary services in the NHS and a wide range of manual jobs in local authorities - from school cleaning to grounds maintenance following the introduction of the 1988 Local Government Act. These measures had the effect of accelerating the change in the composition of the public service workforce away from blue-collar towards white-collar employment.

Additionally, from 1984 to 1990 the density ratio of the public services to the private sectors had increased significantly for white-collar employees from 2.5:3.3. This confirms that trade union membership was becoming concentrated around white-collar, public service workers. Since 1990 the disparity has widened. Recent analysis shows that between 1979 and 1996 membership of trade unions organising predominantly or exclusively in the public services fell by 2%, but this was far less severe than the 40% decline experienced across the economy as a whole. By 1996 over half of total union membership was located in the public services and eight out of seventeen unions with over 100,000 members were public service based.<sup>8</sup>

### **Change in the Private Sector**

Trade union growth was most dramatic in the 1970s when the Transport and General Workers Union [TGWU] had over 2 million members, an increase of more than a quarter in just eight years. The other major, general union, the [now] GMB achieved a 13% increase, and in the retail division, USDAW saw its membership surge by no less than 40%. In white-collar employment, membership trends were also accelerating; BIFU the banking union enjoyed a 42% increase in its banking membership.

The widespread increase in membership that benefitted blue and -white-collar unions came to an end after 1979 following the election of the Thatcher government with its pledge to reduce trade union power. Over the next decade the decline in membership was as dramatic as the increase was spectacular, prompting some observers to ask,

*if the role of unions is past - [now] that the historical moment of collectivism is over ....*<sup>9</sup>

Those unions which organised members in manufacturing industries were hit the hardest. The TGWU and the engineering union the AEU, both lost 39% of their membership in a decade [1979-1989]. UCATT representing building workers also saw its membership plummet by 26%. Against this trend BIFU organising

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<sup>8</sup>Mathieson and Corby. 1999. p201.

<sup>9</sup>Bassett and Cave. 1993. p1.

white-collar staff across the finance sector experienced a 29% rise in membership. And whilst BIFU subsequently suffered membership losses as banks introduced a range of technology driven initiatives, the union's membership increase at that time was indicative of the changing composition of the workforce as heavy manufacturing shed blue-collar labour. [see Table 2.4].

table 2.4

Change in Membership of Selected TUC Affiliated Unions  
Organising Mainly in the Private Sector. 1970-89

Union	1970 (000)	1978 (000)	%age change 1970-78	1979 (000)	1989 (000)	%age change 1979-89
Transport and General Workers Union	1639	2073	23	2086	1271	-39
Amalgamated Engineering Union	1202	1199	n.c.	1218	741	-39
General Municipal, Boiler Makers Union	853	965	13	967	823	-15
Association of Scientific, Technical and Managerial staffs	221	471	113	491	390*	-21
Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers	330	462	40	470	376	-21
Electrical, Electronic, Telecommunications and Plumbing Union	421	420	n.c.	420	370**	-12
Union of Construction, Allied Trades and Technicians	260 (1971)	321	23	348	258	-26
Banking, Insurance and Finance Union	89	126	42	132	170	29

\*ASTMS & TASS amalgamated to form MSF 1988. 1989 MSF had 653,000 members

\*\* 1988 figures. EETPU expelled from TUC same year

source: Marsh 1992 table 2.1 p26-27

#### CHANGE IN THE PUBLIC SERVICES SECTOR

Like the private sector, public service trade unions experienced accelerated growth during the 1970s. In part this was due to the continued expansion of post-war state

welfarism that witnessed an increase in public service provision particularly in the NHS and local government. However, of crucial importance to the growth of the public service trade unions was the support of the State for collective bargaining including a statutory obligation on management to establish collective bargaining machinery.<sup>10</sup> After 1979 that support was still in place through the maintenance of the Whitley Council machinery<sup>11</sup> but other measures invoked by the Tory governments undermined trade union organisation and contributed directly to a decline in union membership and influence. Table 2.5 gives the membership for both TUC and non-TUC public service trade unions from 1979 onwards. Membership for 1996 has been included even though this was after the UNISON merger to help in trying to identify trends in union density.

table 2.5                      Membership of Public Service Trade Unions:  
TUC Affiliated and non-TUC Affiliated, and Police Federations.  
Selected years 1979 - 1996

organisation	1979	1985	1991	%age change 79-91	1996	%age change 91-96
TUC affiliated unions	2,899,094	2,729,054	2,561,442	-11.7	2,578,245	0.65
non- affiliated unions	527,742	695,823	790,809	49	791,099	0.01
total	3,426,836	3,424,877	3,352,251	-2.2	3,369,344	0.5
police federations	113,050	120,462	126,885	12.2	124,710	-1.7
total for public services	3,539,886	3,545,339	3,479,136	-2.2	3,494,054	0.1

source: Mathieson and Corby 1999 table 10 page 201

#### DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE PUBLIC SERVICE UNIONS

Of immediate notice here is the overall slower rate of decline in the TUC affiliates compared to most of their counterparts in the private sectors in the period 1979-1991. [See table 2.4]. At the same time, non-affiliated unions expanded their

<sup>10</sup>McIlroy, 1995, p98-99.

<sup>11</sup>A mechanism established in 1918 for the joint regulation of pay and conditions of service in the public sector.

membership at a rate previously unseen - 49%. This clearly identifies that the government's strategy of seeking to reduce the size, strength and influence of the TUC affiliates in the public services, and concurrently encourage the growth of 'professional' organisations committed to a strike free ethos, was working.<sup>12</sup> It is also particularly interesting to note that in 1996 as the Major [Tory] government neared its end, that TUC membership was rising, and at a faster rate than non-affiliates which perhaps indicates that [TUC] trade union decline had bottomed out and non-TUC membership had peaked. Without further research it is difficult to be precise about any trends that this depicts except to add weight to the argument that trade union fortunes are linked to the general, economic milieu and State empathy with organised labour.<sup>13</sup> Notwithstanding these initial observations, the changes in the public service trade unions were unevenly distributed both within TUC and non-TUC affiliates.

However, as table 2.6 shows, there are some emerging patterns that show divergence of expansion and contraction across the public services. The civil service unions, especially the Civil and Public Service Association [CPSA ] which represented low to middle-grade white-collar staff fared particularly badly up to 1991 losing 44% of its membership as a result of the Service being broken up into free-standing Agencies who had the remit to determine pay of their own staff which had previously been negotiated nationally.

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<sup>12</sup>This policy was particularly pressed amongst the teaching profession where there had been a series of long, drawn-out disputes. One of the new breed of this kind of union was the Professional Association of Teachers.

<sup>13</sup>McIlroy, op cit. p23.



table 2.6

## TUC Public Service Trade Union Membership Selected Years 1979-96

area of organisation	1979	1985	1991	%age change 79-91	1996	%age change 91-96
<u>central</u>						
<u>government</u>						
Association of First Division of Civil Servants	5,820	5,509	9,994	72	9,473	-5.2
Civil and Public Services <sup>1</sup> Association	223,884	146,537	124,566	-44	116,681	-6.3
Prison Officers Association	20,469	23,777	27,224	33	27,322	0.4
<u>education</u>						
Association of University Teachers	30,881	31,232	32,960	6.7	37,054	12.4
National Association of School Masters and Union of Women Teachers	152,222	169,839	179,937	18.2	238,472	32.5
National Association of Teachers in Further and Higher Education	70,652	77,386	73,907	4.6	70,157	-5.1
National Union of Teachers	290,740	253,672	214,675	-26.2	271,299	26.4
<u>health</u>						
Health Visitors Association <sup>2</sup>	12,185	15,952	-	-	-	31
Hospital Consultants and Specialists Association	3,756	2,486	2,351	-37.4	2,264	-3.7
Society of Radiographers	-	-	12,815	-	13,086	2.1

area of organisation	1979	1985	1991	%age change 79-91	1996	%age change 91-96
<u>local</u> <u>government</u>						
Federated Union of Managerial and Professional Officers	6,225	8,770	11,956	92	10,897	-8.9
Fire Brigades Union	41,533	45,895	51,881	24.9	55,341	6.7
National Association of Probation Officers	-	6,225	6,765		6,779	8.8

<sup>1</sup> The CPSA and the PTC amalgamated in 1998 to form the PCS. <sup>2</sup> HVA merged with MSF in 1990

source: Mathieson and Corby 1999 table 10.2 p203-4

By contrast, most trade unions in the teaching profession continued to grow from 1979 to 1991 but the National Union of Teachers, the largest union in this field, saw its membership drop by over 26%. This may be related to the continuing battle with the National Association of School Masters and Women Teachers [NASUWT] over territory and dominance in primary and secondary schools. Although the NUT recovered ground by 1996 the NASUWT had narrowed the gap. This may be indicative of 'special factors' within teaching which continues to attract high profile political and media interest often because of trade union resistance to the imposition of new policies. The difficulties surrounding the organisation of members in education has some implications for the UNISON who have made no secret of the wish to see a larger union with a 'teaching arm' but in the present climate a merger of these two unions, however tenuous, seems less likely than that of COHSE, NALGO and NUPE.<sup>14</sup> The Fire Brigades Union [FBU] is the only blue-collar [albeit specialist] union in the list and the evidence shows that small, occupation specific trade unions can still survive and expand even where national governments are openly hostile to collective organisation.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup>Bickerstaffe. 2000. p20. and interview data.

<sup>15</sup>It is significant that a 'professional' organisation for fire-fighters has not emerged

The evidence concerning non-TUC unions is a little clearer but still indicates that changes may be related to occupation specific factors rather than an overall pattern of adjustment. Once again we can see that those trade unions in the teaching profession have done well with the exception of the tiny Scottish Further and Higher Education Association which lost just 0.2% of its membership from 1979-1991, but a further 28% by 1996. The doctors union, the British Medical Association [BMA] organised an additional 31% of members by 1991, but conversely, the TUC affiliated union for senior doctors, the Hospital Consultants and Specialists Association shrank by 37%. This suggests that the BMA was increasingly seen as the union for the medical profession. [See table 2.7]

table 2.7

Non-TUC Public Service Trade Union Membership:

Selected Years 1979-96

area of organisation	1979	1985	1991	%age change 79-91	1996	%age change 91-96
<u>central government</u>						
Immigration Service Union	-	1,192	1,724		2,183	73.4
Prison Governors Association	-	-	1,555		1,032	-10.6
<u>education</u>						
Association of Teachers and Lecturers	87,407	113,453	141,504	61.9	166,793	17.9
National Association of Head Teachers	23,329	29,762	38,140	63.5	43,617	14.4
Professional Association on Teachers	19,294	39,333	41,174	113.4	40,178	-2.4
Scottish Further and Higher Education Association	1,748	1,679	1,780	0.2	1,253	-29.6
<u>health</u>						
Association of Professional Ambulance Personnel	-	4,584	2,978		2,626	-11.8
British Association of Occupational Therapists	6,417	7,682	11,503	79.3	15,367	33.6
British Medical Association	65,624	78,147	86,043	31.1	101,334	17.8

when many of the other trade unions in the public services now have to compete with employee bodies opposed in principle to strike action.

area of organisation	1979	1985	1991	%age change 79-91	1996	%age change 91-96
<u>local government</u>						
Association of Magisterial Officers	4,668	3,928	4,170	-10.7	5,280	26.6
British Union of Social Work Employees	-	1,235	2,480		3,818	54
<sup>1</sup> Transfer of engagements to UNISON 1995						

source: Mathieson and Corby 1999 table 10.3 p205

Overall the evidence remains confusing but with two tendencies suggested:

- ♦ White-collar trade unionism in the public services has become the main cornerstone of collective bargaining in Britain
- ♦ the TUC affiliates still organise the vast majority [76%] of union members in the public services and 81% all union members;<sup>16</sup> of the remainder, 37% are organised by a single union, the Royal College of Nursing.

Further research is needed to determine additional interpretation of the data.

#### NURSES UNIONS

It would be remiss not to remark separately about those unions specifically representing nurses, not because they have secured the largest percentage increase of non-TUC unions, others have achieved significantly greater, relative growth, but because they constitute the largest single group of employees in the NHS. The Royal College of Midwives [RCM] a tightly 'closed' union<sup>17</sup> showed a 70% increase from 1979-96. For the same period the Royal College of Nursing [RCN], also a closed union, which represents trained staff [in all sections of nursing] and student nurses, but not unqualified nursing auxiliaries, saw an inexorable rise in membership to stand at near 300,000, an increase of virtually 81% between 1979 and 1991. See Table 2.8.

<sup>16</sup>Mellroy. op cit. p22.

<sup>17</sup>For information on 'closed' and 'open' unions see Turner 1962

table 2.8

## RCM and RCN Membership Trends: Selected Years 1979-96

union	1979	1985	1991	%age change 79-91
Royal College of Midwives	20,631	26,518	34,710	68.2
Royal College of Nursing	161,962	251,127	293,193	81

source: Mathieson and Corby 199 table 10.2 p 203-4

Thereafter, the rate of increase in membership for the both unions slowed considerably with the RCN recording only a 4.7% increase by 1996. The RCM and RCN present themselves as 'professional' organisations concerned deeply with the development and maintenance of ethics and standards and less with industrial relations and collective bargaining, though this is changing. For many years the RCN was strongly averse to any kind of industrial action which would affect patient care. In 1982, a prolonged pay dispute across the NHS resulted in a 4% pay offer to ancillary and clerical staff [mainly represented by the partner unions], whilst nurses [seen to be represented by the RCN] received 6.4%. Following this 'divisive' settlement to NHS employees the government in 1983 established a Pay Review Bodies for nurses and professions allied to medicine,

*largely a reward for the RCN not engaging in industrial action.*<sup>18</sup>

<sup>18</sup>Kessler and Bayliss. 1992. p122.

#### Note on Pay Review Bodies

The move by the Conservative government to end annual pay negotiations has meant that now over half of all NHS staff are covered by Pay Review Bodies which 'consider evidence' presented to them by trade unions, other interested parties and government before making their recommendations to government. On occasions this has resulted in awards being 'staged' rather than met outright. A Pay Review Body was also established for teachers after their wage negotiating machinery was abolished following prolonged industrial action in 1985 and 1986. Unlike the nurses' Review Body, the teachers' Review Body was meant as a 'punishment' and to marginalise trade union influence on pay and conditions.

#### Note on Industrial Action

In 1983 the RCN decisively rejected an attempt to amend its rules to allow members to take industrial action, but in 1995 both the RCM and RCN adopted a policy to 'have the right to strike' but as yet haven't used it.

#### COHSE, NALGO and NUPE: MEMBERSHIP DECLINE AND THE RISE OF THE NEW UNION

All three partner unions had enjoyed remarkable expansion from the 1960s and until 1979. [See chapters 3A, 3B and 3C]. From that point onwards their fortunes diverged, most rapidly between NALGO and NUPE, and to which can be traced the additional impetus that 'kick started' the merger. Table 2.9 charts the membership trend of the partner unions up to 1991 when the merger negotiations were as good as settled subject to the approval of the members. The data indicates COHSE had managed to stem decline for the first half of the 1980s and then lost 5% of its membership during the next six years. However, it now looks as though this was a somewhat optimistic view by COHSE of the union's decline and which was subsequently challenged during the merger negotiations.

table 2.9

UNISON partner union membership trends					
UNION	1979	1985	1991	%age change 79-91	1993
COHSE	212,930	212,980	201,993	-5.1	-
NALGO	753,226	752,151	759,735	0.8	-
NUPE	691,770	663,776	551,165	-20.3	-
UNISON					1,300,000 <sup>1</sup>
<sup>1</sup> UNISON estimate but subsequently revised downwards					

source: annual reports NALGO and NUPE. various reports COHSE

Numerical stability was the clear hallmark of NALGO and confirms earlier comments on the trend towards white-collar unionism. It also demonstrates a remarkable achievement by the union who had pressed hard the case of low-paid, white-collar staffs through industrial action and which looks to have won the union a loyal membership through the ability to *bring home the bacon*.<sup>19</sup> From 1979 to 1991 NUPE lost no less than one in five of its members and at that rate was set to fall well below half a million in the immediate future. Bickerstaffe, NUPE General Secretary had often said that below this level, influence at the TUC was marginal. Chapter 3C analyses NUPE's long-standing vision for public service industrial

<sup>19</sup>McIlroy, 1991, p198.

unionism, but there can be little doubt that the unprecedented rate of decline added a note of urgency to that quest. As table 2.10 shows NUPE's financial position was untenable and had to be resolved.

table 2.10

Comparison of Partner Union Finances at 1988

	INCOME			EXPENDITURE		
	FROM MEMBERS	FROM INVESTMENT	TOTAL		SURPLUS	VALUE OF INVESTMENTS
	000's	000's	000's	000's	000's	000's
COHSE	7,612	2,456	10,068	8,496	1,572	4,494
NALGO	40,588	7,648	48,236	40,692	7,544	37,498
NUPE	19,874	640	20,514	22,007	<b>-1,493</b>	3,268

source: annual report of Certification Officer 1989

NUPE's blue-collar membership was structurally in decline and the union had little hope of reversing the membership loss in the foreseeable future. Whereas COHSE and NALGO generally faced an expanding market of white-collar employment, albeit much of it low-paid and low-skilled.

### The State and Economic Influences on Trade Union Membership

To understand the changes, including the pace of the decline in union membership, it is necessary to look at the economic and political trends and how they had both a direct and indirect influence on trade union membership and activity. Unemployment stood at 5% when the Tories came to power in 1979 and inflation was at 13%. The government adopted a policy of increasing unemployment as a prime measure to squeeze inflation out of the economy. Inflation was said to be under control [2% in 1987], but on the way unemployment reached over 3 million affecting 1 in 8 of the workforce. [See table 2.11]

table 2.11 Economic Indicators 1979 -1989

year	unemployment %age	inflation %age	number of strikes (000s)
1979	5	13	2080
1980	6.4	18	1330
1981	9.8	12	1338
1982	11.3	8	1528
1983	12.5	5	1352
1984	11.7	5	1206
1985	11.2	6	857
1986	11.1	3	1053
1987	10.2	2	1004
1988	8.3	5	781
1989	6.4	8	701

source: Marsh 1992. p165

The effect of these policies on trade union membership was five fold:

- ♦ the absolute number of employees in the workforce fell sharply with a concomitant reduction in the available 'potential membership'
- ♦ many long-standing trade union members were lost permanently from the workforce as large sections of industry contracted and closed,<sup>20</sup> with much of the work of these former employees moved to developing economies in Asia.
- ♦ union members were less willing to take strike action in pursuit of an increase in pay and conditions and were often prepared to sacrifice cuts in living standards as the price for retaining jobs. A point readily exploited by some employers.
- ♦ Trade unions also became more inclined to relinquish traditional negotiating stances in return for 'sweetheart' recognition deals with employers who demanded 'no-strike' clauses in these agreements,<sup>21</sup>

<sup>20</sup>From 1979-1988 employment in production industries and manufacturing fell by 39% and 29% respectively. Marsh. op cit. p167.

<sup>21</sup>Such an agreement between the EETPU and News International led to a major confrontation in the print industry - 'the Wapping Dispute' - and the expulsion of the union from the TUC in 1988 partly because the agreement with the employer excluded those unions who had up until then traditionally organised the members with that employer.



- ♦ An effect not often voiced was the willingness of trade unions to seek expansion by 'poaching' the members of another trade union to offset their membership losses and reduce costs, a scenario described as 'Market-Share Unionism'.<sup>22</sup>

The de-industrialisation of Britain continued so that in 1992 only 4.1 million people [22%] of total employment, were in manufacturing; Sainsbury supermarkets employed more workers than Ford and jobs in the private service sector were double those in manufacturing.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, the evolving prominence of the services sector caused a further difficulty for trade unions who had not been successful generally in organising a workforce that is often transitory in nature. Elsewhere, the new employers were frequently small or medium sized companies on green-field sites with little or no history of collective bargaining and trade union recognition. The employees in these new companies also proved to be difficult for trade unions to organise. Many of the jobs were part-time and filled by women who have historically been more problematic to organise.<sup>24</sup> [See later]. Consequently a growing section of the labour force had assumed a mantle of 'union-free non-collectivism' as the norm with only 40% of the workforce covered by collective bargaining.<sup>25</sup>

### **State Policies That Directly Influenced The Partner Unions**

*The root cause of rotten local services lies in the grip which local government unions have over those services in many parts of the country ... Our competitive tendering provisions will smash that grip once and for all.* Nicholas Ridley.<sup>26</sup>

Many of the above changes were an indirect consequence of socio-economic policies introduced by the Conservatives who had promised to effect efficiencies in the public services by exposing them to market testing through competition with the private sector.<sup>27</sup> This initiative was responsible for a number of specific

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<sup>22</sup>Willman. 1989.

<sup>23</sup>McIlroy. 1995. op cit. p85-86.

<sup>24</sup>Marsh. op cit. p170.

<sup>25</sup>Bassett and Cave. op cit. p3.

<sup>26</sup>quoted in Colling 1999. p139

<sup>27</sup>Key. 1988. p65.

measures prosecuted by successive governments that impacted directly on public services and public service trade unions. These included the break-up of the Civil Service and the privatisation of the public utilities and telecommunications. But perhaps the most damaging in terms of the unions in the UNISON merger was the 'rolling' programme of market testing which began in 1982 when NHS employers were forced by ministerial edict to submit their catering, cleaning and laundry services [and later portering] to Compulsory Competitive Tendering [CCT] which enabled external contractors to undercut 'in-house' bids by cutting the pay, holidays and conditions of service of the former NHS employees. Between December 1983 and December 1992 over a 114,000 jobs were lost from these services.<sup>28</sup>

This approach was also adopted in local government where employers were obliged to tender work for highways construction and maintenance in 1981. Then under the 1988 Local Government Act CCT was introduced for refuse collection, street cleansing, catering, building cleaning, vehicle maintenance, grounds maintenance and sports and leisure management. This had several effects:

- ♦ employers cut staff in an attempt to increase productivity
- ♦ even where contracts were retained in-house trade unions found themselves bargaining down their members pay and conditions - the *new realism*.
- ♦ where contracts were lost to private bidders trade unions often had difficulty recruiting and retaining their members in the face of hostile employers who were averse to union recognition
- ♦ key activists were either lost with the contracts or were restricted by their employer from servicing those members transferred to the contractors. This placed an additional strain on the unions' general ability to organise their increasingly remote, potential membership. [IRS 1992].

Although technically not the employer for many public service workers the fact that the government controls the purse strings of its agents makes it an exceptionally powerful regulator of public sector employment which the Conservatives used to the full.

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<sup>28</sup>Kerr and Radford. 1994. p4.

## The State: Legislation and Industrial Relations

*There is, perhaps, no major country in the world in which the law has played a less significant role in the shaping of industrial relations than in Great Britain and in which today the law and legal profession have less to do with labour relations.*<sup>29</sup>

That position changed after 1979 after the Conservatives implemented far-reaching, controversial changes that signalled the end of voluntarism. From 1980 to 1992 successive Tory Governments introduced no less than eight separate statutes limiting and regulating trade union activities. Significant amongst these were:

- ♦ the removal of immunities in secondary picketing<sup>30</sup>
- ♦ unions being subject to punitive damages for unlawful actions<sup>31</sup>
- ♦ requirements for pre-strike ballots if immunity from prosecution was to be avoided<sup>32</sup>
- ♦ removal of all closed shop facilities; the establishment of a Commissioner for the Rights of Trade Union Members, providing them with assistance to sue their own union<sup>33</sup>
- ♦ the compulsion for fully postal pre-strike ballots.<sup>34</sup>

Coupled with this was rhetoric from Government ministers threatening to outlaw industrial action in the public sector whenever disputes in these areas surfaced and impinged on the Government's credibility as a tough master of industrial relations. All of these had the effect of seriously debilitating trade union resolve and ability to start and win fights to maintain and improve members pay and conditions. A notable exception being the national ambulance dispute in 1989 when the unions, [at least in public relations terms] *hardly put a foot wrong*.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>29</sup>Kahn-Freund. 1954. p44.

<sup>30</sup>Employment Act 1980.

<sup>31</sup>Employment Act 1982.

<sup>32</sup>Employment Act 1984.

<sup>33</sup>Employment Act 1988

<sup>34</sup>Trade Union Reform and Employment Rights Act 1993.

<sup>35</sup>Terry. 1996. p93.

Of measures designed to weaken the trade union [and Labour] movement the attempt to try and sever the financial link with the Labour Party was potentially the most pernicious. The 1984 Trade Union Act required all those unions with political funds [37] to hold ballots of their members every 10 years to confirm their continuance. The government had expected that union members would reject the principal which in turn would rupture Labour's financial link with trade unions. In the event, the results were a spectacular success for the unions who ran a co-ordinated campaign via the TUC. All 37 unions retained their funds, mostly with more than 70% of the ballots in favour of retention, including one non-TUC union. Two unions, the National Union of Hosiery and Knit Wear and the Inland Revenue Staffs Federation who had not previously held political funds conducted successful ballots to establish one.<sup>36</sup> At the same time, membership of a trade union was declared incompatible with national security at the Government Communication Headquarters [GCHQ]. Although it did not spark a wave of derecognition [as the government may have hoped], it did damage industrial relations in the civil service. The government did not however have matters all its own way. Legislation enacted through measures from the European Union [EU] acted as a restraint on some of the government's more ambitious intentions, especially those in the areas of sex discrimination, pay equality and employment protection. However, outside of these parameters the influence of the EU was muted.<sup>37</sup>

### **Gender and Occupational Shift in the Labour Force**

The changes in the economic climate that saw unemployment rise in those areas of the workplace organised by the general unions included a disturbance in the gender composition of the workforce as a whole. In 1954 women constituted 29.8% of all employees; by the end of the 1980s this had risen to 43.8%. Between 1971 and 1989 women accounted for 9 out of 10 of the 3.1 million extra employees in the labour force.<sup>38</sup> The number of women working part-time also increased. [See table 2.12].

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<sup>36</sup>Marsh. op cit. p154.

<sup>37</sup>Dickens and Hall. p258-268.

<sup>38</sup>Gallie et al. 1996. op cit. p20.

table 2.12

## Gender change in the workforce 1984 - 1990

		1984	1990
		(000)	(000)
<u>full-time employees</u>	men	11,111	11,345
	women	4,966	5,850
<u>part-time employees</u>	men	426	595
	women	3,952	4,461

source: Employment Gazette 1991

The increasing number of women in the workforce, and the loss of men from it have been key determinants on the pattern of unionisation with women accounting for much of the aggregate increase in membership and potential membership. [See table 2.13].

table 2.13

## Union Membership And Density By Gender: Selected Years 1948-1987

year	men		women	
	union membership	employment density %age	union membership	employment density %age
1948	7,454	56.2	1,648	24.5
1960	7,558	55.3	1,879	25.3
1979	8,818	66.9	3,822	40.4
1987	6,415	55.2	3,459	35.7

source: Waddington and Whitston 1995 table 6.2 p158

The increase in women trade union members also had an impact on the level of participation in the activities of their unions with more of them seeking and obtaining office. Trade unions were also keen to alter their structures of governance and employ women as paid officials as sign of their responsiveness to the feminisation of the workplace.<sup>39</sup> How this affected the partner unions is seen in table 2.14.

<sup>39</sup>Lawrence, 1994, p33. Fryer et al. 1974.

table 2.14 Women's Activism in the Partner Unions 1991

union	no of women members	% women members	% on national executive	% TUC delegation	% full-time officers
NUPE	430,000	71.3	46.1	36.1	38.5
NALGO	398,660 (1989)	53.1	42	41.7	31.6
COHSE	156,900	79	50	31.6	54.2

source: LRD 1991.

However, this level of activism, albeit not being pro rata to women's constituency in the partner unions, was indicative of the importance that women and women's issues would play in the new union. It also indicates that on gender, the three partner unions were converging but at different rates and that men still dominated the centres of lay member governance.

As the number of members of trade unions has altered over time, so has the number of trade unions organising them with a decrease in the overall number of trade unions. Many smaller unions have disappeared often mirroring occupational trends and advances in manufacturing and technology. However, the principal means of structural reform of British trade unions has been the trend towards merger.<sup>40</sup> Those mergers have occurred sometimes as part of an aggressive merger policy, but mostly as a defensive mechanism to off-set a loss of members in declining occupations or occasionally to counter the predatory activity of a disfavoured competitor.<sup>41</sup> The development of national pay bargaining during the first part of the twentieth century transformed relations between employers and trade unions and acted as an impetus to merger for those unions wishing to increase their influence and membership, but much of that potential merger activity was frustrated by inter-union hostilities.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>40</sup>Willman, 1996, p331.

<sup>41</sup>See Undy et al 1981 for a discussion on merger types.

<sup>42</sup>Waddington, op cit, p13.

## Mergers and Change in British Trade Unions

Clearly, trade union merger is not new, but the period following 1979 is of direct relevance to this thesis because of the spiralling decline in union membership. In 1979 there were 454 unions with 13,829 members. Of the 109 which were TUC affiliates, just eleven accounted for 64% of the total membership. By 1992 immediately prior to the UNISON merger, just nine out of the 69 TUC unions organised that 64% of the membership. Non-TUC union numbers had dropped by 77 [22%] to 268.<sup>43</sup> The result was that the average size of unions had increased and twenty unions had over 100,000 members. That said, there was a significant divergence between the nine largest unions with an average size of approximately 600,000 members, and the eleven next largest whose average size was 155,000. [See table 2.15]

table 2.15 Union Membership and Size 1992

1992					
membership size	No of unions	membership (000)	%age of all unions	%age of all membership	average size of group
under 500	92	16	34.3	0.2	174
500-2,499	71	97	26.5	1.1	1,366
2,500-9,999	42	214	15.6	2.3	5,095
10,000-24,999	15	236	5.6	2.6	15,733
25,000-99,000	28	1,326	10.5	14.6	47,357
100,000-249,000	11	1,710	4.1	18.9	155,454
250,000+	9	5,449	3.4	60.2	605,444
Total	268	9,048	100	100	

source: Waddington and Whitston. 1995. table 6.6. p178

This trend of *merger mania* looks set to continue. In 1989 40% of *all* unions had been involved in merger discussions and by 1995 40% of these had achieved merger. Primarily it was larger TUC affiliates [circa 170,000 members] that were involved in merger talks. This lends weight to the view that in future trade union

<sup>43</sup>source: Waddington and Whitston. op cit. p177. McIlroy. 1995. op cit. p19. Kessler and Bayliss. op cit.

membership would be concentrated in *superunions*.<sup>44</sup> Indeed, John Monks, TUC General Secretary believes that there will be no more than 45 affiliates in the near future despite his policy of actively encouraging the smaller, 'professional' unions to join the TUC.

Another consequence of merger activity has been to increase the diversity of the membership of trade unions further complicating the structure of British trade unionism. And although the UNISON merger was specifically aimed at bringing about a re-alignment and 'simplification' of British trade unionism it has paradoxically complicated matters by bringing into the same union, for example, public and private sector workers, nurses and electricity meter readers, as well as white-collar transport staff and blue-collar sewerage workers. These examples highlight how trade unions are becoming more concentrated in numbers but as a consequence have acquired a more diverse membership. The differences of those memberships brings to the fore the need for trade unions to develop equitable systems of participation and governance. [See chapter 5].

#### UNION MERGERS: CLASS AND STATUS

*... to investigate the coherence of the notion of 'white-collar, and to consider whether the conventional dichotomy rests on fundamental or merely superficial differences within the labour force, is to confront implicitly the issue of class structure.*<sup>45</sup>

This thesis is not a study of class and tries to avoid the pitfall of assigning groups to classifications that are frequently and vociferously contested. Hence, in chapter 4 membership differences are not dealt with along those lines. Nevertheless, it would be remiss not to comment briefly on some of the trends that have implications for union mergers. Historically blue-collar workers were mainly seen as supporters of Labour but at the 1979 general election large numbers of them voted for the

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<sup>44</sup>Willman. 1996. op cit. p333. In 1999, *superunionism* had all but arrived: Five unions, UNISON, TGWU, AEEU, GMB and MSF controlled 60% of the TUC's membership. [LRD. 1999] And a further merger between two of these - AEEU and MSF that would create a union of 1.15 million - is under way at the time of writing.

<sup>45</sup>Hyman 1983 p15



Conservatives, although that may have been due to specific circumstances at that time. That said, the drift away from manual labour towards white-collar employment has implications for a potential shift in the class position of unions and their historical support for Labour. Yet such has been the fusion between blue-collar and white-collar employment that some authors now ask, who is the new working class?<sup>46</sup> This may never be fully answered as changes in self-perception as much as the view of others will continue to re-order concepts once thought to be settled. UNISON's membership would include a range of occupations that are difficult to classify and in some instances may have surpassed previous orthodoxy. These include, nurses, paramedics, homecarers, classroom assistants, leisure attendants and a plethora of jobs that now seem to straddle both blue-collar and white-collar concepts. It has been argued that the convergence of work patterns and work content is leading to a shift in the received wisdom of the way in which occupation is allied, however tenuously, to class.

*In reality, many jobs at all levels ... were successfully carried out by people with no or only minimal qualifications. The 'O' level requirement must certainly play a part in maintaining what we have described as the 'skill fiction' in respect of clerical work as a whole ....*<sup>47</sup>

But as is seen in chapter 4, it is not simply the holding of 'paper' qualifications that separates blue-collar and white-collar workers, rather a more fundamental configuration of [including] education, skills, income and articulacy that are intrinsically associated with the disadvantages of manual labour. And as Lockwood has pointed out,

*Working with one's hands was associated with other attributes - lack of authority, illiteracy, lowly social origin, insecurity of livelihood - which together spelt social deprivation. .... status consciousness inflamed class consciousness, and social distinctions reinforced economic distinctions.*<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup>Gallie 1978. Hyman and Price 1983. Crompton and Jones 1984. Smith 1987

<sup>47</sup>Crompton and Jones. op cit. p75.

<sup>48</sup>Lockwood. 1958. p99

This problem was only one aspect of the difficulties facing the three partner unions but it would lie at the heart of the new union and would require tolerance, innovation and generosity of spirit for the union to succeed. It would also be important for the three partner unions to understand why their respective members had joined and stayed in membership and how that had driven the development of services and structures specific to the needs of the kinds of members that they organised, and to recognise that these norms may be inappropriate and divisive to other groups in the new union.

*White-collar workers join unions, not because they reject their middle-class aspirations, but because they see unionism as a better way of obtaining them. Unionisation is viewed in this light as a way of keeping ahead of manual workers rather than as an expression of solidarity with them in fighting for a common cause.*<sup>49</sup>

As chapter 5 highlights, much of the new union was built around a rhetoric of the common interests and values that the members of the three partner unions were said to share. However, this thesis contends that for some white-collar members the new union was not an expression of ideological support for collective and class solidarity, rather that UNISON could be instrumental in pressing their own selective interests.

## **Conclusions**

Membership of British trade unions has rarely been stable and continues to be affected by changes in the economic cycle. During the 1960s and 1970s trade union growth generally exceeded previous trends but looks not to have been typical and has led some to argue that the decline that commenced after the election of the Thatcher government in 1979 is terminal. Such analysis has failed to take account fully of the effects of socio-economic policies during that period which resulted in a substantial reduction of the private sector manufacturing base. Historically, this had been the repository for blue-collar membership many of whom were lost permanently from the labour force which itself was subject to an occupational drift

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<sup>49</sup>Price. 1983. p163. quoting Strauss and Allen.

away from blue-collar labour towards white-collar employment. Consequently, by the end of the 1980s trade union density had fallen considerably in the manual sector and concomitantly, the density in the white-collar sector which had always been lower, also fell substantially.

Trade union membership in the public services suffered from the general downturn in the economy but nowhere near as badly as that in the private sectors. Here too, manual membership was affected more than non-manual membership. This has created a situation where union density has become concentrated in white-collar employment in the public services. But within that scenario, the pattern of membership dispersion has not been even. It has not been possible to discern definite trends, though there is some evidence that suggests that non-TUC unions benefitted from a degree of membership disenchantment with TUC unions who had hitherto been seen as the legitimate voice of those members.. Notwithstanding these changes, those unions who specifically organised nurses have consistently increased their membership.

COHSE had experienced a small loss of members, whilst NALGO had been able to retain and even increase its membership which gave both unions a financial stability that was denied to NUPE who lost one fifth of its membership in little over a decade. That loss, mostly caused by the effects of Compulsory Competitive Tendering, determined the union to expedite the implementation of a long-held vision of a single union for the public services.

On the wider front, the government had taken an incremental approach to reforming the trade union/employer axis by implementing a series of measures to limit trade union activity and reduce the ability of trade unions to resist employer initiatives. These measures did not in themselves bring about a decline in union density, though it is clear that they created a climate that encouraged employers to reduce jobs, pay, and conditions of employment at a time when job security was in the balance.

The changes in the workplace also heralded a change in the gender balance of the workforce as more women, often in part-time jobs, entered employment. Consequently, trade unions became more feminised as women members filled many of the gaps left by men who had lost their jobs in the de-industrialisation of Britain. In the partner unions women were a majority of the membership which ensured that women's issues would be a principle concern in the new union merger negotiations and beyond.

This compositional change in trade union membership was accompanied by a change in the size and shape of trade unions. Merger activity amongst unions has meant that unions are getting larger and more diverse as they have tended to follow a political rather than industrial logic. The changes in the provision of public services has given UNISON a membership that straddles the boundaries of the public and private sectors making a claim for 'industrial unionism' more difficult to achieve. Notwithstanding these structural complications, UNISON was built on a pledge to fuse differences and cross hitherto insurmountable boundaries.

## **An Introductory Note About Chapters 3A, 3B and 3C:**

### **The Importance of History To Our Understanding of The Contemporary**

In his celebrated and influential polemical essay 'What is History?', E.H. Carr demonstrates that the central and distinguishing concern of all good history is a convincing search to the question 'why?'.<sup>1</sup> In my view, asking the various 'whys' about UNISON requires first that we explore the influence of the history and development of the three partner unions upon the formation of UNISON. Without that knowledge we are limited in our understanding of the difficulties that had to be overcome during the merger negotiations for the new union and why subsequently UNISON has in large part, come to resemble NALGO. [See chapter 5]. The contribution of the 'culture' [see chapter 6] of each partner union to UNISON's organisational structure, ways of working and current intra-union associations has been emphasised by Mouzelis who notes that classical approaches to theories of organisation and bureaucracy always recognised the importance of understanding the relationship between historical development and change. The study of contemporary trade unionism and the form and character [see chapter 6] of particular unions requires us to grasp the impact of their historical development upon their contemporary manifestation.<sup>2</sup>

Many of the defining characteristics of the partner unions were deep seated and would require a determined, strategic approach to bring about their change, but even so, some patterns of their behaviour were so ingrained that change to them looked not to be possible without serious harm to the core values and principles held by the partner unions.<sup>3</sup> And because those core values and principles often differed we need to ask what were the old unions like, and how they varied from one and other. This is not an exercise in a simple chronological logging of past events, but an integral and essential part in our efforts to try and determine why UNISON is like it is now. However, we must also remember that whilst history is an [significant] influence it is not in itself a determinant, other matters including

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<sup>1</sup>Carr. 1986.

<sup>2</sup>Mouzelis. 1967. p35.

<sup>3</sup> Turner op cit

the merger negotiations and the socio-economic and political climates that faced the partner unions had a major bearing on the formation of UNISON.

## Chapter 3A

### The Making of UNISON: COHSE's History

#### Introduction

By the late 1960s, COHSE had developed into a major trade union for Health Service workers, but its origins rested in the 'Lunatic Asylums' of Victorian Britain. This chapter charts the early days and the union's later growth and influence and how the union remained until the end, heavily affected by its nursing membership working with the mentally ill. This chapter confirms the link between the contraction of the union's membership and the closure of the large psychiatric hospitals which dispersed the central core of the union's nursing constituency.

Specifically, this chapter addresses the status dilemma COHSE faced as the union tried to expand its membership outside the psychiatric hospitals and into the general hospitals where it had to compete with the RCN. In the end, this dilemma of professionalism versus trade unionism, led to the union's [temporary] expulsion from the TUC as COHSE struggled to maintain its image of the 'professional trade union'. Much of COHSE's dilemma surrounded the disputed status of nurses as professionals and the kind of services that nurses demanded of their trade union. This experience was at the heart of the union's stance in the merger negotiations, so it is essential to understand the store set by the union on being seen as the 'Health Service' trade union and the wish not to be swallowed up by the more logical merger with NUPE who had made several overtures on this front.

One of the most difficult aspects of this research has been the problem of establishing the 'culture' of COHSE and how that has impacted upon the merger negotiations and subsequently, UNISON. The formal literature, with a few exceptions such as Carpenter<sup>4</sup> and Hart,<sup>5</sup> is relatively silent, with greater attention having been given to NALGO & NUPE. This in itself is worthy of comment. Why should researchers 'overlook' such a large trade union? Space, however, limits this line of enquiry: nevertheless, it is important that this phenomenon is not forgotten in any subsequent analysis, for in trying to assess UNISON we are at an immediate

<sup>4</sup>Carpenter, 1988.

<sup>5</sup>Hart 1997.

disadvantage in that formally we know less about COHSE because it has been studied less. Therefore, caution needs to be exercised when comparisons about the three unions are expressed.

### Origins of the Union

*COHSE was traditionally a cautious and conservative affiliated union dominated by male psychiatric charge nurses.*<sup>6</sup>

COHSE's history, like that of many other unions, depicts years of struggle to establish and maintain an organisation in the face of adversity. In 1910 the National Asylum Workers Union [NAWU] was formed as a direct response to the exceptionally low pay of 'attendants' in the 'asylums' and who were viewed officially as manual workers. Promotion was slow, many waiting to jump into 'deadmen's' shoes' as the higher graded posts became increasingly occupied by the *high flyers* from general nursing. All this contributed to discontent amongst staff and provided fertile ground for unionisation.<sup>7</sup>

Recognising the need to exert political as well as industrial influence, the NAWU affiliated to the Labour Party in 1914 and subsequently to the TUC in 1923. This was an unusual [but not unique] chronology, certainly by current standards and priorities, in that official, political affiliation established precedent over industrial association. Evidence from the merger negotiations revealed that fiscal prudence as much as political intent dictated events.

*.... the unions early pioneers delayed TUC affiliation because the union couldn't afford fees and felt the organisation too right wing!*<sup>8</sup>

The union continued to grow and underwent several name changes and a merger until in 1946 COHSE was formed on the principle of a single union for the Health Service. Since then the union moved to a centre right stance as it debated how to organise nurses outside psychiatry.

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<sup>6</sup>Carpenter. op cit. p9

<sup>7</sup>ibid. p19-47.

<sup>8</sup>COHSE. 1989 (1). p5.



## THE ATTEMPT TO FIND A MARKETING NICHE

This early expansion was followed by membership stagnation in the 1950s as the RCN squeezed COHSE on nurses, especially in the general hospitals: NUPE and the TGWU did the same on ancillaries: NALGO on administrative staff and the Association of Scientific Workers on laboratory and professional staffs. This indicates that contrary to COHSE's hope of a single union in the Health Service, that staff were organising according to grade and discipline. This left COHSE being seen increasingly as the union for mental nurses, a tag which followed it through its latter years although the union never publicly accepted this. However, hitherto unpublished COHSE documents show that the union quite early on had recognised privately that its aim of one union for the NHS had failed, and that the union was still perceived mainly as a union for psychiatric nurses.

*In the 1950s, the new COHSE was faced with the challenge of building on its expanded membership base and laying the foundations for its overall industrial objective of one union for all health service staff. It turned sadly inwards, however, dominated largely by the albeit justifiable concerns of mental nurses. As a result COHSE was seen as a 'mental nurses union during the 1950s and 60s .....'*<sup>9</sup>

## Relationship with the TUC

The threat which COHSE felt that the RCN posed is most graphically illustrated by events in 1972, which led to the union's expulsion from the TUC.<sup>10</sup> The difficulties

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<sup>9</sup>ibid.

<sup>10</sup>In 1971, the Heath Conservative Government introduced the Industrial Relations Act which required all independent trade unions to be members of a register which whilst giving certain privileges to unions also restricted other traditional 'bona fide' activities. Among the provisions of the Act were: 'unfair industrial practices', under which both official and unofficial industrial action by unregistered unions would lead to them becoming liable for damages, and ultimately, through contempt of court proceedings to imprisonment. Unions had to control their members by disciplinary measures including expulsion. COHSE feared that if it de-registered as other TUC affiliates had done that the RCN would use its new found advantages under the act to attack the union's members. The TUC expelled COHSE from membership later that year, but re-admitted it in 1974 after the union deregistered after a concerted TUC campaign of non-co-operation had made the Act unworkable.

experienced by COHSE during 'two of the union's most turbulent years' - 1972-74<sup>11</sup> through the union's enforced absence from the TUC, had caused many local branches to reconsider their approach to COHSE's relationship with the rest of the [TUC affiliated] trade union movement. No less than seven resolutions from branches were submitted to the union's 1974 national conference calling for de-registration. The difficulties caused by expulsion from the TUC had plainly caused COHSE branches problems with other TUC unions at local level and promulgated a recognition that the general interests of COHSE's members did not lie in the union acting 'de facto' as a professional organisation but as a fully fledged trade union.<sup>12</sup> The resolution from the Hayward's Heath Branch summed up the mood of the members.

*That in the interest of the brotherhood of mankind generally and of the Trades Union Congress in particular this conference exhorts the de-registration of COHSE.*<sup>13</sup>

In the end, the report from COHSE's Executive Council recommending de-registration was accepted 'overwhelmingly' after a relatively short debate'.<sup>14</sup> The move by the Executive Council to recommend de-registration only came in the 'Supplement to the Final Agenda' which may be an important indicator of how [at times] activists rather than officers dictated the direction of the union.

#### **AFTER DE-REGISTRATION: GROWTH AND INFLUENCE**

Notwithstanding these difficulties, the strategy of maintaining the union's registration under the 1971 Act appears to have paid off, as the union increased its membership even faster than NALGO and NUPE. [See table 3.1].

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<sup>11</sup>COHSE, 1974, p110.

<sup>12</sup>See chapter 6 for discussion on 'unionateness'.

<sup>13</sup>resolution 14, COHSE National Conference 1974.

<sup>14</sup>COHSE 1974, op cit. p110.

table 3.1

## Changes in Membership of Partner Unions 1970-78

union	membership 000s	membership 000s	%age change
	1970	1978	1970-78
COHSE	90	215	139
NALGO	440	729	66
NUPE	373	712	91

source: Marsh 1992 table 2.1 p 26-7

This enabled the new General Secretary, Albert Spanswick to declare this to be,  
*.... a remarkable achievement ..... COHSE had made the change from ... a small, insular union to a large, forward-looking organisation.*<sup>15</sup>

This increase in membership had placed COHSE in the top twenty of the largest trade unions in Britain. The rapid expansion of the union goes some way to answering the question of 'why the merger not happened before?' The union with its declared policy of 'one union for the NHS' would have had to contemplate giving up its ethos and cherished identity which would have invited rebellion amongst the lay activists and obstruction from paid officials keen to preserve their status and identity. Comments by Michael amply demonstrate this.

In 1972 the general secretary, Frank Lynch was contemplating merger with the GMB but it was quickly killed off. People like me as regional secretary made sure it didn't happen. The chemistry was never right. The personalities didn't want it. ... It was a fear that if NUPE and COHSE merged that NUPE would have been totally dominant. We were prepared to make the sacrifice for a new union, but not NUPE writ large, and it would not have been as successful as UNISON. [Michael ex-COHSE. senior, national official ]

Three significant events in COHSE's history stand out from the late 1970s:

- ♦ the 'acquisition' of a small, breakaway organisation of ambulance staffs, the Federation of Ambulance Personnel in 1976, many of whom had formerly been NUPE members. This clearly indicated that COHSE was prepared to seek

<sup>15</sup> ibid.

expansion outside of the nursing field. It also helped the union to claim that it now had 25% of all ambulance staff in Britain and should therefore have greater representation at the National Ambulancemen's Council.<sup>16</sup>

- ♦ in 1977 the union exceeded 200,000 members which had the union's national conference .... *wallowing in the splendid achievement of a membership figure .... the target that many said COHSE could never achieve ... which makes COHSE the fastest growing union in the TUC.*<sup>17</sup>
- ♦ the union adopted a resolution from its Manchester branch calling for development of local Joint Shop Stewards Committees.<sup>18</sup> This would appear to have been in response to the growing competition for members and influence at hospital level from other unions, including NUPE, which had recently restructured itself and was in the process of building a shop stewards movement and which was keen to establish an influential profile.<sup>19</sup>

### Membership Fortunes

As with many other unions, COHSE reached its zenith in 1979 after which the membership declined, though at a slower rate than NUPE which had been severely affected by CCT and to a greater degree than COHSE.<sup>20</sup> [See table 3.2]

table 3.2 Changes in Membership of Partner Unions 1979 v 1989:

union	membership 000s 1979	membership 000s 1989	% change 1979-89
COHSE	212	209	-1
NALGO	753	750	no effective change.
NUPE	692	605	-13

source: Marsh 1992 table 2.1 p 26-7

<sup>16</sup>COHSE 1976. p27.

<sup>17</sup>COHSE 1977. p3.

<sup>18</sup>resolution 3. COHSE National Conference. 1977.

<sup>19</sup>See Fryer et al. 1974. on the NUPE strategy for introducing a shop stewards movement.

<sup>20</sup>Hart. op cit. p8.

There were however, additional factors that influenced COHSE's decline other than those over-arching matters discussed in chapter 2. Despite the earlier recruitment successes, particularly during the 1970s, the union's attempts to expand its membership base outside psychiatric hospitals largely failed. And although at this time there was an increase on COHSE's Executive Council of non-nursing lay members who contributed to the willingness of the union to contemplate industrial action in pursuit of better pay and conditions, the union was still for all intents and purposes dominated by psychiatric nursing issues. Formally the union denied this to be true, and indeed some of the ex-COHSE contributors to this research rebutted such suggestions, however, as will be seen in the following extract from my interview with a very senior, ex-COHSE, national official, many in the union simply despaired at the lack of progress in re-balancing the union's membership.

Charlie and I were strap hanging [on the London underground] one day and he said, "we've got more bloody bin men than NUPE." It stuck and became a common saying.<sup>21</sup> [Michael, ex-COHSE senior national official]

And perhaps it is this belated recognition that despite efforts to the contrary, the union had failed to make significant headway on creating a single union for the NHS that helped tip the scales in favour of the new union.

#### **THE CLOSURE OF LARGE PSYCHIATRIC HOSPITALS**

In 1984, COHSE established an influential Working Party to review the future of psychiatric services at a time when hospital based provision for the mentally ill was undergoing far reaching changes. The effects of these changes had serious implications for the union with a [potentially] considerable loss of membership.<sup>22</sup> The resources and priority given to this issue by the union demonstrates that the psychiatric nursing members of the union were not only an influential section within it, but also a very important contributor overall to COHSE's presence in the

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<sup>21</sup>The reference to bin men means: mentally-ill = loony; mental hospital = loony-bin; bin men = psychiatric nurses; in NUPE bin men = local authority refuse collectors]

<sup>22</sup>COHSE 1984.

NHS, and in particular to the union's claim to be a major organisation representing nurses.<sup>23</sup>

The scale of change that faced COHSE was immense, but in truth those changes had started in the 1960s as the large psychiatric hospitals contracted in size and number. In 1960, there were no less than 363 hospitals with more than 250 mental illness beds each. By 1980 there were just 78, a reduction of more than 78%. By 1980, only 18 of the very large, psychiatric hospitals (1000 + beds) remained. This effectively eradicated the potential for further growth in this section of the Health Service. [See table 3.3]

table 3.3

Contraction of Psychiatric Hospitals and reduction in number of in-patient beds for the mentally ill: 1966 to 1980

number of psychiatric hospitals with number of beds over	1966	1969	1972	1975	1980
1500	30	28	21	7	1
1000	61	55	46	34	17
750	82	81	70	54	
500	91	92	89	83	60
250	99	99	100	99	
number of mental illness units in general hospitals	103	111	114	126	157

Source: COHSE. 1984. p14.

The closure of the large psychiatric hospitals and the associated move to 'Community Care'<sup>24</sup> were the major contributors to COHSE's lack of expansion in

<sup>23</sup>The membership of the Working Party included: the Director of the NHS Health Advisory Service, a professor of psychiatry, two further consultant psychiatrists, a consultant psychologist, an Administrator of a District Health Authority, a Director of Nurse Education, and the assistant Director of MIND, a highly effective national lobby group on behalf of psychiatric patients.

<sup>24</sup>In 1990 the government enacted the National Health Service and Care in the Community Act which heralded the quite rapid closure of many of the large psychiatric hospitals as patients were transferred into small, family-sized units

the early 1980s and inevitable decline in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The union did not, or perhaps could not, for lack of organisational structure, follow its newly re-ordered membership base. Many of its lay activists had found themselves removed from large sections of their original membership which added to the difficulty of servicing a newly isolated workforce.

#### CONSOLIDATION OR EXPANSION

The union now had to face a further dichotomy, should it consolidate its [dwindling] membership base, or alternatively increase [limited] resources to try and organise community based staff. This would have entailed concentrating resources and energy on non-members as opposed to servicing current membership. To have re-ordered the union's priorities to organise widely in the community would have required the active consent and co-operation of COHSE's lay activists who themselves were having to cope with far reaching changes in their formal employment. These changes caused COHSE an unprecedented degree of difficulty in recruiting and retaining both members and activists and hindered the union's wish to organise effectively amongst community based staff.

By the mid 1980s the union had already recognised that without a substantial change of fortune that major alterations to its ways of working and potential expansion plans were inevitable. Following a debate at its 1986 national conference the union commissioned a review of matters. The subsequent confidential report from a senior national officer noted,

*[COHSE has] recognised the need for change and a major overhaul of our organisation and structure ..... the regional executive committees are no longer capable of carrying out many of their functions and should therefore be abolished ..... the relationship between the employer and employees is changing ..... and greater use is made of temporary and part-time staff. These developments do not provide a favourable base for strong union organisation ..... it is imperative that we develop effective recruitment and retention*

spread throughout the locale and who were cared for by mobile community psychiatric nurses who were primarily non-hospital based. The staff were fewer in number and more difficult to organise.

*strategies and a degree of flexibility in our structures which would allow us to meet the needs of existing members more effectively and move into new potential areas of membership. .... there are other groups who may wish to join forces with COHSE who under the present constitution are prevented from doing so. For example there are a number of 'professional' organisations .....*

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That said, there is little evidence that the union had any definite strategy to follow up the initiatives in the report as the union continued largely as it had previously. This confirms COHSE's inability to break out of the grip of the psychiatric nurse membership and although the union was affected by CCT this was not a major cause of the union's stagnation and subsequent decline. Additionally, the creation of NHS Hospital Trusts in April 1991, who not now bound by national Whitley Conditions<sup>26</sup> established local pay determination and generally made it more difficult for trade unions to organise workplaces.<sup>27</sup> This inevitably placed additional strain on both local lay representatives and full-time officers who had to bargaining across a greater spread of issues and on matters previously determined at national level.<sup>28</sup> From this it is clear that the union's membership gains of the 1970s could not be sustained and that the failure to consolidate a firmer presence in general nursing had left the union as a decreasing influence in a declining market. In that sense, it may be that the NALGO/NUPE merger talks merely hastened the time when the issue of contraction and waning influence had to be dealt with quite formally.

#### **NURSES, STATUS AND CHANGE IN MEMBERSHIP COMPOSITION**

By the time of the UNISON merger negotiations there were signs that COHSE had achieved some re-balancing of the membership away from psychiatric nurses to nurses in general medicine [see table 3.4], but even so, nurses comprised over fifty percent of the union's membership ensuring that 'nursing issues' remained at the top of the union's agenda.

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<sup>25</sup>COHSE. UD 1.

<sup>26</sup>The system of negotiations and consultation on staff conditions of service between trade unions and Government.

<sup>27</sup>IRS 1991

<sup>28</sup>IRS 1992



table 3.4

## Composition of COHSE's Membership at November 1989

Total Membership 218,000			
nurse members		non-nurse members	
general	57,200	support workers	56,000
mental health	23,400	professional and technical	10,000
mental handicap	23,400	administrative and clerical	10,000
		local authority	7,000
		ambulance	7,000

Source: COHSE 1989

The earlier difficulties that COHSE had found in 'making its pitch' as 'the union for the Health Service' are confirmed by this data which shows that with the exception of nurses and support workers, that the union had little resonance amongst other NHS staff. It is unsurprising that the union was still undecided about its status and direction because the status of nurses was [and is] itself in question. This conflict surrounding nurses' status [and potentially their political disposition], has been fuelled by the more recent introduction of Health Care Assistants into the NHS whose [contended] duties span functions previously the sole preserve of qualified staff. Such has been the transformation of healthcare provision in the last decade that UNISON has declared,

*All jobs are up for reappraisal; nothing is off limits. The idea is to accept the inevitability of change and cultivate it from below, not wait for imposition from above.*<sup>29</sup>

Nurse practitioners themselves remain divided over the notion of 'professionalism' which is sometimes seen as synonymous for 'management'.<sup>30</sup> That COHSE found itself still in a dichotomy about the union's own place and order in the representation of healthcare staff helps to explain why the union was insistent in the merger negotiations that 'health' be recognised as a special case and given advantageous Service Group facilities.

<sup>29</sup>Guardian. p17.

<sup>30</sup>Brooks. 1999. p41-52.

## Leadership

As the principal officer of a trade union, a general secretary, wields considerable power and influence, although it is accepted that this may vary across unions depending upon their traditions and internal relationships. If the incumbent so chooses, he or she, can be one of the fundamental architects of the union's 'organisational culture', including the formal, and sometimes informal, political disposition and allegiances. Despite the assertion by Carpenter,<sup>31</sup> of Spanswick's aggressiveness, it was not a characteristic widely recognised, especially by those on the political right who saw him as [an unwitting] ally.

During the 1982 acrimonious, ancillary staffs dispute, Norman Fowler, then Secretary of State for Health was able to conduct confidential meetings with Spanswick who was also chairman of the TUC's Health Service Committee. Three 'friendly' meetings were held at Fowler's house in Fulham, London which subsequently led to Fowler attempting to end the dispute by calling a meeting with the TUC health unions.

Albert Spanswick came from the old school of trade union leaders and I found him a more persuasive advocate for the health service workers than Rodney Bickerstaffe. [NUPE general secretary] ... [Later in a meeting with the TUC] Albert as chairman asked me a number of questions to which he already knew the answers for the good reason that we had already gone over them in Fulham.<sup>32</sup>

Clearly, Spanswick's centre-right stance had made him a more obvious target for 'backdoor dealing' than the leaders of other unions involved in the dispute.<sup>33</sup> Had this scenario been generally known during the UNISON merger negotiations it would have strengthened the arm of those in the debate who argued about the need

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<sup>31</sup>Carpenter. op cit.

<sup>32</sup>Fowler. 1991 p175.

<sup>33</sup>ibid. p173. Fowler also tells of his earlier coincidental meeting on a train with Bickerstaffe. *We talked quietly for half an hour but there was no point of contact..... he was determined to win .... his members came first. I saw no prospect of any sensible compromise.*

to 'curb' paid officials and the importance of lay member control in a system of democratic governance, a position argued for by many lay activists in NALGO.

David Williams succeeded Spanswick in 1983 and adopted a low-key approach during his tenure in office<sup>34</sup> and chose to continue with his work at the Whitley Council rather than attempting to reposition the union on a basis better able to contend with the new industrial relations environment created by the Thatcher government. Just four years on, Williams retired and MacKenzie took his place, from whence it can be said that a less antagonistic relationship with NUPE commenced. This was seen in the mutual recognition by the two unions of the need for a more disciplined approach to unionism in the public services and led to their closer co-operation across a variety of issues, including industrial action, and the desire to improve the prospects for a return to a Labour Government.<sup>35</sup> There was also closer co-operation on matters at the TUC and Labour Party Conference between the national leaderships the importance of which was emphasised by Alan, a senior COHSE official,

The personalities were very important, having the right people at the right time.

If it hadn't been for Hector MacKenzie it [the merger] wouldn't have happened.

[Alan ex-COHSE senior, national official]

That said, like his predecessors MacKenzie had not always been in favour of closer ties with NUPE. In 1984 when he was assistant general secretary he had helped to defeat a resolution to the union's national conference from the Portsmouth Branch which called for a feasibility study of an amalgamation with NUPE. In his rebuttal of the tentative move he told that year's conference that it was,

*a waste of valuable time and money ..... this issue must not distract us from our main purpose of building a single health service union.*<sup>36</sup>

and the following year he also declared.

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<sup>34</sup>Carpenter. op cit. p381.

<sup>35</sup>Terry. op cit. p100.

<sup>36</sup>quoted in COHSE 1984. [2]

*Pooling our resources is not a panacea for our problems. Effective working relationships don't require marriage contracts.*<sup>37</sup>

From this we may conclude that the COHSE/NUPE joint working party which had been set up after the COHSE 1983 national conference to establish a more co-ordinated approach to matters of mutual concern to both unions, including the return of a Labour government, was at the limit to which the national leadership of COHSE was then prepared or allowed to go [by the lay members] to develop a closer working relationship with NUPE. COHSE's subsequent involvement in the UNISON merger negotiations owed more to the strategic need to avoid being sidelined by a NALGO/NUPE new union, rather than a predilection for public service industrial unionism, at that time.

## Conclusions

The relative lack of sociological enquiry into COHSE has placed limitations on our understanding of COHSE and caution should be observed in any analysis of the union. Originally, the union had been built on the support of [mostly] male, asylum workers. As the Health Service developed, psychiatric nursing services expanded as care of the mentally ill assumed a greater priority for governments and the public. This scenario provided COHSE with fertile ground for developing the union's membership. The union also extended its organisation amongst nurses in the general hospitals but found it very difficult to compete with the RCN which increasingly was seen as the union for nurses. COHSE also represented ancillary staff, administrative and clerical staff and some professional and technical staff, but once again, the union found it very difficult to compete with other trade unions who also organised staff in these areas.

COHSE had a wish to see just one union organising and representing staff in the NHS. The union marketed itself as **the** Health Service Union, but this was an over-played claim, for the evidence quite clearly shows that staff were organising according to grade rather than on an 'industry' basis. Internally, COHSE was less

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<sup>37</sup> quoted in COHSE 1985.

sanguine about its potential expansion and influence; the union became introspective which led to it being tagged as a union for 'mental nurses'. As COHSE struggled to rid itself of this image the union became caught in a dilemma about the status of the union which it never fully resolved and which would subsequently emerge in the negotiations for UNISON.

That said, COHSE's growth rate was both swift and remarkable especially during the 1970s after which the union began a slow decline, largely attributable to the closure of the large, psychiatric hospitals and the implementation of a policy of Care in the Community for the mentally ill. These changes had the effect of reducing and dispersing the constituency of staff that COHSE had historically relied upon as a cornerstone of the union's organisation, and made it more difficult for the union to recruit and retain members and stewards. Compulsory Competitive Tendering also affected the union's ancillary staff membership but this was not the linchpin area of membership that determined COHSE policy and therefore did relatively little to inform the union's general approach to industrial relations, albeit the union's role in the 1982 ancillary staff dispute. Although COHSE had recognised the need to consider the implications for the union of the changes in the NHS, especially in psychiatric services, the union failed to galvanise itself to deal effectively with the implications of those changes. This was despite the warning of a COHSE working group who had cautioned that the current strategies to halt decline were ineffective and that the union should consider seeking mergers with other health care unions.

Several attempts by COHSE branches to persuade the national union to merge with NUPE failed, due in part to the influence of the union's general secretaries and key officials who had generally kept the union on a 'middle of the road' direction and who found NUPE's approach to industrial and political matters an anathema to the COHSE culture, said by some to be centred on *gifted amateurs*.<sup>38</sup> Nevertheless, COHSE and NUPE established closer working relationships with the return of a Labour Government a priority for both unions.

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<sup>38</sup>Ouroussoff. 1993 [1].

COHSE's own evidence depicts the union as being dominated by nurses and relatively little penetration into other disciplines. In the psychiatric hospitals ancillary members were disadvantaged by the self-perpetuation of the dominance of nurses in the branches.<sup>39</sup> Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that in the merger negotiations COHSE would not only wish to protect the union's Health centred culture, but also ensure that specific arrangements would be provided for nurses and their professionals interests.

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<sup>39</sup>Munro. 1999. op cit. p149.

## Chapter 3B

### The Making of UNISON: NALGO

#### Introduction

The 'Association' was founded by senior, town hall officials the epitome of middle-class professionals who for many decades steered the organisation away from traditional trade union values. This chapter outlines the contest within NALGO to change the order and philosophy of the organisation in a general direction away from the union's centre-right stance. The chapter details the protracted fight by leftist elements to bring NALGO into mainstream trade unionism via membership of the TUC and how the failure to achieve participation and a say in Tripartite discussions with the Government and employers finally tipped the balance in the union towards affiliation.

The chapter also looks at the growth and influence of local government membership in NALGO and how that affected the union's culture and ways of working. It also shows how changes in the composition of the union's membership altered the relationship patterns between lay activists and paid officials and created the environment in which organised dissent from national union policy was accepted as part of the union's democratic tradition. Other aspects of this democratic tradition included: branch finance for local activities, an active, campaigning lobby during union elections and a strong ethos centred on the right of members as opposed to paid officials, to determine the policies and practices at all levels of the union. The chapter also demonstrates how the advantageous facilities often acquired by branches from employers supported a comprehensive local, lay activist environment.

#### Origins of the Union

*It is not unknown in NALGO for the higher graded staff to play a disproportionate role in branch administration and dominate policy making ....*<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> NALGO 1989 (1), p1.

NALGO emanated from the Liverpool Municipal Officers' Guild an organisation for senior town hall managers and chief officers and was run as a friendly society.<sup>41</sup> In 1905, the Guild, keen to press the case for wider pension provision merged with several other local 'societies' to form NALGO most of whose members were staunchly conservative.<sup>42</sup> This was a remarkable step for a fledgling movement which just 11 years earlier had pronounced attempts to persuade employers to adopt a policy of paying pensions as,

*... smacking of 'trade unionism' - a movement entirely alien to respectable vestry [council] officials.*<sup>43</sup>

### **Relationship with the TUC**

By 1918, the union's leadership was being pressed by sections of the membership to reject the union's traditional 'professional' stance and adopt a more aggressive approach to relations with the employers through formal, trade union status. This was opposed by Levi Hill, the general secretary as,

*.... although trade unions were 'undoubtedly of advantage to the masses of workers, local government officers were 'a class apart' [and] ... Anything savouring of trade unionism is nausea to the local government officer and his Association.*<sup>44</sup> [my emphasis]

Nevertheless, despite a confusing ballot in 1920 NALGO became a formal, certificated trade union which signalled the union's independence from the employers with whom traditionally the union had held a close relationship. That said, the union's leadership continued to disavow trade union actions such as industrial action and strikes despite attempts at national conferences by some sections of the membership to establish fighting funds via a levy system to encourage and support strike action in pay campaigns.<sup>45</sup> The strike issue did not go

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<sup>41</sup>an organisation whose prime function is to act in a benevolent and welfare capacity as opposed to a trade union concerned with the regulation of pay and conditions of service.

<sup>42</sup>Spoor 1967 chap. 2 p 10-18

<sup>43</sup>ibid p 11.

<sup>44</sup>ibid p47-67

<sup>45</sup>ibid p517-532. It is also quite remarkable that during the debate that NEC



away and at the 1961 national conference a resolution proposed by the NEC was adopted to enact a strike clause in its constitution. Less than 50 of the 1500 delegates opposed this radical move. This should not be interpreted as an expression of support for 'militancy', more a growing recognition that recalcitrant employers were less open to persuasion than they had been previously. This was a most significant step for NALGO and the start of an era of growing unrest amongst white-collar trade unionists generally who were increasingly prepared to contemplate industrial action in pursuit of pay claims and other matters of injustice.<sup>46</sup>

#### **THE INFLUENCE OF A NEW RADICAL LEFT**

In the early 1960s, an influx of new [younger] blood onto the NEC ensured that the question of affiliation to the TUC was again addressed. The union's national leadership was still formally opposed to TUC affiliation and resisted calls to commence a campaign to win support from the membership for affiliation. But the end was in sight, at the 1963 national conference delegates supported a motion from the Glasgow branch to ballot the membership following NALGO's exclusion [because it was not a TUC affiliate] from participation in the important tripartite National Economic Development Council which influenced government thinking on economic matters. And in 1964 the members voted to affiliate to the TUC; it had taken 43 years, numerous attempts and 7 ballots to achieve it.<sup>47</sup> [See figure 3.1]

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members who had quite clearly been party to the 'platform's' strategy were given carte blanche to speak in the debate in opposition to the expressed policy. This feature was to become an accepted right or tradition in the union.

<sup>46</sup>Terry, *op cit.* p88.

<sup>47</sup>The importance of NALGO's affiliation is emphasised by the fact that its 338,322 [in 1964] members doubled the size of the TUC's public employees group - 338,799 to 677,121. Newman, 1982, p81.

figure 3.1 NALGO TUC Affiliation History

year	NEC support /initiative	Conference support	Conference vote		membership ballot result:	
			for	against	for	against
1910	general secretary declares trade unionism to be antithetical to NALGO members best interests					
1920	NEC announces ballot on certification/registration. 'favours' certification, but makes no recommendation.				registration 6,992.	7,916
					certification 5,002	
1921	no	no			n/a 'massive majority' against discussing a branch resolution	
1922	conference rejects branch motion again					
1934	general secretary "NALGO does not intend to join the TUC, the Labour Party, the Conservative Party, or the Liberal Party."					
1935	further attempts by branches to affiliate. 'rejection by a big majority'					
1936	Scottish TUC declares NALGO not to be a 'bona fide' trade union.					
1937	TUC establishes National Advisory Council on local government, NALGO - not an affiliate given 6 of the 21 seats. Opposed by NUPE.					
1942	no	no	26,445	55,921	40,733	28,715*
1943	*NEC uses a constitutional device to only release ballot result to national conference which overturned the ballot result and referred it out again to a further ballot which agreed to defer the decision until after the war					
1945	n/a	n/a	39,000	71,000	n/a	n/a
1946	n/a	n/a	44,000	56,000	n/a	n/a
1947	NALGO pledges to 'observe all recognised trade union practices'. At the national conference NEC seeks and gets authority to 'explore the possibility of affiliating on a purely industrial basis. Ballot requests rejected					
1948	NEC despite having a report on affiliation on an 'industrial basis only, rejects recommendation to conference. Conference supports NEC but agrees further ballot					
	no	no	55,254	101,895	46,200	83,443
1955	no	no	n/a	n/a	73,151	77,592
1958	no, but supports rule change to allow 2/3 majority in ballot to decide				82,618	108,615
1961	yes COPPSO failed to deliver political influence, NALGO invites TUC general secretary to meeting re affiliation. <sup>1</sup>					

year	NEC support /initiative	Conference support	Conference vote		membership ballot result	
			for	against	for	against
1962	yes	no. but supports ballot of members			111,489	117,312
1962	Service conditions Committee recommends to NEC pro-affiliation motion for 1963 national conference in face of continuing national political isolation. NEC rejects move but re-affirms continued support for affiliation.  <u>At same meeting NEC decides to affiliate to the National Federation of Professional, Technical, Administrative, and Clerical Employees [NFPTACE] despite an earlier rejection of the same on the grounds of 'little value' <sup>2</sup></u>					
1963	no	yes. campaign of support agreed				
1964	yes	yes	199,949	67,444	138,120	118,531
NALGO affiliates to TUC						

source: Spoor. op cit. p532-561

N.B. Even after affiliation NALGO maintained its relationship with the NFPTACE attending its conferences as late as 1969. This suggests that the union retained a degree of ambivalence over its relationship with the wider labour movement.

The prolonged campaign to win TUC affiliation and the union's steadfast policy of not affiliating to the Labour Party, [which it maintained throughout its existence **and** successfully carried into the new union], had caused some of the other trade unions in the TUC especially NUPE to label it as a second rate or half-hearted union,<sup>48</sup> an image that the union legitimately resented but never quite managed to shake-off.

*For several decades during this century white-collar unions were perceived - often unjustly - as 'not real trade unions' by their blue-collar counterparts. In some*

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<sup>48</sup> The Association of Local Government Officers has thus announced that it will never join the Trades Union Congress nor the Labour Party. This should certainly have been kept in the dark. After all, it is generally accepted that the Association has thrived because it has been given, especially in certain parts of the country, a Labour colouring. Indeed, throughout its career it has masqueraded as a semi-Labour organisation. .... It is significant that several of NALGO's own branches have refused to accept the non-political doctrines of its leaders. .... At Merthyr, the NALGO branch is affiliated to the Trades Council .... and at Abertillery, the NALGO branch is affiliated to the quite "reddish" Trades Council .... [NUPE. 1934. December. p2-4]

*quarters this prejudice lingers, despite overwhelming evidence of its inaccuracy .... the 1989 Local Government pay dispute just the most recent evidence of this.*<sup>49</sup>

## Membership Fortunes

### THE DOMINANCE OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Since the mid 1960s, NALGO has been an unqualified success as regards membership growth. Table 3.5 shows that whilst the percentage increase in the union's membership was less in this decade than in earlier periods, in absolute numbers the union had doubled in size in just 20 years.

table 3.5 NALGO membership 1928-1968

year	membership	%age increase
1928	43,602	-
1938	101,041	232
1948	170,960	169
1958	246,576	144
1968	366,951	68
overall increase 1928-1968:		<b>841%</b>

source: trade union directory 1969. p239

NALGO had continued to grow whilst other unions, notably those representing blue-collar members, struggled to remain effective and viable independent units. The expansion of public services that had begun in the 1960s enabled NALGO to organise across local government, the NHS, universities, water, gas, electricity and transport, though by far, the local government membership remained not only numerically superior, but also the major determinant in union policy and activity which alienated some sections of members.

*... there are inevitably tensions between the different service groups. On the one hand smaller groups tend to feel that their interests are not sufficiently taken into account and their separate identities submerged. .... some NALGO services, notably Gas, have demonstrated a certain resentment in recent years at the*

<sup>49</sup>NALGO [undated] p3. [although undated it was a paper prepared by NALGO for the merger negotiations].

*numerical dominance of the union by local government and the resulting policies on matters such as pay and productivity.*<sup>50</sup>

#### **FINANCIAL STABILITY**

The union's ability to recruit and retain members through the consecutive Conservative administrations from 1979 to 1997 gave NALGO a sound financial base to service its members needs and to mount prolonged campaigns with longer term aims. In financial terms, the union could have continued as it was for the foreseeable future, even the workforce compositional changes were towards the kind of white-collar members that the union organised.<sup>51</sup> NALGO's solid financial base and [near] constant membership, allowed the union to pick and choose not only when it wanted to merge, but on what terms it was prepared to merge. And, as will be seen in chapter 5, this was very clearly a strong, if unspoken, bargaining weapon during the merger negotiations.

#### **Leadership**

##### **NATIONAL POLICY AND ACCEPTED DISSENT**

The success of the 'young Turks' in the affiliation battle signalled the end to an era of right wing policies and the start of period of high profile factionalism between far left groups,<sup>52</sup> the Communist Party and pro Conservative elements over which the officership and national leadership had little control.<sup>53</sup> Although the actions of one such faction - NALGO Action Group [NAG] was investigated by the NEC for inappropriate activities, the union chose not to sanction its members but instead declared that,

*.... it was neither possible nor desirable to lay down a rigid policy regarding the activities of NAG and that it was essentially a matter to be left to the judgement of members in the light of the facts.*<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> NALGO 1983 (1). p5.

<sup>51</sup> Fryer. 1998. op cit.

<sup>52</sup> Newman op cit p 552

<sup>53</sup> Mellroy. 1995. op cit. p167 - 175.

<sup>54</sup> Newman. op cit. p553

This clearly identifies the ancestry in NALGO of 'the right to campaign' [against agreed national policy] which was to later belabour UNISON.

#### THE ORGANISATION OF DISADVANTAGED GROUPS

The union also established positive rights for groups that had traditionally been seen as disadvantaged. These included: women, disabled members, lesbian and gay members, and black members. All of these groups were financed and resourced by the national union and incorporated into the union's structures which enabled them to influence policy matters at all levels within NALGO. This principle was known as 'self organisation' and became an issue in the merger negotiations. [See chapter 5]. However, the question of minority group representation was never fully resolved in NALGO and as such could be expected to surface as an issue in UNISON. The highly factionalised nature of the union, of both right and left persuasions, and the right of the self-organised groups to campaign around their separate agendas that were often at odds with the general policy of the national union, gave rise to the expression of, *Tories led by Trots*.<sup>55</sup>

#### BRANCH INFLUENCE IN NALGO ELECTIONS

Turning to the key question of the internal relationships within the partner unions, we can better understand NALGO by examining the actions of branch activists who played a much greater part in the running of their union than their counterparts in COHSE and NUPE, who certainly by NALGO standards, were relatively content to let the national machinery of the union conduct matters, including elections for the NEC and other lay committee seats, on their behalf. By contrast, NALGO Branches, particularly the large, local government branches, overtly campaigned for their preferred candidates with both the political right and left issuing 'election slates'. In-house branch magazines ran commentaries on [disfavoured] candidates and the election results.

*.... the major change was the unseating of serving NEC member Mojo (real name Maurice Jones of Lancashire Gasi). Despite his reputation for doing and*

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<sup>55</sup>Ironside and Seifert. 1996. p2. note that some influential right sections in the union flirted with the SDP and that the ultra-left were 'small but well organised' but that they would combined forces to jointly criticise the leadership 'as unaccountable and unacceptable'.

*saying little, the defeat of an NEC member is always something of a shock - especially when he is of 'moderate' (i.e. rightist) persuasion. The Star can claim no credit for his defeat. It used to be our practice until this year to publish an election preview with unflattering references to Mojo, among many other people, thereby attracting to him a large, sympathy vote. This year it was decided to drop the election preview - and as a result Mojo's sympathy vote has evaporated: such is the power of the press!*<sup>56</sup>

#### DEMOCRACY AND THE INFLUENCE OF THE 'MEMBER-LED' TENET

This open interest of some activists with those who exercised power and/or leadership also manifested itself in the way in which the relationships between the different sections of the union were conducted. At the very heart of the lay membership concerns was the issue of who controlled NALGO - the elected Leadership, paid officials, or members. This became a central issue in the union and reached a climax in 1978 when a vigorous campaign was launched to thwart the NEC's attempts to re-assert its [dubious] authority over the union. The NEC didn't succeed, and the foundations were laid for the increase in influence of lay activists [as opposed to members], throughout the union, including the ability, prescribed in rule, to prevent paid officials visiting branches without prior branch approval. However, the ability of the lay membership to control the union by excluding the paid officials was often assisted by those same officials opting out of their wider responsibilities.

*It is not the committee system per se which prevents officers from being as effective as they might be, but the lack of a concerted effort on the part of officers to develop a strong management ethos. In other words, their own criticism is that the committees are used as an excuse, and I quote, 'to duck and ignore problems'. - as a cover for not taking responsibility. [my emphasis]*<sup>57</sup>

This style of latent leadership was criticised [especially] by officers in the other partner unions who saw it as an abrogation of responsibility as the following extract from my interview of an ex-COHSE official shows.

<sup>56</sup>NALGO 1984. [1] p5.

<sup>57</sup>Ouroussoff 1993. [2] p4.

P. Haunch. *Why did NALGO go for it?* [the merger]

Michael ex-COHSE senior officer. *I don't know. ... Neither COHSE or NALGO were financially driven into the merger. My impression was that Alan Jinkinson was driving it. I think that he was the first [NALGO] general secretary that drove anything.* [my emphasis]

Whether or not that was true is another matter, but it was nevertheless, a clear perception held by some outside NALGO and identifies a fundamental difference in the internal relationships of the partner unions that would have to be dealt with during the merger negotiations. And as will be seen in chapter 5, the circumscribing of the function and influence of paid officials by the use of activist authority, became the locus of high profile conflict during the merger negotiations and beyond into the new union, and perhaps above all else, one of the defining features of UNISON. [See chapter 5]

It would however be a misrepresentation to portray the whole of the union as under the influence of a 'militants charter' for it was only a minority of branches, albeit well organised and influential in lay committees and at the national delegate conference, which were in the control of the new radicals. Large and powerful right led branches still held sway in many areas contributing to the growing factionalism in the union. Nevertheless, NALGO was clearly seen by members as a powerful and influential union whatever the politics of some branch leaderships, which helped the union maintain its membership through the 'Thatcher Years'.

#### **FINANCE AND THE ACTIVIST**

The tacit endorsement of lay member activities that were sometimes at odds to the national union [see above] were supported by the availability of large amounts of money, [over 20% of branch members' subscriptions], that branches used to fund local initiatives, some of which were contrary to national policy, including that decided by national conference, the supreme policy forum in rule.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>58</sup>Provision was also available to enable branches which had 'overspent' to claim top-up funds from the central union thereby negating the obligation of fiscal prudence. Subscriptions were also collected locally by branches directly from employers and members and then forwarded to the national union. It was not



Notwithstanding this aspect, branches, particularly the larger ones, were able to provide a comprehensive system of member support and welfare activities usually denied to branches of those unions that are more centrally controlled. Crucially the larger branches were also able to directly employ administrative and clerical support staff leaving activists free from the constraints of managing the necessary but 'boring' aspects of union paperwork and bureaucracy.<sup>59</sup> Additionally, many branches had negotiated with their employer such facilities as:

- ♦ office premises provided by the employer, often without charge or at a pepper-corn rent and in a central location with ease of access to employers managers. By the same measure, this provided easy 'availability' to branch members
- ♦ access to the employers internal and external telecommunication
- ♦ photocopying and printing services
- ♦ use of the employers internal mailing system
- ♦ listing in the employers' phone book alongside members' own workplace address.
- ♦ senior branch officers given paid, full-time release from their official contractual duties to enable them to carry out their trade union functions

Branches also had the power to raise local levies from members and many did so, often to set up branch industrial action funds which were at times used to facilitate the swift implementation and continuance of industrial action in defence of members' interests without the need to wait for approval from the national union. Anecdotal evidence also suggests that in some branches quite large sums of money, on occasions in excess of £100,000, was used for matters less related to the

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unusual for branches to withhold the monies due to the national union and eventually make a late or deferred payment, maybe many months later. During the first year of UNISON it was held that former NALGO branches had failed to remit some £11-12 million to the central funds at a time when the union was having to consider large-scale redundancies and other cost cutting measures as expenditure outstripped income. This demonstrates the power and authority of branch organisation in the union.

<sup>59</sup>In addition to the 'clerical' support that the branch employed, there were also posts in some of the larger branches of branch administrator and branch organisation officer which were funded by both the branch [25%] and the national union [75%]. Despite the controlling financial interest the national union had little, if any, say in the allocation of duties and responsibilities to these 'branch employed' staff.

industrial relations interface.<sup>60</sup> Such examples whilst few and far between, have overshadowed the essential, good work done by many of the union's branches which would otherwise, in all likelihood, not have been possible.

One other key factor that helped NALGO establish branch based concessions and facilities from the employer was the union's ability to keep senior managers as members who were generally seen as 'helpful' to the NALGO cause.

*NALGO managers help to maintain the NALGO culture in the areas in which we organise. In order to recruit and retain more junior staff who see their future in higher managerial positions it is important to present the union as capable of looking after their future as well as their present needs. ... The retention of a cadre of managerial members has strategic importance - it is always useful to have friends in high places.*<sup>61</sup>

Branches in the NHS, higher education, transport and some areas of the utilities were rarely able to command parity with their local government counterparts placing them at a disadvantage in terms of access to the democratic lay structures and extra curricula union activities, but even so, they still generally enjoyed better facilities than either COHSE or NUPE.

## **Conclusions**

Formed from a number of local government Associations, NALGO's early culture reflected the 'Town Hall' way of doing things. The union's members were often the senior officers of the councils and were staunchly conservative in their approach to the internal and external relations of the Association. NALGO was keen during the union's formative years to keep the union as an 'Association' and frequently disavowed both the principle and need to become a formal, trade union. Nevertheless, but still cautious, NALGO formally became an independent trade

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<sup>60</sup>The Lancashire County Council branch based in Preston was one such case and said to have had a holiday cottage in the Lake District and also substantial investments in 'works of art'. Also, see Terry. op cit, p89.

<sup>61</sup> NALGO. 1989 (1). op cit. p6

union in 1920 which signalled the start of a slow, but definite move towards mainstream trade unionism.

There followed a series of attempts by sections of the membership to affiliate NALGO to the TUC. The union's Leadership steadfastly declared itself against the principle winning several ballots of the union's membership on the question of affiliation, but in the face of national marginalisation on socio-economic matters, a newly, radicalised section of activists succeeded in 1963 in by-passing the formal Leadership by winning the support of the union's National Delegate Conference to recommend TUC affiliation to the members in a ballot. The 1964 ballot was overwhelmingly in favour of affiliation and from this time NALGO has played a key role in TUC affairs.

However, this victory for the activists over the Leadership marked a significant moment in the union's history in that it demonstrated that well-organised and co-ordinated lay activity could successfully challenge official orthodoxy if done in the name of member democracy. The absolute right of national conference to determine union policy became a defining feature of NALGO. Whilst NALGO had positively adopted the relationship with the TUC the union consistently eschewed formal, political alignment with Labour and all other political parties. This allowed it to be openly critical of Labour, both in and out of office, and enabled factions from the right and left to campaign independently for NALGO policies rather than policies that could be said to buttress Labour. The reality of this stance dictated that political [non] affiliation would be at the centre of the UNISON merger negotiations.

The rise of political activism in NALGO was also marked by the acceptance of the right of dissent from official, national policy. Factions from the right, left and far-left accepted the right of individuals and groups to campaign against agreed policy, even where that policy had been agreed at national conference. Many of the leftist factions were younger graduates based in the metropolitan districts who saw themselves as a legitimate opposition to the formal Leadership of the union and

were successful in winning some ballots for influential union offices whilst standing on a factional ticket.<sup>62</sup> The union had also developed a strong ethos concerning the democratic governance of the union which established that lay members, not paid officials, controlled the union. This ethos established NALGO as a 'member-led' union. An extensive system of lay member committees developed at all levels<sup>63</sup> to support the member led principle which often resulted in the union being compared with the bureaucracy of a council in local government. The depth of lay control and the intensity of support for the member-led principle indicates that this aspect of NALGO's culture, if allowed, would spill over into UNISON.<sup>64</sup>

Local branches were also powerful with some of the larger ones able to provide a comprehensive range of services to members through the use of employer supplied office and administrative facilities supported by substantial branch funds to supplement local initiatives, including the use of local strike funds. The militancy which accompanied the political activism surfaced as disputes at local and national levels indicating that NALGO did not feel constricted by legislation in defending members interests.<sup>65</sup>

The expansion of public services after 1960 provided the opportunity for NALGO to increase its membership and influence across local government, health, higher education and the utilities, though by far, local government was the largest section within the union and informed much of NALGO's culture and policies. In membership numbers, NALGO was an unqualified success and remained a strong and viable union even throughout the 1980s and 1990s when CCT and other government initiatives had caused the decline of other unions, including NUPE.

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<sup>62</sup>Undy et al. 1981. op cit. p1117-126.

<sup>63</sup>McIlroy. 1995. op cit. p168.

<sup>64</sup>Undy et al. 1996. p186.

<sup>65</sup>ibid. p248.

## Chapter 3C

### The Making of UNISON: NUPE

#### Introduction

This chapter shows how following near extinction, charismatic leadership and a belief that a multi-union presence in the workplace only benefited the employer, carried the union forward amidst caustic recriminations from competitor trade unions who found NUPE a threat to the status quo. The Leadership style of the union's general secretaries [and other full-time officers] once termed 'Popular Bossdom',<sup>66</sup> is assessed against the membership expectations and the measures adopted by NUPE to restructure the union and introduce a shop stewards' movement. This strategy was interrupted by the effects of Compulsory Competitive Tendering and other measures which resulted in the loss of large numbers of members throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s. Understanding the 'domination' by officers, or the 'dependence' of members, characterised in the 'family' relationship that was said to govern the union, is essential to understanding the union's organisational culture. Examples from my own experience and from field work interviews and data, are used to demonstrate [not justify] what happened in practice.

Although the union grew rapidly during the 1960s and 1970s, [see chapter 2] members' low pay remained very much at the forefront of the union's campaigns which were noted for their high profile effect on public services. These campaigns were pressed in tandem with efforts to persuade the TUC and the Labour Party to support the introduction of a Statutory National Minimum Wage as the most effective measure to eradicate low pay. Finally, the chapter stresses the impact of CCT on NUPE and by implication suggests that this must have added urgency to the need to achieve one union for the public services.

#### Origins of the Union

*We had to stand up to our fork in the water, right to the top of our jack boots and sometimes over them. ... When there's a good flush of water coming down we are*

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<sup>66</sup>Turner, op cit.

*obliged to put our heads fast against the crown of the sewer, and bear down upon our shovels so that we may not be carried away and taken bang into the Thames. You see there's nothing for us to lay hold on.*<sup>67</sup>

NUPE's origins reside in the poorly paid, unskilled workers who provided much of the public services in London in the late nineteenth century. The unsavoury working conditions, such as those of the sewer men quoted above became the rallying standard around which NUPE's early predecessors built their unions. It soon became obvious to these small unions that they could not survive if they restricted their activities to London or only organised council employees and so began a series of mergers between small unions who saw the need to draw together public sector workers under a united banner. This eventually led in 1928 to the formation of the National Union of Public Employees which signalled the start of this union's pursuit of a single union for the public services.

#### COUNTY ROADMEN AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF NATIONAL BARGAINING

*... the condition of Cheshire County Roadmen, and the miserable wages received at present by them in return for good honest workmanship .... we are at the commencement of a difficult period of negotiations that will have to take place on nearly every workman. Our task will be difficult because of the indifference of the County Council and the Whitley Council: an indifference that has been unchallenged for 15 years owing to the fear and intimidation of the miserably paid men concerned.*<sup>68</sup>

In 1934, Bryn Roberts an ex-miner from South Wales was appointed as General Secretary. The union was almost dying, had just 13,000 members providing an annual income of £10,000 and had a recorded deficit of over £450.<sup>69</sup> He began a concerted campaign to establish a national forum for agreeing wages to replace the

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<sup>67</sup>Dix and Williams. p25.

<sup>68</sup>NUPE. 1934 [2]. p12. This extract from the union's in-house journal edited by the newly appointed General Secretary, Bryn Roberts exemplifies the forthright style of campaigning that the union was to adopt under his leadership.

<sup>69</sup>Craik. 1955. p34.

employer based system of local determination. This was achieved in 1941.<sup>70</sup> However, some County Councils refused to accept the new arrangements effectively turning the campaign into a fight for trade union recognition as NUPE sought to cement its position as the collective voice of organised labour. Despite concerted attempts by the NUGMW and the TGWU to keep NUPE isolated the union achieved national recognition that witnessed the commencement of an integrated national bargaining structure for county roadmen.

The aggressive, forthright style with which the campaign had been waged was often accompanied by such rhetoric as

*Britain's Slave Gangs of the Roads. ... Help us Remove These Evils By filling in the Attached Membership Form and Becoming a Member.*<sup>71</sup>

This kind of approach to recruitment and organisation undoubtedly had appeal to the roadmen, but did little to foster co-operation with the other unions as the union's publications inevitably made overt overtures to all employees, some of whom were already in a union other than NUPE.<sup>72</sup> In later years, this kind of activity earned the union the dubious name of 'The National Union of Poaching Experts'.

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<sup>70</sup>ibid. page 55-56. A prolonged and intensive press campaign coupled with meetings aimed at mobilising feeling amongst the roadmen eventually secured the National Joint Council for County Council Roadmen. This established for the first time a national rate for the job and was a precursor of NUPE's strategy in the Health Service and elsewhere, where national wage bargaining became the route to attempts to eliminate low pay.

<sup>71</sup> NUPE. 1939

<sup>72</sup> It appears that Roberts, aided and abetted by his staff and activists, did everything possible to 'wind up' the union's competitors. However, the intensity of the enmity between NUPE and [particularly] the NUGMW, is witnessed by a row between them which erupted at the 1956 TUC Congress following which NUPE took to Court one W. McGinniss, District Secretary of the NUGMWU having failed to get an apology from him. Eventually, one was obtained via the legal proceedings and published in full in the NUPE Journal in March 1957. (p23). It is questionable if these machinations had any positive effect on individual members of either union, but the incidents emphasise the highly influential role of a general secretary in shaping the 'character' of their union.

## Relationship with the TUC

*..... every Union operating within local government, i.e. General and Municipal Workers Union, Transport and General Workers Union, Confederation of Health Service Employees, Fire Brigades Union and the National Union of Public Employees, should pool all their local government members, and from such pooled membership an entirely new organisation, bearing a title different from any of the Unions involved, should be created.*<sup>73</sup>

## THE VISION OF INDUSTRIAL UNIONISM

The wish to see industrial unionism,<sup>74</sup> was to become one of the hallmarks of NUPE and a driving force of successive general secretaries who maintained the view that inter-union competition was destructive and only benefited the employers. Roberts remarkable lack of success on this front was in part undoubtedly due to his often vitriolic relationship to the general trade unions who had for many years combined resources to keep him off the TUC General Council.

For over two years [1934-37] Roberts conducted an acute and aggressive recruitment campaign on the theme of industrial unionism as seen in this extract from the union's journal.

figure 3.2

### Extract From Public Employees' Journal 1934

ARE YOU A TRADE UNIONIST

IF NOT ? WHY NOT

Our Object is one big Union for Public Employees

On these lines we can build the most powerful trade union in existence

The Labour Gazette reports there were 181 registered unions catering for Employees of Local Authorities. We want one union. We make Public Employment a speciality-not a side line. We can, and will alter, bad conditions if only you will join our Union.<sup>75</sup>

<sup>73</sup>Roberts, 1961, op cit, p15.

<sup>74</sup>that is a single trade union for a single industry or service, not to be confused with single union deals whereby one union only is recognised by an individual employer.

<sup>75</sup>This appeared as the back cover on the union's journal 'public employees' during this period.



NUPE's belief [at least that of its general secretaries] in industrial unionism had been intense. During COHSE's expulsion from the TUC in 1972 a decision was made not to exploit that union's predicament.

[merger with COHSE] ... the idea was knocked back time and time again. [by COHSE] We had been trying for years. Alan Fisher [general secretary] in 1972 when COHSE were disaffiliated from the TUC said, "don't go for COHSE's members" because of the wish to see a move to industrial unionism. [Rodney Bickerstaffe, UNISON general secretary]

From this it is evident that plans for a single public service union were held in deep conviction by the union and that a major re-alignment of British trade unions was always in the union's sights.<sup>76</sup>

#### FULL-TIME OFFICERS AND THEIR RELATIONSHIP WITH LAY MEMBERS: DOMINATION OR DEPENDENCE

Most NUPE members were poorly, formally educated, poorly skilled and poorly paid. Their occupations in the 1980s were still very much in the ilk of the early members of the union; dirty, dusty, often wet, heavy, repetitive and almost universally of low status. They ranged from school dinner ladies to refuse collectors; school cleaners to street sweepers and hospital porters to laundry workers. The union also managed to attract a significant minority of nurses, particularly unqualified staff, and some white-collar staff, though never on a scale to challenge either the RCN or NALGO. The disadvantages experienced by most NUPE members generated a cadre [though by no means all] of a highly politicised,

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<sup>76</sup>Bickerstaffe's comments, if anything, underplay the significance that NUPE had consistently attached to the potential relationship with COHSE. In the May-August 1959[p145] issue of the union's newspaper, *The Public Employees Journal*, Roberts wrote the following on the ill-health retirement of J.T. Waite, the COHSE general secretary.

*I regret his retirement and, particularly, the reason for it, and I should like to extend to him best wishes for his recovery and a long and happy future. In the past COHSE and NUPE have not seen eye to eye on many things. However, we have had little conflict with Friend Waite, which caused me to hope that sooner or later our two organisations would effect a merger, which would be advantageous to the members of both unions. I am still hoping that ere long this will be accomplished. NUPE's door is, and will remain, open.*

full-time officer elite that ran the union on behalf of a tolerant membership which allowed paid staff to set agendas on their behalf, even to the extent of a general secretary [Roberts], arguing in the union's national journal that power to negotiate should not be devolved to local level until there was a single union in place there because,

*to shift responsibility to the factory floor would soon lead to chaos.*<sup>77</sup>

That philosophy was discontinued by Roberts' successors and by the late 1960s the union had started to establish a shop stewards movement<sup>78</sup> which indicates that the union had perceived Roberts to be out of step with his own Executive and members.<sup>79</sup> The union continued to give the development of a shop stewards' system a high, formal priority and in 1973 it enlisted academics from the University of Warwick to map the union's lay membership and their activities and make recommendations. The result was stark.

*.... one of the most striking characteristics of NUPE is the key role played in the organisation by its full-time officials. .... [without whom] the Union would have suffered setbacks and may even have disappeared altogether. [this has led to] the development of a dependence of the Union membership upon paid officials ... [whilst it] was understandable and even necessary, it was also open to the possibility of becoming self-confirming ... but a dependence upon full-time officials is conducive neither to democracy nor necessarily to effectiveness ....if the dominance of the full-time officers and the dependence of the membership upon them become the chief organisational character of the Union, then the problems of Union structure can be resolved only at the expense of democracy*<sup>80</sup>

The difficulties exemplified by this situation were:

- ♦ 39% of branches had no union steward at all. [1970]
- ♦ 40% only 3 stewards or less. [1974]

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<sup>77</sup>Craik, 1968, p85.

<sup>78</sup>Although it may have seemed a belated move on NUPE's part, the union's move to establish a shop stewards' system preceded that of both COHSE and NALGO which suggests that in the public services at least, union democracy and an active lay membership were still generally underdeveloped.

<sup>79</sup>Fryer 1983, pages 11-18

<sup>80</sup>Fryer et al 1974, op cit, p17-18

- ♦ 67% of branches reported that only about 5% of members attended branch meetings.
- ♦ 7% [85] of branches voted for members of the Executive Council or National Committees based on the informal advice of a full-time officer.<sup>81</sup>

Fryer made detailed recommendations concerning the development of structures designed to,

*.... counteract those forces creating isolation and remoteness [which] ... should have the eventual benefit of stimulating greater self-reliance and strengthening local Union organisation.*<sup>82</sup>

The union consequently redrafted its rule book in 1974 and there began a period of intensive steward recruitment, training and education. The expansion of workplace activism was prioritised by some full-time officers who,

*sometimes aided by active lay officials, have coaxed, encouraged and even bullied in order to foster the growth of union stewards and the development of greater membership involvement and self-reliance.*<sup>83</sup>

Nevertheless, the position of NUPE full-time officers remained relatively unassailable as they maintained their long-standing role as policy deciders. By 1983, the dominant role of NUPE full-time officers looked to have changed little from Roberts' era despite the volte-face on shop stewards. Fryer characterised this as,

*... full-time officials of the union, free from the limitations experienced by rank and file members and unconstrained by organised and focused membership pressure, have enjoyed many of the conditions which promote a tendency towards oligarchy and domination.*<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>81</sup>ibid. p23-30.

<sup>82</sup>ibid. p53.

<sup>83</sup>ibid. p18.

<sup>84</sup>Fryer. 1983. op cit.

This aspect was brought home to me during the course of this thesis when an academic colleague who was also researching UNISON asked me what was the role of the Broad Left in NUPE? To which I replied.

There was no Broad Left in NUPE. The membership never organised itself that way. National Conference wasn't an occasion for debating policy, it was an excuse for a big piss-up for everyone who had worked hard for the union during the past year. It was a social event more than anything.

My colleague found this difficult to comprehend, especially as his own experience in the trade union movement had been around Left politics. What this exchange serves to highlight is one of the 'peculiarities' about NUPE that non-NUPE people have difficulty in understanding, but which NUPE people, both lay and full-time, saw as the norm, or as we referred to it - the family. This thesis is unable to explain fully this phenomenon and suggests that further investigation is needed to try and locate the significance of the NUPE member/officer relationship.

#### INCOMPLETE MATURATION OF ACTIVIST EDUCATION

The progress towards an expanded and trained stewards movement was interrupted latterly as the effects of CCT and other measures designed to reduce the public sector pay bill commanded greater attention. At the same time, shop stewards showed a disinclination to be involved in local pay bargaining, which, ... *exposed the weaknesses and unwillingness of shop stewards*'.<sup>85</sup> At national level activists were little better prepared for the forthcoming merger as Sean, an influential figure in the merger process explained.-

I regret that the NUPE culture was hammered by the NALGO culture because NUPE activists were not well organised enough. [to resist]. NUPE full-time officers did a great deal for the lay reps, perhaps so much that they were not able to stand on their own two feet. Training for them should have begun 5 years before. [the merger]. ... until 1969/70 we had no stewards, maybe we didn't do enough in the mid-years. [Sean, ex-NUPE senior national official]

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<sup>85</sup>IRS 1992. op cit.

Support for this contention came from June an ex-NUPE, national official.

NUPE was a truly great working-class trade union, but being paternalistic isn't always helpful. The NUPE style was appropriate then, but not now. We didn't equip activists for this climate. We may have nannied them too much. [June, ex-NUPE national official]

Hitherto unpublished data clearly shows that dominance/dependence issue ran far deeper than previously understood from earlier research. Executive Council members, including the union's President, had conference speeches drafted for them, even to the extent of verbatim et literatim welcome addresses.

*Welcome back delegates. I hope you enjoyed your lunch. ...*<sup>86</sup>

Whether this kind of activity was due to control of, or support for members remains at issue. But what is clear, is that this style of relationship was seen as inimical to the concept of member-led by NALGO whose traditions did not sponsor the kind of interdependence that prevailed in NUPE. The NALGO tradition of full-time officers acting as executors rather than leaders never featured in NUPE's way of doing things, and it has been argued that this was a deliberate attempt by NUPE officers to suppress democratic emancipation. However, my own [and NUPE colleagues] experiences as a lay activist and subsequently as a paid official, do not support this contention. Of course, I accept that this in itself is not categorical proof

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<sup>86</sup>NUPE national conference 1991. President's 'order of business' paper's 3rd May, p.m. session. This 'speech' was drafted by a senior national official, Martin, who also wrote on the same day an advice note to other 'speech writers' ... *You should draft speeches, not speech notes.* But it would be an unbalanced perspective if this kind of 'assistance' was portrayed as one of the worst aspects of a centralised union under complete officer control. On the 18th of May 1991, another national official, George, wrote to the General Secretary and Deputy General Secretary expressing concern about the National Conference's ability to understand the complexities of the formal conduct of conference business, ... *all the training which goes on beforehand, and I wonder whether there might be some place for role playing with one of us taking on the task of being the troublesome delegate.* This would appear to indicate that the speech writing may have had an additional or alternative purpose to the control aspect - that of assisting key activists to cope with very difficult tasks, such as the ordering and conduct of national conference business. It was also practice for national conference speeches to be drafted for full-time officers, including the general secretary.

of how things were generally, but perhaps the following example, which is fairly typical of the kind of relationships that prevailed in NUPE, will demonstrate, if not explain, the member officer inter-dependence relationship.

Betty was a lady in her late 50s who had recently been elected as a branch secretary for a local government branch servicing mostly social service staff in a large authority covering both urban and rural areas. Her aim was to visit every major workplace on a rotational basis. She didn't drive, so the task was one we tackled together with me acting as chauffeur. She then suffered a chronic, domestic crisis which demanded that she learn to drive. Several failed driving tests made the situation worse. The problem was resolved when she changed instructors and received additional, weekly tuition from me. It eased her own domestic problem and also ensured that she could continue with her union duties. My help was both unofficial and 'official' at the same time. It was what was required - and expected - by the national union. This is not a unique example and former NUPE colleagues could just as easily tell similar tales of their experiences. It may not have been the correct way of doing things, but it was the NUPE way.

## **Leadership**

### **FULL-TIME OFFICERS AND 'THE FAMILY'**

The forthright, public campaigning style of its national leaders, centralised decision making, and prominence of full-time officers in setting goals, set it at odds with the position in other unions where the rank and file had grown in assertiveness during the 1980s.<sup>87</sup> The difference in styles of Leadership in the partner unions was sharpest between NALGO and NUPE, and some may argue, diametrically opposed to each other. The received wisdom in NALGO about the strength and charisma of the NUPE Leadership can be seen in this contribution about the merger negotiations.

We didn't always agree with the people we had to report back to. Bickerstaffe could go back to NUPE conference and swing it, [the merger] we couldn't guarantee that. [Rory, ex-NALGO national official]

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<sup>87</sup>McIlroy, 1995, op cit, p168.

This comment identifies the NUPE general Secretary [and by implication] other senior officers, as 'leaders' and policy makers rather than an executive ensuring the application of 'members wishes'. Full-time officers like myself also had a very prominent part to play in running the union. We were expected to 'lead' branches and shape opinions in conjunction with branch officers and stewards. This gave rise to the union being stereotyped as 'officer-led' and described by one external commentator thus,

*[full-time officers impose] their own decisions onto each branch with no reference to the opinions of its members. The idea is that full-time officers know what is best for members and they do it. Would be activists are prevented from participating in their own union by their officers who see them as a threat to their own personal interests. National officers, far from being swamped by bureaucratic procedure, themselves dominate both the regional officers as well as their regional and lay committees.*<sup>88</sup>

This view was not exclusive to outsiders and one key, senior national official even went as far as saying,

In NUPE, Bick used to chair the meetings, not the President. [George, a former NUPE senior national figure.]

However, there does not appear to have been much dissent by the union's members over this style of governance and the union, both members and officers referred to their relationship as 'The Family.' So much so, that academic consultants employed by the three partner unions to advise on 'change management' were able to report,

NUPE ... all talked of the ways in which ex-NUPE people were part of a family, and were loyal to each other. They were champions of the low paid, keen to use their political influence, and were aware of their manual workers background.<sup>89</sup>

Whilst the reality may have been over-stated it is clear that a special articulation had developed between the members and the organising staff who in 1941 had

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<sup>88</sup>Ouroussoff 2. op cit. p4-5

<sup>89</sup>Brewster and Lloyd. op cit p8

founded an in-house staff association with the full support of the NUPE Executive Council to represent the employment related interests of its members.<sup>90</sup> The Association continued latterly as the Society of Union Employees [SUE] and subsequently played a significant role in NUPE including, the active campaigning for UNISON. The importance that NUPE attached to its relationship with its paid full-time officers, referred to colloquially as the 'special relationship', is demonstrated in the union's rules which obliged all officers to become and remain a member of SUE whilst in NUPE's employ. This signalled a unity of purpose and shared priorities between members and officers. And although this kind of 'rule book' relationship was not unique to NUPE the ardour with which it was preserved by all parties set it apart from most other trade unions. Barry, a long-standing, key activist at national level explained it as,

I never agreed that NUPE was officer dominated. All the NUPE officers have been family friends. I know their families. When times were bad they would take the pressure off. It was a true cliché, NUPE was my extended family. Within NUPE there was genuine affection, but by and large it felt as if it cared for you. The members cared for the union and they felt that they were part of the whole. NUPE was my chance in life. I was taken and educated. If I live until I'm 90 I will never be able to repay NUPE for what it has done for me. In no time at all, I was arguing with councillors and beating them twice over. It gave me a whole new outlook on life. [Barry, ex-NUPE, national lay activist]

These sentiments were by no means pertinent only at national level. During an interview with Willie, a former NUPE branch Secretary, I sought to re-assure him of the confidential nature of our discussions. He responded,

If you can't trust a regional officer, who can you trust? [Willie, ex-NUPE branch secretary]

The latter comments hold their significance in Willie's belief that I as a full-time officer would not act in a way that was inimical either to him or to the union as a whole. They were particularly poignant because his UNISON branch was

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<sup>90</sup> Craik, 1968, op cit. p67.



experiencing as another steward put it, 'pistols at dawn' between former NALGO and former NUPE activists and he had no way of knowing if I was on one side of the fence or another. Furthermore, these comments run contrary to the notion of member-led and imply equity of status between members and paid officials and also highlight the almost inevitable conflict arising from the UNISON's member-led rule. [See chapter 5]. That potential conflict was not solely related to the aspirations of lay members, for as the following shows, there was a simple disbelief amongst officers in the other partner unions [primarily NALGO] that the 'family affair' was a desirable form of governance.

NUPE was very much up front on policy issues in its interests. I always had the feeling that it was at the expense of organisation. It was an inspirational way of leading the union. Enthusiasm, inspiration, constantly portraying 'we can be one big happy family'. That kind of culture at the expense of organisation. [Jimmy, a senior ex-NALGO national official.]

If like Jimmy, we fail to understand the significance of the 'family' to NUPE's relationship between members and paid officials we are at an immediate disadvantage in understanding why NUPE members would prefer specific arrangements in the new union that would be sympathetic to their needs and expectations.

#### **RHETORIC AND REALITY**

Politically, NUPE could be said to have been received as a left-led union which ran aggressive recruitment drives amongst areas of public service members that were difficult to organise because of their relative isolation and high proportion of part-time, women workers. In 1970, NUPE led high profile, national disputes on low pay through large scale strikes in refuse collection, street cleaning and other essential public services in what became known as 'The Dirty Jobs' strike. Other similar campaigns gave the union a degree of notoriety culminating in 1978 with the now infamous 'Winter of Discontent' in which hospital operations were cancelled and the dead not buried as gravediggers took strike action. This earned

NUPE the reputation as a 'militant' union.<sup>91</sup> The long standing rivalry with the GMB surfaced again during this dispute in 'a new low' when the union's national officer declared to his conference that NUPE leaders,

*were determined to demonstrate their virility in pursuance of a recruitment drive ... their strategy was to organise chaos and pick up the pieces.*<sup>92</sup>

Although this dispute only lasted some six weeks it became the basis of the Conservative Party's attack on Labour and subsequently saw them swept to victory in May 1979 on a hostile, trade union platform.

#### **PURSUIT OF A STATUTORY NATIONAL MINIMUM WAGE**

For many years NUPE had pressed the issue of eradicating low pay through the creation of a statutory minimum wage and had often found itself at odds with the TUC's formal position. In 1965 NUPE National Conference passed a resolution calling for a Statutory National Minimum Wage [SNMW]. It pressed the issue repeatedly at both TUC and Labour Party conferences but with little success as this policy was viewed by other unions, particularly those in manufacturing, as a route to the erosion of differentials between unskilled and skilled labour. Undeterred by a heavy defeat of 3:1 on the issue at the 1973 Labour conference the union maintained its stance and was rewarded in 1983 with support at both the TUC and Labour conferences on the principle of a SNMW but without the required 2/3rds majority at the Labour conference to entrench it as policy. Eventually, the union's persistence paid off and in 1985 the Labour Conference agreed overwhelmingly to support a SNMW and the following year with the exception of the EETPU and the T&G, the TUC placed its full weight behind it. The battle won, it then had to wait until April 1999 for the 'New Labour' Government to introduce the SNMW at £3.60 per hour. Above all, NUPE was associated with its campaigning on behalf of improved pay and conditions for low paid employees.

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<sup>91</sup>Kessler, p158.

<sup>92</sup>ibid. page 196.

## MEMBERSHIP FORTUNES

### RAPID DECLINE AND THE PUSH FOR MERGER

The effects of CCT cost the union twenty per cent of its membership between 1979 and 1991. {see table 3.6}

Table 3.6      NUPE Membership Decline 1979-1991

1979	1985	1991	%age change
691,770	663,776	551,165	-20.3

source: NUPE annual Reports

Large sections of members in hospital cleaning, catering, portering and laundry services were 'lost' to private contractors with a similar result in local government cleaning, school meals, [once the financial bedrock of the union], refuse collection, street sweeping and grounds maintenance. All these were areas where NUPE had been traditionally strong and in which the union had fought its national, low pay disputes. Consequently, the union found itself struggling to protect the jobs of its members whilst at the same time conceding ground on the pay and conditions of those members whose jobs remained in-house. These circumstances made it increasingly difficult for NUPE to retain members and undoubtedly accelerated the wish and need of the union to achieve a merger of public service, trade unions.

### Conclusions

The origins of NUPE lay in the organisation of low-paid, manual workers in the public services in London during the latter half of the 19th century, but gradually the union began to seek membership outside the Capitol. This was not very successful and the union nearly collapsed for lack of funds. The appointment in 1934 of Bryn Roberts, a charismatic leader, though some would argue authoritarian, witnessed a change in the union's fortunes, and more significantly, the direction and philosophy of NUPE. Under Roberts' stewardship NUPE began to press the case for national pay bargaining which was accompanied by an aggressive approach to recruitment that saw NUPE's membership steadily increase. The blunt tactics adopted by NUPE and the frequently scathing criticisms of other trade union leaders and the TUC by Roberts, left both Roberts and NUPE ostracised by much

of the trade union movement.<sup>93</sup> During the Roberts' era, it is difficult to separate NUPE from Roberts, for in many ways, NUPE was Roberts who had an overriding desire to rid the trade union movement of inter-union competition which he saw as a barrier to the elimination of low pay. This legacy from Roberts strongly influenced successive NUPE general secretaries who continued to press the case for a single union in the public services. Several attempts were made by NUPE to merge with COHSE, but all were rebuffed until the UNISON merger. NUPE's belief in industrial unionism was quite clearly the biggest, single driving force in the desire to create UNISON. The earlier willingness of NUPE to concede a change to the name of the union, and the decision not to recruit COHSE membership after that union was suspended from the TUC, foretells that NUPE would be prepared to make considerable concessions in the UNISON merger negotiations to achieve the new union.

Many NUPE members were poorly educated and poorly paid and often occupied manual labour jobs considered to be at the bottom of the social status ladder. A relationship developed between these members and the unions full-time officers that was known in the union as 'the family'. The full-time officers led the union at all levels which earned the union the epithet of being 'officer dominated', but which NUPE officers and members did not generally accept.<sup>94</sup> Full-time officers were also required by rule to be members of NUPE. This indicates that the relationship between members and officers was closer to partnership than domination. However, research for the partner unions prior to the merger has suggested that the union's internal relationships were changing and that full-time officers were themselves concerned about the central control exerted by the union's staff at head

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<sup>93</sup>Coates and Topham. 1980. p116.

<sup>94</sup>In February 1979 at the end of the so called 'Winter of Discontent' trade union leaders reached agreement with the Government over the unions' pay claim. When NUPE's General Secretary, Alan Fisher took back the offer to his Executive Council which was rejected as being insufficient. When interviewed on BBC radio Alan Fisher was asked if he 'had lost control of his members'. He replied that it was no part of his job to 'control' his Executive, but that his Executive, on the contrary, had every right to 'control' its general secretary. Quoted in Coates and Topham. 1980. p83.

office.<sup>95</sup> In 1974, with academic advice, NUPE had begun to develop a shop stewards movement supported by a comprehensive training programme that was intended to reduce the reliance of members on full-time officers. This also signalled official union support for decentralised, union governance and 'participatory unionism'.<sup>96</sup>

The high-profile, aggressive recruitment drives and often media-driven pay campaigns, at times did little to help NUPE's relationships with other unions who saw NUPE as an opportunistic union more determined to recruit [their] disaffected members rather than negotiate an early settlement. Undoubtedly this perception did not help NUPE's long-standing campaign for the introduction of a Statutory National Minimum Wage which was not fully supported by the Labour Movement until 1985. Along with the vision of industrial unionism, the pursuit of a Statutory National Minimum Wage as a means to end low pay, was a hallmark of NUPE.

The union's expansion was dramatically halted by the introduction of CCT and other similar measures in the 1980s in areas where NUPE had large concentrations of members. In just twelve years the union lost a fifth of its members. Many members who remained in the public services found their pay and conditions of service reduced and often their workload increased at the same time. The inability of NUPE [and other trade unions] to protect members interests in the face of increasingly hostile attacks from government made it more difficult for the union to recruit new members and retain those already in membership. The rapid decline in membership made the task of achieving industrial unionism all the more important and more urgent. Membership decline was not the cause of NUPE seeking merger, but it was clearly a catalyst in the time scale.

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<sup>95</sup>Ouroussoff [2], *op cit.*

<sup>96</sup>Kelly and Heery, 1994.

### **General Conclusions on Chapters 3A, 3B and 3C**

These three chapters have looked at the historical contributions made by the partner unions to the culture of UNISON. It has been necessary to do this because much of what developed through the merger negotiations and subsequently in UNISON is rooted in the origins of the partner unions.<sup>97</sup> The way in which UNISON has developed is best understood by rigorously attempting to understand the basic organisational issues and matters of definition and conceptualisation.<sup>98</sup> This has involved examining the priorities and principles of the three unions and not by exposing differences per se. However, it is as important to understand those differences, as it is to recognise their existence. But it is also important to recognise how those external influences that affected trade unions generally as highlighted in chapter 2, impacted upon the partner unions and their disposition to the UNISON merger.

#### **THE DIFFERING EFFECTS OF EXTERNAL INFLUENCES ON THE PARTNER UNIONS**

The changes in 'welfarism' and State sponsored support for trade union organisation had substantially benefitted all three partner unions during the 1960s and 1970s but the advent of Thatcherism in 1979 signalled a marked digression in their respective fortunes, particularly between NALGO and NUPE. Although there was a significant reduction in spending on the public sector, the areas that were organised by COHSE and NALGO suffered less than the areas in which NUPE organised. This enabled both COHSE and NALGO to weather the storm, and in NALGO's case, sail through it, if not with ease, certainly without being thrown off course. By contrast, NUPE organised those areas of public services which employers opted to see as the first port of call when making savings. This resulted in the workforce, and therefore potential NUPE recruits, being seriously reduced. This pattern of 'State Employment' for blue-collar employees was not dissimilar to the trend in the private sectors where white-collar employment was increasing as blue-collar jobs declined. Therefore NUPE was in a position where the maintenance of its membership would have been against the occupational drift.

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<sup>97</sup>Turner, op cit.

<sup>98</sup>Salaman, 1979, p3.

This scenario was made worse by direct State intervention through the introduction of Compulsory Competitive Tendering for many of the blue-collar services in local government and the NHS as well as elsewhere in the public services. This was specifically damaging to NUPE as these were the key areas where the bulk of the union's membership lay and which resulted in the union losing a fifth of its membership in 5 years as many services fell under the control of private contractors. The raft of increasingly punitive anti-union legislation whilst not the determinant of union membership decline, nevertheless contributed to NUPE's ability to resist CCT and [mostly] prevented the union from running major, national pay disputes that had traditionally benefitted NUPE's recruitment drives that traditionally accompanied the publicity that surrounded such events.

A further aspect to this re-drafting of the public service provision through CCT was the quite dramatic reduction of those jobs in areas that had historically been filled by men in full-time employment, such as refuse collection, street sweeping and grounds maintenance in local government, and portering in the NHS, membership groups who had often been at the forefront of NUPE pay campaigns and branch organisation. Consequently, NUPE lost not only members who had been supportive of pay campaigns but also a source of branch activists. The workforce changes identified above contributed to a rapid alteration in membership gender balance in NUPE emphasising both the importance of women's priorities **and** the potentially, relatively isolated position of male manual workers in the new union. As NALGO did not organise blue-collar workers and COHSE's organising emphasis revolved around nurses it is clear that the predominantly white-collar, new union had innate, structural conflicts concerning the differing priorities of blue- and white-collar members. And what is crucial to the argument here, is that the longer the merger negotiations continued, the weaker would be NUPE's claim for dedicated policies to protect manual workers who continue to decline as a percentage of the workforce as the occupational shift towards white-collar employment continues. [See chapter 5]

We are therefore drawn to ask, 'was this merger an inevitable consequence of other changes and mergers that were happening elsewhere in the British Trade Union movement?' Clearly not, other mergers held little in the way of the industrial logic at the heart of this new union; a move that would see a re-drafting of British trade union patterns of organisation. This merger was therefore, exceptionally ambitious given the distinct, fundamental, long-standing differences of the three partner unions. Principally these were:

1. politically, COHSE was centre right with a long history of association with Labour; NALGO was late in embracing TUC affiliation but had steadfastly maintained formal political independence, though it had a developing strategy of supporting sympathetic Labour campaigns; NUPE on the other hand, was, at least in national leadership terms, on the radical left.
2. Although all three unions were affiliated to the TUC, NALGO's membership was a relatively recent matter but the union's affiliation doubled the size of the public services group emphasising the future influence of NALGO in the TUC. By contrast, COHSE had been temporarily suspended from affiliation caused by the union's dilemma over the RCN and the wish to be seen as a 'professional' trade union. NUPE on the other hand had been marginalised in the TUC in the union's early days but latterly was a key player in Congress matters as seen in the fight for a Minimum Wage. This suggests that the kind of relationship that UNISON would need with the wider trade union and labour movement could be at issue; and certainly in respect of UNISON's relationship with the Labour Party, frequently [but not always] a progression of TUC membership, this was sure to be a major obstacle in the merger negotiations. [See chapter 5]
3. membership composition across the partner unions was diverse and would become more complex at amalgamation. Refuse collectors and hospital cleaners would find themselves in the same union branches as their line managers and other professional white-collar employees. The difficulty for UNISON would be to identify the varying needs of the quite different membership groups and then to set out an agenda and proposals to meet them. And as chapter 4 shows, these differences outweighed those aspects where the partner unions looked to be in some degree of accord



4. leadership styles, especially of the general secretaries were markedly different contributing to characterisations of COHSE, NALGO and NUPE as 'amateur', activist controlled and dominated by officers, respectively. That being so, whosoever became the first general secretary of UNISON would have a critical influence over the early, and therefore long term development of UNISON. [See Chapter 7 ]
5. the democratic traditions and the crucial relationships between paid officers and members and their elected lay representatives, set COHSE and NUPE with their 'settled' relationships, apart from NALGO who championed and valued the 'member-led' ethos as a cornerstone of union organisation. [See chapter 5]
6. Branch organisation varied in size and focus across the unions, but one of the most significant differences in this area was the power and influence of the large, metropolitan branches in NALGO who were able to hold sway over much of that union's activities and as chapter 5 shows, continue to do so in UNISON.
7. the pressures on the three partner unions concerning the need to merge varied considerably and suggests that the urgency of reaching a negotiated merger strategy and subsequent agreement was felt most heavily by NUPE. This may have predisposed the union to settling for second best if the alternative was to see the merger fall apart.

These deep-seated, historical differences lie at the heart of any understanding of the UNISON merger and should not be seen as mere 'background' information, for contained in these ingrained traits is the key to knowing why UNISON has developed as it has. These and other key differences are discussed in chapter 4.

## Chapter 4

### Convergence and Divergence: The Potential For Conflict

#### Introduction

Chapters 3A, B and C examined the contribution made by the histories of the partner unions to the merger process and the formation of UNISON. This chapter investigates the similarities and differences of the characteristics of the membership of the three partner unions and also highlights areas of convergence and divergence in the structures and policies of the partner unions. This enables a considered assessment to be made of the basis for building a *new union* and how easy or difficult it would be to bridge those differences to produce a cohesive and integrated, new trade union. Understanding those differences in governance, organisation and representation helps us to understand why and how UNISON developed as it did.

A comparison of some of the central similarities of the three partner unions shows how their respective interests and concerns with changes in the approach to the provision of public services by central government, led to an increasing awareness of the need to improve co-operation between themselves [and others] to resist a 'common enemy'. Albeit this trend towards 'official' co-operation, the difficulties of securing integration of their memberships is emphasised in the diverse characteristics of those memberships which contributed to the 'shape and feel' of the new union which would have to demonstrate equity across all sections of the merged membership, where issues of [including] class, income, education and employment would be accentuated.

The difficulties that would sit at the core of the new union are seen in the evaluation of the priorities and interests of their respective memberships. By broadly categorising the resolutions sent by branches to each union's National Conference it has been possible to compare and contrast issues upon which the partner unions concentrated their efforts. In some instances these can be seen to be linked to the democratic structures developed by the partner unions, as in the self-organised groups in NALGO. In the case of NALGO and NUPE, the data was collated from reviews of the conference agendas from selected years. It was not

possible to repeat this for COHSE because the union's archive material, including conference documentation, is still held at the union's former head office and is currently awaiting formal cataloguing, so access has not been possible. It therefore remains a shortcoming in the thesis for which due regard must be made. However, a number of post-conference, COHSE journals which report the results of motions debated at conference have been reviewed, and whilst these do not correspond directly with the data on NALGO and NUPE they do act as a helpful comparator when assessing policies and concerns of the partner unions. Overall, this chapter acts as a crucial link between the early and developing themes of the partner unions and the outcomes of the merger negotiations.

The chapter also tries to explain why NALGO, seemingly stable and financially sound, agreed to merge when it could have continued as a separate, viable union. It is posited that this was due to a decision of some of the political factions in NALGO who wished to expand their influence into trade unions where previously they had experienced only limited success.

### **The Dimensions of Differentiation: Convergence**

*.... an amalgamation of the three unions has an inescapable logic and would create a pre-eminent TUC affiliate in the Health Service.<sup>1</sup>*

The differences attributable to the historical developments of the partner unions [see chapter 3] perhaps mask some of their similarities in which the 'germination' of the new union had some purchase. Although it has to be said, that some of these commonalties were frequently overshadowed by the seemingly sharper differences which sometimes characterised the relationships between their members and which led the partner unions in their pre-merger publicity to emphasise the said convergence of their interests.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, it is useful to examine those similarities to understand how they may have contributed to expectations about the new union, and in at least one instance, became a central feature in UNISON's

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<sup>1</sup>NALGO, 1989 p1.

<sup>2</sup>COHSE, NALGO, NUPE. [1].1990. op cit.

'Aims and Values'.<sup>3</sup> Figure 4.1 highlights some of the principle areas where the partner unions' policies, practices and structures were broadly compatible but which would need enhancing to help cement tolerance and inclusiveness in the new union.

figure 4.1 Similarities and Convergence in the Partner Unions

CHARACTERISTICS	COHSE	NALGO	NUPE	CONSEQUENCE
<u>FOCUS OF ACTIVITIES</u>				
national union centred	yes	yes, but high status and importance of regional structures	yes	national image. Potential for power to become limited around national figures.
local branch structure	yes, often based around a single hospital.	yes, large branches a defining feature, especially in local government	yes, usually employer based, but CCT and related matters disturbing service to members	local services to members vary according to personnel and resources
shop stewards system	yes, but underdeveloped	yes, relatively recent, but training and development prioritised. e.g. regional and branch education officers.	yes, but incomplete. strategy difficult to follow because of CCT	activists encouraged to 'stand on own two feet'
public services oriented	yes	yes	yes	government control finances for services and effective control of pay, therefore unity through a 'common enemy'
<u>ATTITUDES</u>				
belief in comprehensive public services	yes  strong commitment to universal Healthcare	yes  Put People First campaign. etc.	yes  Statutory Minimum Wage seen as an integral part of quality public services	support for action and campaigns to fully finance a wide range of services. A belief in 'public ownership'

<sup>3</sup>Uniquely amongst British trade unions UNISON includes the promotion of public services in its rules. UNISON Rules. 1993 p2.

CHARACTERISTICS	COHSE	NALGO	NUPE	CONSEQUENCE
<u>POLICIES AND INITIATIVES</u>				
recognition of need to enlist wide support for public services	yes	yes	yes	co-operation at TUC on key measures affecting public services, also especially SNMW
prepared to use industrial action to support members claims	yes an increasing willingness at national level to work together. e.g. 1989 national ambulance dispute			recognition that the government benefitted from a dis-united workforce
<u>POLITICAL ASPIRATIONS</u>				
support for return of a Labour Government	yes though support relatively low key	yes but not at any price. Political independence still paramount	yes seen as <b>the</b> priority for public services & the union	joint union co-operation on 'political' issues often sympathetic to Labour

### Structural Similarities

All three partner unions had national structures that supported national, collective bargaining strategies on behalf of their members, but the unions differed in how those strategies were conducted and resourced. As the smallest union in the partnership and operating [almost] exclusively in the NHS, COHSE had fewer resources dedicated to national structures than either NALGO or NUPE which may have contributed to the 'gifted amateur' tag. NUPE's membership was represented by a small core of national negotiators supported by a [probably] insufficient research team that had become highly influential in the policy formulation and administration of the union.<sup>4</sup> NALGO's approach was much more ordered. The

<sup>4</sup>Under Bernard Dix, the former Assistant General Secretary, NUPE's Research Department developed into a political 'power house' that was often responsible for the 'left' direction of the union's many, high profile disputes. A hitherto unpublicised example of this was in the 1978/79 Winter of Discontent; the Research Department staff became concerned when the General Secretary, Alan Fisher struck a private deal with Jim Callaghan, the Prime Minister over public sector pay. This would have ended the dispute but not met the union's claim to significantly raise members' take-home pay. The Research Department intervened through Rodney Bickerstaffe, then Local Government National Officer who sought the assistance of Dix who was seriously ill at the time and on long term sick leave. Bickerstaffe brought Dix, seen as Fisher's confidant and strategist, to an Executive Council Meeting called to consider the Callaghan deal. Dix openly challenged Fisher's rationale which resulted in the Executive

financial stability of the union had allowed it to engage a high number of research and support staff to service the national negotiators and produce a comprehensive written advice and information service to members through its in-house publications of 'Public Services' [for all members] and each week, NALGO News [for stewards]. However, the most significant difference between NALGO and [COHSE and NUPE] was not the quantity of the union's resources devoted to supporting the role of the national union, but the primary role played by the lay members in the policy making and administration of the union, and their integration in the national negotiations fora. This practice, also influenced NALGO's approach to the merger. [See chapter 5].

Much of the democracy within the partner unions centred around 'the branches' and their roles, rights and responsibilities. These branches were expected to provide the organisation and representation of members at the workplace as well as a number of other 'peripheral' services. But as chapter 3B showed, NALGO's relatively, healthy financial position and often superior facilities for its stewards, enabled the union's branches to potentially pursue matters more professionally and realistically than either COHSE or NUPE branches who were more stringently 'controlled' by their respective central administration. For whatever reason, NALGO had a greater number of stewards than the other two partner unions which suggests that the union's system of steward and branch organisation may have had advantages over those operated by COHSE and NUPE. Without further research it is not possible to say if this scenario was directly attributable to NALGO's member-led philosophy, though this clearly had a bearing on the authority with which stewards were able to conduct themselves on behalf of members.

### **Shared Attitudes and Common Policies**

Whilst the yearning for industrial unionism sported by NUPE may not have been shared [initially] by COHSE and NALGO, the belief in publicly funded services provided by 'public' not private employees gave them considerable common ground

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rejecting the deal 26 votes to nil. The dispute then continued and led indirectly to the election of the Thatcher Government in May 1979.

around which they could jointly campaign.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, they organised many of the same workplaces, often in competition with each other, which had demonstrated the weakness of their position when faced with a concerted attack by the 'real employer' - the government. The recognition of this weakness had encouraged a range of initiatives between them including jointly funded research, publicity campaigns and even some industrial action to defend public services and members' jobs. This was best seen in the 1989 national ambulance dispute when the unions [principally COHSE, NALGO and NUPE, but with some T&G and GMB members] elected NUPE's senior NHS negotiator, Roger Poole to be their agreed spokesman in a dispute in which the trade unions held sway over public opinion.<sup>6</sup> Another highly important aspect of this unity was the way in which the partner unions worked to secure majority support for a Statutory National Minimum Wage at the TUC Conference in the face of stiff opposition from some of the other unions.

### **Political Aspirations**

The partner unions' separate traditions of political activity were reconciled in principle, if not in practice, around the need to prevent a fifth, successive, Tory general election success which promised further damaging cuts and policies in the public services. For NUPE the return of a Labour Government had become paramount to halt the intensive programme of CCT and other privatisation initiatives. COHSE also saw the need to work co-operatively to achieve this end as the union's membership was in the forefront of a range of government measures in the NHS that had serious implications for its members. NALGO, unaffiliated to Labour, was prevented by law from directly supporting the Labour Party but ran a comprehensive series of publicity campaigns in defence of public services that at times 'sailed close to the wind' and which could have led to legal action against the union. However, NALGO's position was often more critical of Labour than either COHSE or NUPE. The support for Labour and the joint initiatives on public services and pay, indicate that the partner unions were converging, if only slowly, and on a limited number of fronts.

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<sup>5</sup>Bickerstaffe 2000. op cit. p16-17.

<sup>6</sup>See Kerr and Sachdev 1992 for an analysis of the dispute

### **The Dimensions of Differentiation: Divergence**

The memberships of COHSE, NALGO and NUPE were marked by deep-seated differences that reflected divisions often associated with the inequalities of class, such as education, skill and career opportunities. These differences were most noticeable between many of NALGO's members and the majority of NUPE's members over whom they often had managerial authority. Some of these differences seem irreconcilable, others would require the new union to adopt specific measures to deal with them and to redress the imbalances and in-built advantages that some of the groups would have over others. One of the sharpest contrasts and which was to have a profound influence in the eventual style and shape of UNISON, was in literacy and numeracy. The lack of recognised, educational achievement that characterised many of NUPE's members set them at a great disadvantage when dealing with the formal, written aspects of their work and everyday lives. By contrast, most NALGO members were generally more literate, numerate and better educated than their NUPE counterparts. NALGO members and a significant number of COHSE members, practised their literacy and numeracy skills in their jobs. This gave them a degree of confidence and familiarity with 'official' or bureaucratic ways of working that were largely alien to most NUPE members. The higher articulacy of many NALGO members also gave them advantages in formal debates over their COHSE and NUPE colleagues, and as chapter 5 shows, has contributed to the marginalisation of manual workers in UNISON. Figure 4.2 demonstrates key differences that would have to be overcome to enable parity of participation in the new union.



figure 4.2 Membership Characteristics: Differences and Divergence

LAY MEMBER FACETS	COHSE	NALGO	NUPE	manifestation
<u>GENDER AND WORK PATTERN</u>				
majority of members women	yes	yes, but less than COHSE & NUPE	yes	paradoxically, gender issues low profile in COHSE and NUPE
high proportion of part-time employees	yes	no	yes	pay usually paramount
full-time employees length of working week	37.5 [nurses] 39 [manuals]	usually 37 or less	39 for majority	re-inforces status divisions
membership concentration	NHS	mostly local government	NHS and local government	local employer's environment may be influential in determining style of local union branch
<u>INCOME AND EMPLOYMENT STATUS</u>				
income spectrum	medium, but high for some senior nurses	wide and high	low	broad span may diffuse focus, narrow spectrum may exclude other considerations
salaried	majority	yes	majority no	salariat unfamiliar with problems associated with waged labour
white/ blue-collar	majority nurses defying classification	white	large majority blue	priorities vary between groups. e.g. incremental advancement for w/c. basic pay for b/c
dress code	nurses uniform denotes status and rank	own clothes individualism 'dress to kill'	protective clothing, for dirty jobs	re-inforces 'difference'

LAY MEMBER FACETS	COHSE	NALGO	NUPE	manifestation
<u>ACADEMIC AND VOCATIONAL SKILLS AND QUALIFICATIONS</u>				
formal educational attainment required for employment	yes for some, though limited	yes, including significant proportion of HE	no, with small No of exceptions	self-perception and self-worth influential
formal written and numeracy skills required in job	yes for nursing discipline, but limited for most others	yes, often an integral part and pre-requisite of career progression	no, with few exceptions	distinct advantage in dealing with reports, formal documents and written submissions. At relative ease with 'bureaucracy'
<u>EMPLOYMENT</u>				
nature of work	majority in a Profession that attracts high public esteem. 'Angels syndrome'	largely office based, seen as a 'decent job'. Status can be quite high, but sometimes tagged as bureaucrats	usually unskilled, low status, 'anyone can do it' 'just a domestic'	type of employment often pre-disposes individuals' own and the public's perception of their value to the community
work environment	good for majority	good	may be hostile, uncomfortable, dirty or dangerous	adds to perception of status. 'clean clothes = good job'
career prospects	majority yes, but limited except for minority	yes, especially in higher grades where 'professionalism' is intrinsic to job	strictly limited	career may be as important as pay
<u>EMPLOYMENT STABILITY</u>				
affected by privatisation/ CCT	a little	only to a small extent	yes, greatly	cuts in pay and conditions. loss of job security
received wisdom of 'public worth'	very high for nurses	mixed, may be subject to bad press 'officialdom'	generally low	high worth may influence pay and job security

The data in figures 4.1 and 4.2 indicate that whilst there were some similarities between the partner unions that contributed to a convergence, the differences between the 'lived experiences' of their memberships were substantial and possibly widening. COHSE and NUPE were predominantly female a large proportion of

whom worked part-time, and especially in NUPE's case, were poorly paid and in 'dead-end', manual jobs. By comparison, NALGO had a majority of women members in full-time employment, but also a large section of men in full-time, relatively well-paid, career jobs in local authorities. In UNISON, the dominance of the local government membership in NALGO was clearly going to be a major difficulty vis a vis the NHS 'nurse lobby' most noticeable in COHSE. The prospect of trying to combine a strict hierarchical 'uniformed profession' with a large scale bureaucracy, and then both of them with the largely unskilled membership of NUPE implies that substantial compromise, skill and ingenuity would be needed to meld this volatile concoction of divergence.

The primacy with which trade union members view matters of pay is well documented<sup>7</sup> but for some workers matters of career and professional development may be just as, or possibly more important than pay.<sup>8</sup> The new union would have to reconcile the different priorities of this latter group with those members for whom pay was paramount. To ignore this could see the union identified as only interested in the low-paid, or alternatively, not interested in the low paid. Interview data indicates that senior managers [both UNISON members and non members] perceive UNISON as offering little to attract higher paid employees, but more research is needed to determine the extent of this problem. Allied to this is the question of status. The problem does not solely turn on differences between senior managers/professionals and manual workers. Inherent prejudices have long influenced the articulation between blue-collar workers and low grade, white-collar employees which Lockwood described as *guerrilla warfare*<sup>9</sup> and as chapter 2 highlights, manual work is continuing to decline whilst white-collar work, albeit much of it low-skilled, is increasing. For UNISON this would exacerbate the problem of integrating different sections of its membership as one group [white-collar] looks set to extend its numerical dominance thereby accentuating status perceptions whether contrived or real. In some respects, the increase in white-collar employment to supervise the [decreased number of] blue-collar

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<sup>7</sup>Kerr and Waddington. 1998. p13.

<sup>8</sup>Bassett and Cave. op cit.

<sup>9</sup>Lockwood. op cit. p101.

employees affected by Compulsory Competitive Tendering<sup>10</sup> has helped to reinforce status incongruity by depicting manual labour as intrinsically less valuable.

These differences, as argued in chapter 6, have to be recognised and dealt with through appropriate structures and mechanisms, but the extent of that incompatibility cannot be fully reconciled through a single action such as Fair Representation. [See chapter 5]. Overcoming many of the problems would require a willingness by those groups seen as 'advantaged' [white-collar] to concede ground to those less privileged. But as shown in chapter 8, in the majority local government group a consensus approach to union governance looks highly improbable because there are insufficient 'advantaged' people prepared to surrender past priorities and values in favour of a strategic approach to membership integration and participation.

### **The Contribution of the Partner Union Structures to UNISON**

The potential dissonance arising from the attributes of the separate and distinctive memberships of the partner unions needs to be viewed alongside their formal structures to expose the incompatibilities of many of their respective traditions and practices. This also helps us to locate in the partner unions' systems of governance those issues that emphasised their intra-union and inter-union relationships. Through an understanding of how the partner unions conducted themselves we can try to identify those issues which were likely to be for want of a better phrase, 'the battle ground' during the merger process and later in UNISON itself. Figure 4.3 details crucial spheres of conduct that, like the issues surrounding member characteristics, would have to be recognised and dealt with in order to create a genuinely 'new union' and not just a re-worked version of one of the partner unions.

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<sup>10</sup>Kerr and Radford. op cit. p2.

figure 4.3 Differences and Similarities in Partner Union Structures

UNION STRUCTURAL FACTORS	COHSE	NALGO	NUPE	manifestation
<u>RELATIONSHIP WITH WIDER UNION MOVEMENT</u>				
TUC affiliation	yes	yes, but much later than COHSE or NUPE	yes	influence with governments and other institutions
<u>FORMAL POLITICAL ACTIVITIES</u>				
political fund	yes	yes	yes, had emptied coffers to support Labour elections	formal voice on political matters
Labour Party affiliation	yes, seen as mainstream	no, strong resistance	yes, left-led <sup>1</sup>	formal and financial relationship with Labour
<u>PRINCIPAL LOCI OF AUTHORITY</u>				
national conference as supreme authority of union	yes,	yes, but branches able to campaign against national policy	yes	unity through sovereign authority
national conference size	small	very large, every branch entitled to a delegate	medium	small conference able to generate intimacy, but may exclude minority interests. large conference potentially provides all branches opportunity to influence national union, but may be viewed as intimidating.
service groups	no predominantly NHS	yes influential, especially in negotiations on pay and conditions	yes, plus Advisory Committees for specific occupations influential but subject to Executive endorsement	potential alternative centres of power and/or extension of representative democracy

UNION STRUCTURAL FACTORS	COHSE	NALGO	NUPE	manifestation
regional executives	yes declared ineffective by union's officer leadership	yes powerful in region and influential at national level	yes but with limited roles, though latterly involved in selection of candidates for full-time officers	potential alternative centres of power and/or extension of representative democracy
<b><u>BRANCH INDEPENDENCE</u></b>				
branch financial autonomy	no	yes	no	ability to stage local initiatives
branch campaigning autonomy	no	yes	no	quick & flexible responses, but may give rise to conflict with 'official' policy
veto on full-time officer visits	no	yes	no	restricts national union influence. underscores member-led ethos. 'Federation' not Union implied
branch employed administrative and clerical staff	no	yes but mainly in larger local authority branches	no	activists freed-up to concentrate on members' problems
<b><u>ADDITIONAL STRUCTURAL INFLUENCES</u></b>				
retired activist members section	no	yes, representation at national fora	no	activists still linked to union
women, black, gay & lesbian, & disabled members groups	no	yes, highly influential even where group numbers are small	no but gender issues important	power and authority more widely dispersed

UNION STRUCTURAL FACTORS	COHSE	NALGO	NUPE	manifestation
<u>PRINCIPAL FEATURES of GOVERNANCE</u>				
formality of conducting business	no	yes	no	[usually] written rules, procedures, codes of practice
importance of regional and national lay activists profile	low	high Powerful lay Regional Convenor	low	widening of democratic franchise which may attenuate FTO role and authority
member or officer-led	officer/member	member	officer	member-led - paid officials status reduced. members run the union. officer-led - members' abilities may be suppressed
key decision making process	officer/member	member, usually legitimated via committee system	officer/member	restricted democracy may develop in absence of committee, but committees may perpetuate bureaucracy
member/officials inter-personal relationships	mostly cordial, informality said to border on 'amateurism' <sup>2</sup>	democratic authority of system more important than inter-personal relationships	'family' status claimed by union, but seen by others as domination. <sup>3</sup>	relationships no substitute for core organisation. personalities may subjugate democratic expression even where this is not intended
<u>UNION CONTROL OF PAID OFFICIALS</u>				
full-time officers obliged to be members of employing union	no, but had a policy of only recruiting full-time officers from within the union	no, strongly opposed	yes, expressed in union's rule book. Officials also required to seek approval to stand for public office - <u>contrary to legislation</u>	employee status may become distorted - <i>whose union is it?</i>

UNION STRUCTURAL FACTORS	COHSE	NALGO	NUPE	manifestation
<b>MEMBERSHIP SPECTRUM</b>				
incidence of managers and their juniors in same union	low/medium	high	low	low - 'them & us' high - degree of mutual affinity
<sup>1</sup> National leadership strongly viewed as on left of Labour. Union one of the first to ballot members on Labour Party issues which sometimes produced support for centre right candidates in elections. <sup>2</sup> See Ouroussoff chapter 3A <sup>3</sup> See Fryer et al chapter 3C				

The data shows that whilst there were similarities between the partner unions they did not constitute a bedrock of congruence to support an otherwise exceptionally difficult merger. As seen in chapters 3A, B, and C, it is the way structures are operated that contribute to the success or failure of the union's democracy and not the elaboration of the structures per se. Figure 4.3 represents a complex matrix of core traditions, values and beliefs held by the three partner unions that the merger process would need to recognise as potential sources of conflict and barriers to a new, inclusive union. Some of these sources of divergence have never been fully resolved. [See chapter 5]. Additionally, the convergence discussed earlier was more than offset by a plethora of core structures and practices that set the partner unions apart from each other, most noticeable between NALGO and [COHSE and NUPE]. This indicates that the main struggle for philosophical and political supremacy in UNISON would be around the boundaries of branch autonomy preferred by NALGO, rather than an actively integrated union.<sup>11</sup>

Five of these key incompatibilities, the member led lay control principle, branch finance, branch autonomy and the right to campaign, self-organisation, and Political Fund/Labour Party affiliation assumed paramount status in the merger negotiations and eventually set the parameters that shaped UNISON. Figure 4.3 clearly demonstrates the emphasis placed by NALGO on the authority and influence of lay activists at all levels in the union and which distinguishes the union's style of governance from COHSE and NUPE who preferred a 'partnership'

<sup>11</sup> Terry 2000. p 226.



approach to running their unions. The acceptance by NALGO of dissent by branches against agreed national policy identifies this as a key area of divergence and inevitable conflict with the other two partner unions whose central control did not encourage independent initiatives that conflicted with 'official' policy. These differences reveal that the fundamental battle for power would not be between the partner unions per se, but around concepts of governance that are effectively diametrically opposed to each other. That is, one where members define and decide policy and officials then put it into practice; and one where officers develop initiatives and ideas for members to approve or reject.

### **Members' Priorities in the Partner Unions**

So far this chapter has largely concentrated upon the structural aspects of the partner unions and how they contributed to the making of UNISON. To discover a fuller picture of the 'cultures' of the partner unions it is useful to examine the priorities of their respective membership generally as exemplified through those issues raised by branches in resolutions to the unions' national conferences. It is accepted that this is only one aspect of those complex, inter-linked strands that make up the cultural web<sup>12</sup> of a trade union. [See chapter 6]. It was, however, a very significant element in the annual cycle of the governance of the partner unions. Although resolutions to a union's national conference may not reflect the concerns and priorities of individual members they do represent the expectations of lay activists without whom trade unions could not function.<sup>13</sup> In that sense they are a public expression of a trade union's inner sentiments.

Figure 4.4 categorises the resolutions from the national conference agendas of NALGO and NUPE. Access to COHSE national conference agendas has not been possible as the COHSE records and archives are awaiting cataloguing. This makes comparative analysis more difficult, but not impossible: three COHSE journals - 'Health Services' - that reported Conference resolutions provided the COHSE priorities. [See figure 4.5]

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<sup>12</sup>Brewster and LLOYD, op cit

<sup>13</sup>Waddington, op cit. Kerr and Waddington, op cit.

figure 4.4

Analysis of National Conference Agendas of NALGO & NUPE Selected Years 1987-93								
	1987		1990		1992		1993	
agenda classification	NALGO	NUPE	NALGO	NUPE	NALGO	NUPE	NALGO	NUPE
Group 1: Primary Functions - Employer Contingent								
pay, conditions of service, pensions	5	68*	13	4	6	4		
Group 2: Constitutional								
rule Changes	26		32	70	21	44 [many of a technical nature concerning uprating of benefits]		
standing orders	7		15					
Group 3: Equality of Opportunity								
gender/positive action/equal opportunities		5	8	4		1		4
disability			1	1	1	2		
sexuality	7		5		2			2
ethnicity/racism	1	2	12		11	1	1	4
retired	5		1	1	1	2	1	

Analysis of National Conference Agendas of NALGO & NUPE Selected Years 1987-93								
	1987		1990		1992		1993	
agenda classification	NALGO	NUPE	NALGO	NUPE	NALGO	NUPE	NALGO	NUPE
Group 4: Internal Relationships								
lay member democracy	3	1	6		3			
member/staff /FTO's	1	4		3		2		1
branch campaigning autonomy and finance	4		24	3	1	3	1	
union structures/policy	1	7	50 [24 concerning new union also linked to lay member democracy]	19 [8 concerning new union]	19	37 [18 on new union]	17 [16 concerning UNISON issues]	15 [3 on new union]
Group 5: External Relationships								
legislation/political	24	19	26	12 [7 on Labour Party]	7	47	3	24 [19 on relationship with Labour Party]
TUC	3	3			2	1		
unions GB	3	1	1		1		3	
international	12	10	26	7 [all Northern Ireland]	14	6	2	4

Analysis of National Conference Agendas of NALGO & NUPE Selected Years 1987-93								
	1987		1990		1992		1993	
agenda classification	NALGO	NUPE	NALGO	NUPE	NALGO	NUPE	NALGO	NUPE
group 6: Socio-Economic								
economy	3	4	7		2			4
social policy	17	18	9	24	4	14	6	4
pay/statutory national minimum wage	10	8		4	1	7	1	4
Group 7: General Social Dimensions								
public interest/concern	19	22	12	5	17		3	
environment		3	4	2	3			
public services						6		
Group 8: Health and Miscellaneous								
Health & Safety & welfare	2	14	12	3		10	5	1
miscellaneous		5		1				1

\* Until 1987 NUPE's national conference included all matters relating to pay and conditions of service that subsequently became the property of the new Sectional Conferences [= UNISON Service Groups] and should therefore be discounted in this analysis

figure 4.5

Analysis of COHSE National Conference Resolutions: 1980, 1983, 1985.

agenda classification	1980	1983	1985
Group 1: Primary Functions - Employer Contingent			
pay, conditions of	17	12	
service, pensions	10	4	
Group 2: Constitutional			
rule changes	51	7	10
standing orders			
Group 3: Equality of Opportunity			
gender/positive action			
disability			
ethnicity/racism			
retired			
Group 4: Internal Relationships			
lay member democracy		4	
member/staff/FTOs	1	1	
branch campaigning autonomy and finance			
union structures	4	22	26
Group 5: External Relationships			
legislation/political	10	1	6
TUC		2	1
unions GB	6		1
international	8		1
Group 6: Socio-economic			
economy			
social policy	1	6	3
pay/SNMW	2	1	
Group 7: General Social Dimensions			
public interest/concern	16	23	36
environment			
public services			1

agenda classification	1980	1983	1985
Group 8: Health and Miscellaneous			
Health & Safety & welfare	4		6
miscellaneous	2		1

### **What the Agendas Tell us: Internal Relationships and Union Structures**

Those matters considered to have had a crucial and defining influence on the governance, practices and ways of working of UNISON - the member-led/lay control principle, branch finance, branch autonomy and the right to campaign, self-organisation, and Political Fund/Labour Party affiliation, had different priorities across the partner unions and had the potential to become a foundation for long-term incompatibility in the new union between white-collar and blue-collar members. Much of the merger negotiations turned on these matters and therefore their importance should not be underestimated. Sharp differences separated all three unions, but on the aspect of lay member democracy, COHSE and NUPE appear quite distinct from NALGO. With the exception of 1987 when just 1 resolution was registered, the matter was not at issue in NUPE. A similar picture emerges in COHSE in 1983 when 4 resolutions [all concerning the selection of Labour Party Conference delegates] were tabled. For NALGO the issue was a regular feature of conference agendas, with the exception of the last year, 1993. By itself it may not seem to have been critical in shaping the nature and practices of the union, but when taken in conjunction with the other elements related to this key group of members' concerns, their defining nature on UNISON becomes apparent. [For example, see group 4 in figures 4.4 and 4.5]

At the 1990 NALGO conference, no less than 80 [30.4%] of all resolutions centred on the structural matters of lay member democracy, branch campaigning, autonomy and finance, and union structures and policy. Interestingly, there were none concerning the articulation between members and full-time officers, nor were there in any of the subsequent, selected years. This is significant. In 1983 the NALGO national conference passed a resolution from the Haringey Branch that called for

greater accountability of full-time officers and which resulted in a report being adopted the following year [1984] that effectively ensured the status quo with officers remaining responsible directly to the general secretary and not the members.<sup>15</sup> It may be assumed therefore, that at the start of the formal, merger negotiations [1987] this matter was still not fully settled and could be expected to surface again. The fact that it did not may indicate that an 'understanding' about the role of full-time officers had developed between lay activists and full-time officers, but in favour of the lay activists who saw no further reason to raise the issue again. In essence, NALGO was member-led.

In 1993 structural issues still pre-occupied NALGO conference delegates; seventeen [36%] of all resolutions [sixteen of them relating to the new union directly] concerned such matters. For NUPE members, there appears to have been something of a delayed recognition of the implications of the potential merger, for it was not until 1992 that structural issues came to the fore. Of the thirty seven resolutions submitted to the union's national conference no less than eighteen [48.6%] of these concerned the merger, but by this time the ground had already been laid for how the new union would operate. Put bluntly, it was a belated attempt by NUPE's lay members to 'close the door after the horse had bolted' and a further indication of the control that NUPE full-time officers had exerted on the pace and direction of the merger process.

Whilst we cannot comment on the precise disposition of COHSE for the same period, we can say that during 1983 and 1985, [admittedly prior to COHSE's involvement in the merger] the members held high interest in matters of union structure when 22 [26.5%] and 26 [28.26%] respectively of all resolutions discussed concerned this aspect of organisation. This was a surprising finding, but it could reflect issues specific to that period. It had been expected that the 'professional' emphasis of COHSE's orientation to nursing matters and the union's acknowledged informality, would have reduced activists pre-occupation with the internal relativities of the union. It is perhaps this track record of dealing with

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<sup>15</sup>NALGO 1984 [1]

structural matters that placed the union's merger negotiating team in the strong position which allowed it to demand a Service Group structure within UNISON where it could continue as a rejuvenated version of itself.<sup>16</sup>

### **Constitutional Issues**

A strict comparison on rule changes between any of the three partner unions is not practicable because of differences in the ways in which each union approached this aspect of governance. For example, a union executive may submit rule changes to adjust the constitution of the union to keep it 'technically' correct, such as to comply with new legislation or to take account of proposed subscription levels and this can distort analysis if it is taken as a true indication of members' concerns. Therefore I have discounted this as a useful contribution to our understanding of the priorities of the unions' memberships.

We are, however, helped by looking at challenges to the standing orders of the three partner unions where a distinct divergence of priorities is revealed. Both COHSE and NUPE in the selected years did not face significant changes to their standing orders. This is in marked contrast to NALGO who in two of the selected years saw considerable opposition to the union's status quo - 1987 [7 proposals] and 1990 [15 proposals] - which suggests that sections of the union's membership were still seeking to alter NALGO's order. The absence of such challenges in 1992 is probably due to the imminence of the merger and the need [in the members' view] to set the priorities in the new union rather than continue the process of change in NALGO. By this token, COHSE and NUPE appear to have been less unsettled than NALGO in their internal relationships.

### **Disadvantaged Groups**

NALGO's arrangements of self-organisation for disadvantaged groups - women, black members, lesbians and gays, disabled and retired members - were not

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<sup>16</sup>Uniquely in UNISON, the Health Care Service Group has a 2 day annual conference compared to the 1 day allowed for all other Service Groups, including the much larger Local Government Group. The effect of this arrangement has been to shelter members in the Health Care Group from some of the practices and former traditions of the partner unions that continue to shape the union.



matched by either COHSE or NUPE and it is debatable if this difference is the reason why these issues had a higher profile in NALGO than in the other two unions. In COHSE, in the years for which data was available, self-organisation was not an issue raised by any branch via conference resolution. Either it was not an issue, or, the 'disadvantaged' groups had still to find sufficient voice to raise their profile. When compared over the period covered by the data, 1987 to 1993 [immediately before the merger], NALGO and NUPE show a remarkable difference with a near four-fold increase in resolutions to the NUPE conference, and an almost three-fold decrease in NALGO's resolutions. This decrease in 'formal' interest in these matters in NALGO probably was not due to a decline in the importance of matters of 'equal opportunity' in the union, rather that the members were more concerned with establishing NALGO traditions and structures in the new union. [see chapter 5]. What is more remarkable, is that at 1993 in the advent of the new union, matters concerning disadvantage/self-organisation had assumed a five-fold greater significance in NUPE than NALGO. [See table 4.1]

table 4.1

Disadvantaged Groups and National Conference Resolutions:

1987,1990, 1992,1993

year	NALGO	NUPE
1987		
self-organisation: total no of resolutions and as a %age of all resolutions	13:150 8.6%	7:126 5.55%
1990		
self-organisation: total no of resolutions and as a %age of all resolutions	27:263 10.26%	6:163 3.68%
1992		
self-organisation: total no of resolutions and as a %age of all resolutions	14:116 12.06%	6:184 3.26%
1993		
self-organisation: total no of resolutions and as a %age of all resolutions	2:47 4.25%	10:44 22.72%

source: NALGO and NUPE National Conference Agendas

This strongly suggests that as far as the NALGO membership was concerned, the question of maintaining the principle of self-organisation and its associated structural status had been won during the merger negotiations. For NUPE, this may indicate that matters of equal opportunity were naturally beginning to surface as a priority of the members, especially given the overwhelming majority of women in the union. More likely though is the 'cross-fertilisation' [networking] of the NALGO approach to dealing with groups widely recognised as under-represented in trade unions specifically and society generally. The influence of the NALGO system of self-organisation that was adopted by UNISON is explored in chapter 5, but is mentioned here to emphasise the contention that during the advent of the new union supporters of this concept of enfranchising disadvantaged groups had successfully prepared the ground for an increased lobby after vesting day.

### **Socio-Economic and Social Policy Attitudes**

The primary importance of pay issues to NUPE members is witnessed in the union's conference agendas which have consistently shown a greater concern with this aspect than both COHSE and NALGO. Pay in the public services is inextricably linked to the economy at large - domestic growth potentially increases the public purse - and public service unions have historically had a keen interest in policies aimed at influencing the economy and government policies on the public services. It is revealing here to note that NALGO and NUPE have been inconsistent in their consideration of these matters. In 1993 no resolutions were submitted on the economy in NALGO when the new union was the key issue, and none in 1990 and 1992 for NUPE. However, differences do start to emerge when matters of a legislative/political nature are linked and included in the overall analysis. The broad parity in 1987 is replaced in the later years by NUPE's far greater concern with such matters. In 1992, NUPE had 47 resolutions in this category compared to just 7 in NALGO. This clearly reflects the effects of Compulsory Competitive Tendering on NUPE's membership. [See chapter 2]. The high number of resolutions [19] on the Labour Party to NUPE's last conference in 1993 may be accounted for by the members' concern to work for a return to power for Labour and by apprehension over the union's traditional relationship with Labour in the new union.

During the selected years for COHSE, no resolutions on the economy were submitted by the union's branches. This suggests a somewhat inward looking union more concerned with other matters, although COHSE's concern with legislative/political issues was quite high reminding us of the union's long tradition of association with Labour and political activity. Where the union's priorities stand out above those of NALGO and NUPE is in COHSE's pre-occupation with matters of public interest and concern.<sup>17</sup> This is most likely attributable to the high profile nature of much of their members' work in the NHS and the root and branch changes in the NHS policies introduced in the 1980s. In particular, the shift from hospital based treatment to Care in the Community engaged much of the union's time and resources. And although both NALGO and NUPE had also been concerned with a broad range of subjects in this category, the sheer number [36 in 1985] of resolutions in COHSE [the smallest partner union by far] on matters of public interest/concern indicates an area of potential divergence of priorities in UNISON. It also may help to explain why COHSE wanted to have a separate Health Care Service Group in UNISON where it could continue the union's pursuit of such matters and protect the 'professional' interests of the union's nurse members.

### **Relationships with the Wider Trade Union and Labour Movement**

Nearly all British trade unions have active links with unions in other countries and the increasingly transnational nature of capitalism in recent years has accelerated this trend as trade unions seek to limit being 'played-off' against each other. Therefore we may expect that international relations in public service unions to be of lower profile than in those areas of manufacturing and commerce where employers operate across national boundaries. This is true of both COHSE and NUPE but not NALGO. The data indicates that strong international links with trade unions and other sympathetic organisations was of considerable importance to NALGO who were [in 1990 up to] nearly four times as likely to debate international issues as their COHSE and NUPE counterparts. It may be that as a numerically stable and successful union that NALGO was sought after as a 'mentor' on organising white-collar employees by organisations in other countries. It could

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<sup>17</sup>See Carpenter op cit. p381-400 for a summary of COHSE's activities and concerns in the 1980s.

also indicate that NALGO had recognised early on the potential for [unwelcome] policies and practices operated by governments to migrate across nation states and this may have encouraged the union to increase its knowledge and resistance to this trend in public service provision.<sup>18</sup> In crude terms, the potential for division in the new union would be around COHSE's and NUPE's greater concern for their own pay and conditions before those of union members in other countries.

### **Why Did NALGO Agree to the Merger?**

NALGO could have walked away from the merger process and was unlikely to have suffered from significant membership losses as a result, but it didn't. It would be too simplistic to conclude that this was because it had achieved [virtually] all its demands at the negotiating table, [see chapter 5] so it is reasonable to assume that other factors were in play. Several, influential interviewees and informal sources from former NALGO with whom I have discussed this aspect have almost perfunctorily suggested that the advent of CCT and the externalisation of white-collar employment had provided the impetus for merger. However, there is little factual evidence to support that particular hypothesis. Though it has to be said that Jinkinson, the NALGO General Secretary consistently referred to this aspect in his public speeches. Even so, this may have been a response to moves from within the lay membership of NALGO. [See Below]. NALGO was financially and numerically sound, had little need of additional influence with [most] employers, and most importantly, no historical record of interest in a wider charter that would cross political, status and class boundaries. Inside the TUC it was the largest white-collar affiliate in a national workforce where white-collar [public service] density was replacing blue-collar organisation. Trade unions in Britain have shown little evidence of merger on the grounds of 'industrial logic',<sup>19</sup> so why should this merger have been any different? The antipathy between COHSE and NUPE was

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<sup>18</sup>The provision of water and electricity which were previously public monopolies are now partly owned by foreign capital. Street cleansing and refuse collection in some local authorities is carried out by foreign owned conglomerates that provide similar services in their base country. The talk of a pan European, public service trade union often cited by Bickerstaffe upholds the contention that perhaps NALGO's international undertakings were merely another facet of this move towards international alignment.

<sup>19</sup>Undy et al. op cit. Waddington. 1995. op cit.

only matched by the antipathy between NALGO and NUPE: 'bosses' and 'bin men' are not natural bedfellows on the basis of their track records towards each other. Indeed, as one observer to the merger put it,

The thing that they had in common was the frequency with which they crossed each others' picket lines. [Fred, external observer of merger negotiations]

There is another scenario that has not been voiced but which holds logic, and is centred upon the lay control principle that was held by NALGO. Within NALGO, the Communist Party was influential and the prospect of a larger union that would extend the Party's influence across a wider franchise and into the 'working-class proper' would have held great attraction. Indeed, in the north west region of NALGO the motto of the Communist Party towards the merger was, *Accelerate Don't Hesitate*. The far-left groups would also have seen the merger as a prime target to establish their philosophy and presence in two major areas of the public services that until now they had failed to infiltrate with any significance; neither COHSE nor NUPE had been much bothered by Trotskyist politics to anything like the degree of NALGO. For the mainstream Labour-Left<sup>20</sup> this was an opportunity to affect Labour Party policy directly in ways that were not open to them through NALGO's politically, non-aligned status. The Right, although opposed to the merger in principle, [the Conservative Governments were not keen to see union mergers, especially in the public services] and indeed campaigned until the end against the new union, adopted the rearguard action of supporting the lay control principle. This ensured that if the membership voted for the merger that the Right would still be in an influential, if somewhat minority position, in the new union.

These gambits were also being played out against the backdrop, pressed by NUPE, of industrial unionism and how a single union for the public services was a better defence of jobs and pay and conditions than the fragmentation and disunity that prevailed. The three, agreed Reports<sup>21</sup> presented to the unions' conferences emphasised this aspect and must have had some positive effect on the majority of NALGO members, most of whom were not formally aligned to any particular

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<sup>20</sup> NALGO had more individual Labour Party members than either COHSE or NUPE.

<sup>21</sup> see COHSE, NALGO and NUPE 1991 [4].

faction or party. The combination of political aspirations and general merger publicity was sufficient to overcome the conservative element in the union who were opposed to the new union along class lines, that is, not in the same union as the refuse collectors.

Chapter 5 addresses in some detail the primary role of NALGO lay activists in the merger negotiations, but what remains unanswered is the position of NALGO senior officials in [potentially] driving forward the merger process. In COHSE and NUPE, full-time officers were clearly in charge of the merger preparations as the comments of this ex-COHSE, senior official show.

There were three executive officers. We had the two pronged strategy. We then brought the President on board. There was no paper to the NEC, I think it came up under [name] report - we almost bounced the NEC into it on the day, [my emphasis] - eventually with the president's help. [Mitchell. ex-COHSE senior officer]

But when I asked Mitchell about why NALGO went for the merger, a sense of ambivalence showed.

I don't know. ... Neither COHSE or NALGO were financially driven into the merger. My impression was that Alan Jkinson was driving it. [Mitchell. ex-COHSE senior officer]

An influential [Communist Party] lay member who played a significant part in establishing NALGO's pro-merger stance dismissed this out of hand and said that the union's full-time officers played no part in determining whether NALGO would support the merger. The evidence, as chapter 5 demonstrates, is that once the lay members had decided in principle, the officers then pursued that agenda ardently, but would have been unlikely to have moved in support of policies without prior endorsement of the lay democracy who determined the policies of the union.

There is also another aspect several interviewees and other UNISON colleagues have opined; that is, that this was an opportunity for NALGO's national leadership

to enlist the help of the COHSE and NUPE officers to curtail the activities of the far-left groups which so troubled NALGO. The evidence is unclear as to who 'started the ball rolling' and in the long run it may not matter, however, as chapter 5 shows, once the principled decision had been taken, lay members actively controlled NALGO's approach to the merger

## Conclusions

The three partner unions were very different organisations with memberships, ways of working, ethos and priorities that distinguished them from each other. These differences would need to be recognised to assist the integration of UNISON's diverse constituency. A comparison of the similarities and differences of the partner unions' memberships and the structures and ways of working that each union had developed to meet the needs of their discrete constituencies has highlighted the potential for conflict where differences of [including] education, income status and class are present. This was reflected in the resolutions registered at the partner unions' national conference.

Radical changes in the way in which Conservative governments viewed the provision of public services generated a degree of consensus and co-operation between the partner unions across a range of political and industrial issues, including the return of a Labour Government. Although national union centred, each partner union had an extensive system of local branches in which members were organised. However, this aspect of organisation was developing at different rates and stages in each union and appeared to be more advanced in NALGO than either COHSE or NUPE. The benefit of the closer working relationships between these three unions was seen in the national ambulance dispute in 1989 when they coalesced behind one national spokesman who presented the case to the public and media on behalf of all the unions described as an expression of the *inescapable logic*<sup>22</sup> of a single, public service, union.

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<sup>22</sup>NALGO, 1989 [1], op cit.

The structures of the partner unions had a number of important similarities, such as affiliation to the TUC and a Political Fund,<sup>23</sup> but fundamental differences separated them across several critical areas. These included: the member-led/lay control principle, branch finance, branch autonomy and the right to campaign, self-organisation, and Political Fund/Labour Party affiliation. These issues became points of principle in the merger negotiations for NALGO, and more than other aspects of the merger process came to symbolise the union's central approach to the prospect of the new union. [See chapter 5]. Traditionally, [NUPE] manual workers and to a lesser extent COHSE members, had relied upon the assistance of full-time officers to advocate their interests which had contributed to the joint regulation [by members and officers] of their unions' governance. However, the critical areas of difference, particularly the member-led principle, separated NALGO from [COHSE and NUPE] and on the face of it, look unbridgeable. To maintain acceptable traditions UNISON would have to be highly innovative and be determined to overcome the preference by NALGO for a relationship regulated by formality and rule.

Matters concerning internal and constitutional arrangements generally attracted greater interest in NALGO than either COHSE or NUPE whose members appeared content to accept the defined order for conducting their unions' affairs. Notwithstanding the limitations regarding COHSE, the available data suggests that contrary to expectation, the union was familiar with debate on structural matters leaving it well placed to argue for constitutional measures that would protect the union's traditions, practices and values, and limit the influence of the non-Health Care, Service Groups in the new union.

The principle of self-organisation pioneered by NALGO was reflected in the volume of resolutions to the union's national conference and indicates the commitment of the union to this particular form of organisation. NUPE did not have similar arrangements for disadvantaged groups of members and these issues only belatedly came to the fore as a realisation of the importance of the principle of

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<sup>23</sup>The Political Funds are dealt with more appropriately in chapter 5



self-organisation in UNISON. For COHSE, which had a substantial majority of female members, self-organisation for the overwhelming majority of members was not an issue. However, restricted access to the data leaves this aspect open to challenge as the situation may have changed as the prospect of the new union came closer.

Although pay is a key issue for employees the evidence from the conference agendas suggests that the partner unions' attitude to socio-economic affairs has been uneven and in NUPE's case a lesser priority as the overwhelming effects of Compulsory Competitive Tendering threatened job security. It could be that generally all three unions had recognised that whilst they clearly needed to influence the government on pay strategy, they also had to deal with the wider consequences of other political policies. This may also account, at least in NALGO's case, to a realisation of the need to build international co-operation as political ideology crossed state boundaries.

Even allowing for the degree of convergence, the task for UNISON was immense. Where there was divergence, and that was in the majority of instances, agreed solutions look almost impossible. What is more, in most instances the areas of convergence are less contentious than some of the patterns of divergence, for example, a belief in public services and a local branch structure. Building on these was a useful start to achieving a consensus, but they look insufficient to outweigh the divisions between the respective memberships and between their unions. This implies that unless there was to be a concerted effort and agreement, not to eradicate differences, but to recognise and deal with them appropriately, then conflict, disillusionment and marginalisation would be inevitable. And as will be seen in chapter 5, the construction of UNISON was not about reconciling alternative qualities and traditions, but of trying to build square pegs for round holes.

This chapter has also tried to establish why NALGO was prepared to entertain the merger when as Fryer says there were no utterly compelling reasons for the merger

at all and certainly not from financial pressures.<sup>24</sup> Analysis suggests that an 'unspoken' alliance between the various left factions who had different agendas and wanted different things from the new union, created a substantial bulk of opinion within the union that was sufficient to outweigh the Right and more conservative elements of the membership who did not wish to see a link-up with a 'class' movement. The Communist Party saw an opportunity to increase its influence in the union movement generally; the Trotskyists were keen to extend their presence in both COHSE and NUPE where they had had little success; and the Labour Left were keen to exploit a new relationship with Labour that NALGO's strict non-alignment denied them. In essence, NALGO's truck with the merger was a simple expansionist opportunity expressed through the member-led/control philosophy. Each of the separate factions supported the pro-merger moves of the other in return for a [hoped for] greater influence later. Crudely put, controlling the new union was a chance to wield a bigger stick.

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<sup>24</sup>Fryer 2000. op cit

## **Chapter 5**

### **Top Lines and Bottom Lines: The Merger Negotiations**

#### **Introduction**

This chapter examines the merger process, including specifically, the key issues of the member-led/lay control principle, branch finance, branch autonomy and the right to campaign, self-organisation, and Political Fund/Labour Party affiliation. It is an insight into the bargaining positions, bottom lines, concessions, negotiating strategies and general approaches to the merger of the three partner unions. It also shows the disparity between the approaches of [COHSE] and NUPE on one hand, whose national officials effectively determined the tenor, content and direction of the negotiations, and NALGO on the other, whose national officials were constrained by a detailed overseeing of events by lay activists, some of whom played a leading role as 'monitors' of the merger negotiations.

Evidence from UNISON's National Delegate Conferences shows how the arrangements agreed for the participation by delegates in national conference favoured former NALGO branches whose members disproportionately dominated the first national conference in 1994 and have continued to do so ever since. An assessment is made of how 'far left' groups and radical politics have influenced UNISON policy and practice by their ability to command a large part of the national conference agenda. An analysis of resolutions to UNISON's conference reveals that structural and constitutional matters are a high priority for a minority of branches who have captured the centre stage of debate at conference to the disadvantage of UNISON as a whole, and blue-collar members and women in particular.

The principles of Proportionality and Fair Representation are examined through a review of the lay governance of the union which shows that UNISON has an increasing problem in convincing members to participate in the democratic affairs of their own union. The thesis demonstrates that in practice member-led means 'activist-led', and at that, by only a small minority of white-collar members.

This chapter is not a chronological account of the merger, but is concerned with those matters which have exercised a defining influence over the eventual culture of UNISON. Finally, it is suggested that the evidence strongly indicates that UNISON is perhaps less of a 'new union' as regards its characteristics, ways of working and general ethos than the union originally promised. NALGO's strength, determination and unwillingness to concede on key issues, meant that the union's agenda would, for all intents and purposes, survive in tact in the new union, much to the detriment, primarily of blue-collar members.

### **Lay Control and the Member Led Principle**

In any merger of trade unions the different parties to the merger will have their own agendas, some elements of which will be hidden, whilst other aspirations will be clear and openly voiced. In the UNISON merger negotiations one aspect, some may say above all others, over which there was considerable [initial] disagreement was about the balance of rights and obligations between lay activists and paid officials. NALGO openly championed the case for the new union being member-led, whilst COHSE and NUPE wanted a 'partnership' between members and full-time officers. The matter appeared to be resolved shortly after COHSE joined the merger discussions in 1989 when the three partner unions issued the first of their 'Joint Reports' - The Challenge of a New Union. This report set out in detail the basis for building the 'New Union' which it referred to as,

*A Membership Centred Approach to Local Organisation, ... based firmly upon a commitment to membership centred trade unionism. It recognises that our members come from different backgrounds and have different needs. But it also recognises the need to provide common arrangements to bring them together to support one another within an agreed framework of rules and structures.<sup>1</sup>*

The Report also spoke of the need to build the new union from the 'bottom up' rather than the 'top down' which it said had the potential to leave the running of the union to a *minority of stalwarts and enthusiasts*.<sup>2</sup> But in July 1990, this 'theme' was dealt a severe blow when NALGO introduced into the merger negotiations a paper

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<sup>1</sup>COHSE, NALGO, NUPE. 1990. [1]. op cit. p16-21

<sup>2</sup>ibid.

on the subject of 'Lay Membership Control' in which the union sought to lay the foundations for the intended articulation between lay members and paid officers in UNISON.<sup>3</sup> This 'position statement' set out NALGO's view of a democratic system of lay member control 'at all levels' as previously determined by the union's national conference.<sup>4</sup>

*There are certain key principles which in rule as well as in practice must be central to maintaining and advancing democracy in the new union and ensuring that the members have the last word. [my emphasis]*

- ♦ *overall policy must be determined by a conference of lay delegates elected by members through their branches.*
- ♦ *the implementation of national policy must rest with a National Executive consisting of lay representatives elected by secret ballot of the membership. Full-time officers should not have a vote.*
- ♦ *within the overall parameters of national policy pay and service conditions issues should be determined by group conferences elected through the branch structure and a national committee composed of lay representatives.*

The report acknowledged that the notion of 'lay control' had *profound implications for the internal government of unions*, which in NALGO was evinced through,

- ♦ *the well developed structure of lay committees at all levels from local to national.*

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<sup>3</sup>NALGO 1991 [1].

<sup>4</sup>The NALGO 1989 national delegate conference had given approval for the union's national negotiators to enter into discussions with NUPE [COHSE had still to join the talks] about a possible merger, but in doing so, had set strict parameters about the ways in which the new union would work. Composite 'L' called for:

*clause vi) The new structure should ensure that branches retain similar financial control and relationships to full-time officers, district and national committees to that currently pertaining in NALGO.*

*clause vii) The new structure should ensure branches retain similar financial control to that which they currently enjoy in NALGO.*

This Composite was lost, largely because it included a clause to affiliate to the Labour Party. However, a more mildly worded, though nonetheless categorical, NEC statement supporting these principles was adopted. NALGO's 1990 national conference reaffirmed these principles - composite 'D' - and which then surfaced in the report of the union's merger committee working party in July 1990.

- ♦ *the formal [and informal] limits on the authority and powers of full-time officials.*
- ♦ *the tradition of branch autonomy and independence.*

The Report went on to argue that these '*structural features*' of the union had developed from the *high levels of education, competence, and self-confidence of many leading activists*, many of whom saw no need to call upon the assistance of a full-time officer. From this point onwards, the debate about the nature of the internal relationships and democratic structures within UNISON would be informed by NALGO's irreducible stance on these pivotal issues.

### **The Response**

These 'demands' by NALGO found little favour with COHSE and NUPE who clearly felt affronted by NALGO's attempt to move away from the agreed sentiments of the newly issued Joint Report. In a formal, written response they declared,

*... It certainly has nothing to do with overall assumptions of confidence, competence, articulacy or presumption. .... Rather it has to do with a complex set of factors and opportunities, all of which need to be viewed within a framework of a partnership and as part of a division of labour in the New Union, rather than resulting from a series of moralising slogans used as sticks with which to beat other practices. .... It cannot be assumed that any one of the three partner unions has already divined the best answer to that.<sup>5</sup>*

### **Lay Control v Member-Centred**

The issue of who would 'run the union' remained unresolved as this extract from a background paper shows.

*The concept of lay control - that the membership should exert sovereign authority over the fundamental policies - lies at the heart of all three unions, and must be of equal importance in the New Union. Membership sovereignty and the*

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<sup>5</sup>COHSE, NALGO, NUPE. 1991[2]. p3.

*importance of accountability to the membership - part of the continuing theme of 'membership-centredness' should inform every aspect of this Report.*<sup>6</sup>

There are some who would perhaps argue that there is little difference between member-centred and member-led and that the immense concern and energy that all three unions spent on this aspect was unnecessary as it is difficult not to agree that a union should be controlled and run by its members. However, as the above extract highlights, within each of the partner unions there was a clear recognition that fundamental differences separated the COHSE/NUPE approach from that of NALGO which was seen as 'activist-led' rather than 'member-led'.<sup>7</sup>

In 1991, the issue of member-led threatened the merger itself. To try and resolve the matter the partner unions established the 'Lay Control Panel' whose membership included senior, national officials from all three unions but of more significance, a senior, NALGO NEC member. This indicates that this was not a simple matter of national officials 'cutting up the cake', but one of reaching accommodation and agreement with NALGO lay activists who continued to hold a tight rein on the direction of the merger. The following extract from the minutes of a meeting of the Lay Control Panel emphasise the depth of difference between NALGO and the other two partner unions and demonstrate the role and influence of NALGO's lay activists.

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<sup>6</sup>COHSE, NALGO, NUPE. 1991 [3]. A background paper prepared for the merger negotiations but it is not known if it was eventually used. There is no indication of the author, but looks to have been prepared on behalf of NUPE.

<sup>7</sup>Whilst NALGO appeared to be content with its own ways of working, the concept of 'union democracy' generally was widely contested and the union had attracted criticism from external observers [other than COHSE and NUPE].

*The NALGO organisation in our research took the prize among our five case studies in showing the most consistent commitment to all aspects of workplace trade union democracy. The problem was that in their dedication of trade union principles they occasionally left the members behind.* Fosh and Cohen. 1988. p22-24

Lay Control Panel 1.1.91

NALGO Lay Member. *In my branch, FTO only comes in over my dead body. There is resentment in NALGO that there is no control over staff by District Committee. I think they are wrong. They don't like branch staff being controlled by the District Organisation Officer. The nub of the problem is lay control at all levels. Some staff try to say they are the boss - some of our District staff said they are the barons.*

NALGO Lay Member. *There is the problem of access to branch meetings -it's a hot potato.*

NUPE Officer [1]. *There is a difference. FTOs have the right, the duty to go to branches to put EC view. It's part of the strong centre argument.*

NUPE Officer [2]. *It could happen on 2 things. 1, malfunction. 2, where there is a difference of policy.*

NALGO lay Member. *That's where we are different. It would be seen in NALGO as being told what to do. ... There are blatant policies where branches oppose national policy. Nothing is done.*

NUPE Officer [1]. *In NUPE wouldn't be happy for union's funds to be used to campaign against policy - wouldn't mean can't be seen to challenge policy through Conference.*

*If you don't want officer in your branch, what happens?*

NALGO lay Member. *He doesn't get invited. If we do want him, he's difficult to get.*

It is evident from these notes that the lay member from NALGO played a 'Lead' role on behalf of that union and that the NALGO officials at the negotiations were having the 'script' set for them by the lay members.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>Another feature of the NALGO approach to the negotiations was the submission of 'position papers' authored by lay members in addition to those prepared by officers. Once again, this emphasises the authority of the member-led principle in NALGO.



## The Right to Campaign

NALGO activists were insistent on maintaining the 'right to campaign' which was resisted by COHSE and NUPE who saw the new union centred on members, rather than activists.<sup>9</sup> A furore erupted in NALGO when this issue appeared to have been settled in favour of member-centredness in the negotiations. Some sections of NALGO's Left, including *Left Outside Group*, *Socialist worker*, *P and P Working Power*, *Socialist Organiser* and *NALGO Militant*, produced 'flyers' a special conference on the merger attacking as they saw it, an undemocratic principle.

*The Draft Rules represent a crude attempt by elements amongst the top echelons of NALGO to impose a NUPE style constitution on the New Union. Although the right to campaign is now reflected in the rules, other provisions would effectively annul this, and additional powers for the NEC and officers would undermine Branch activity and autonomy.*<sup>10</sup>

Despite this opposition, the principle of campaigning to change policy *while at all times acting within the rules and agreed policy* was accepted into the rules of the New Union.<sup>11</sup> At the time of writing, this matter is still at issue and re-surfaced in early 2000 in a policy document, 'Democracy in UNISON'<sup>12</sup> and in a major composite resolution at the National Delegate Conference 200.<sup>13</sup> This indicates that the principles of the 'right to campaign' and 'branch autonomy' are still very much at the heart of the unsettled business of UNISON.

## 'NALGO Writ Large'?

There was opposition on political and financial grounds. There were those, some on the right, whose view was, 'all they [NUPE] want is our fucking

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<sup>9</sup>*Members have differing aspirations and expectations .... they look to the democratic structures of the union to express these similarities. And in the New Union the crucial structure will lie in the relationship between those members who put trade union activity high on their list of personal priorities ... and other members who channel their energies in different directions - as parents, ... conservationists, etc.* COHSE, NALGO, NUPE. 1990. op cit. p4-5.

<sup>10</sup>NALGO Militant. 1992.

<sup>11</sup>UNISON Rules. 1993. rule 2.5

<sup>12</sup>UNISON 2000 [4]

<sup>13</sup>UNISON 2000[5]

money.' [names Lancashire County Council Branch], but there was also a Trot element who wanted nothing to do with that 'dreadful Labour Party'. The strongest opposition came from the right and not so right; and for some it was a class issue ... Those who opposed the merger on financial grounds said, 'if we sit here for another two or three years they'll [NUPE] come knocking on our door. Then it would be a transfer of engagements and not a merger. ... the view of conference delegates was, We're gonna' fight to the end of it. We feel that we're joining to get a greater NALGO. We might have to concede a bit on the way, but we'll get it. (my emphasis) [Julian, ex-NALGO senior official]

That said, NALGO was persuaded to adopt the 'member-centred' philosophy which became a central theme in the reports and publicity about the new union. However, NALGO had consistently maintained their position on the 'key issues', especially those surrounding lay control and branch autonomy, even to the extent of holding a special conference to consider the merger at which the union made unilateral changes to the agreed Joint Report. These decisions almost terminated any hope of the merger happening with both COHSE and NUPE suspending their participation in the negotiations for several months following this conference.<sup>14</sup>

Despite this major hiatus the negotiations resumed in the early Autumn and the partner unions began the difficult job of preparing what would be a 'Final Report' to all three unions' conferences. However, private and confidential information of NALGO prepared for the union's NEC reveals that the union's Leadership believed that it had already won the battle for the internal focus and ethos of the New Union and that further attempts by some sections of the union's membership to insist on achieving every last NALGO demand were seriously jeopardising the merger. In a rebuttal of its South West District Council the report concluded,

*..... there is absolutely no possibility of COHSE and NUPE accepting an ultimatum of this kind and no one in their right mind should be expected to. It would be pointless to try and agree a report which met every NALGO demand and effectively denied our partner unions the right to negotiate. .... The fact is that substantial*

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<sup>14</sup>NALGO 1992. [1]. p2

*progress has been made since the special conference. On most of the issues where amendments were carried NALGO has succeeded in negotiating improvements. This was not easy .... the NEC's negotiators have squeezed all the concessions they can out of the other unions. The final package meets all NALGO's key objectives and indeed looks very much like NALGO writ large. [my emphasis] <sup>15</sup>*

### **Member Centred wins the Day?**

Even so the issues of member-led, branch autonomy and the relationship with full-time officers were [seemingly] settled sufficiently to be included as part of the agreed 'Final Report'<sup>16</sup> and addressed in the first rule book of the New Union. [See appendix 5.1] This, however, was not the end of the matter. At the first UNISON Conference in 1994 a rule amendment from a former NALGO branch, the Bristol Community Workers and Voluntary Organisations was carried which replaced 'member-centred' by 'member-led'.<sup>17</sup> Although the three unions had supported the principle of UNISON being member-centred in the merger ballot when it came to the conference vote the Executive of UNISON formally adopted a neutral position and left it entirely as a matter for Conference; the only instance when the Executive took such a stance throughout that year's Conference. In these circumstances, one is bound to ask, why did the ex-COHSE and ex-NUPE Executive members not insist on the Executive giving a positive lead to Conference by opposing the proposed rule change? Further, did the achievement of the required two thirds majority vote to change this rule signal that ex-COHSE AND ex-NUPE delegates did not support the view adopted by their national officials during the merger negotiations on the New Union being member-centred? Or were they swept along with the tide of the ex-NALGO delegates who were in a significant majority? It could also have been that members generally thought that to oppose the notion of 'member-led' was 'bad form' and anti-democratic. It also emphasises that member-led may not mean the same to all members.<sup>18</sup> Either way, the rule now seems irreversible and has not

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<sup>15</sup>NALGO 1992 [1]. op cit. Re - amendment to motion 25.1 proposed by the South West District Council. The NEC opposed the amendment which was lost.

<sup>16</sup>COHSE, NALGO NUPE. 1992. p11.

<sup>17</sup>UNISON Rules. 1994. p2. rule 2.2.

<sup>18</sup>Bennett and Haunch. 2001. p15-27.

been challenged since that time. Perhaps of more importance, and this certainly seems to have been a lapse by the COHSE and NUPE negotiators, is that this particular rule not was given *entrenched status* as other rules were, preventing them from being changed before the 1st of January 1997.<sup>19</sup>

### **The Concessions: Branch Autonomy, Branch Finance, National Conference and The Right to Dissent**

Although the merger negotiations chose to try and deal with the notion of branch autonomy and the right to campaign separately from the member-led issue, in reality, they were virtually inseparable and concerned the right of members through their branches to accept or ignore national policy. Like 'member-led' these matters were also 'non-negotiable' for NALGO and remained so throughout the entire merger process and once conceded by COHSE and NUPE, became transplanted into UNISON's policies and practices.

#### **Branch Finance**

Both COHSE and NUPE had a system of central collection of membership subscriptions and were determined to keep to this principle even though NALGO insisted on a branch collection similar to their own. NALGO branches saw the move to central collection as a 'shift in control' with the potential for UNISON Head Office to withhold branch funds from 'troublesome' branches and as a mechanism to restrict branch autonomy through the control of local funds. NALGO officials investigated alternatives to offer as a compromise, including the involvement of a third party [bank or administrative agency].<sup>20</sup> In truth, NALGO officials did not support their lay colleagues demands. In a confidential support they remarked,

*The NALGO system which already provides timetables for branches to submit funds centrally, is marked by massive non-compliance by branches which led at the time of writing this report to arrears of around £7million. This has led, over*

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<sup>19</sup>UNISON Rules. 1993. Rule 'N' p56.

<sup>20</sup>NALGO 1992 [1]. op cit. p36.

*the years to NALGO having to sell investments to fund cash flow. In the light of this experience, The NALGO system is just not exportable.*<sup>21</sup>

However, COHSE and NUPE stood firm [perhaps with covert support from NALGO officials] and won the case for central collection. This demonstrates that where these two unions were sufficiently determined to jointly resist NALGO demands they could expect a shift in the NALGO position of 'No Concessions'.

### **National Conference**

COHSE and NUPE were concerned to limit the size of the New Union's national conference to below 1,000 delegates. This would have prevented some of the smaller branches electing a delegate in their own right. This was unacceptable to NALGO who saw this as undermining the right of a branch to take part in the union's foremost democratic forum. NALGO stood firm on the issue and won the concession in its entirety, despite it overriding NUPE's bottom line.<sup>22</sup> This supports the view that NUPE, for the reasons already discussed, was prepared to countenance the unthinkable rather than lose the prospect of the merger and the genesis of industrial unionism in the public services.

The Concern expressed by NUPE over the potential 'swamping' of its members at national conference appears to have been justified. At the first conference of the new union former NALGO members constituted over 60% of the delegates but formed only 49% of the membership. These delegates produced six times more speakers than former COHSE members and four and a half times more speakers than NUPE in the conference debates. [See table 5.1]

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<sup>21</sup>NALGO 1992 [3].

<sup>22</sup>NALGO 1992 [4]. The Report reveals the extent of the concession by COHSE and NUPE. *The most difficult objective was that every merged branch within a lead employing authority would be entitled to send a delegate to conference however small that branch might be. It is that aspect of the agreement in particular which COHSE and NUPE who have much smaller conferences resisted to the bitter end and remain unhappy about .... The concern of COHSE and NUPE [and to some degree this is NUPE's bottom line] is that the New Union Conference is not swamped by former NALGO delegates and male professionals in particular.*

table 5.1 UNISON National Delegate Conference 1994: Attendance

	COHSE	NALGO	NUPE
%age of UNISON membership [1.2 - 1.3M]	18	49	33
%age of delegates by former union	14	61	26
%age speakers by former union	12	72	16

Source: UNISON [1] 1994.

The data also emphasises that formal, representative structures and rules are in themselves, little guarantee of participation in the union's democracy without a principled shift in the ethos that underwrites that democracy. Both former COHSE and NUPE members were disproportionately under-represented at the conference relative to their overall make-up in UNISON. Between them they held 51% of the total membership, but formed only 40% of the delegates. This poor position deteriorated further as they only managed to capture 28% of the speakers at the conference with former NALGO members taking the lion's share with 72% of all contributors. NUPE members suffered more than COHSE members in this respect, but overall neither had much opportunity of influencing conference. Indeed, on such vital rule changes as the member-centred issue, former NALGO needed attract only 6% of the votes of former COHSE and NUPE members to overturn the whole merger process [provided that all NALGO delegates voted to retain the member-led principle]. In this sense, the Bristol resolution to restore the member-led principle was pushing at an open door.

It is evident from this data that the agreement by COHSE and NUPE to allow every branch a delegate, as argued by NALGO, contributed to the marginalisation of COHSE and NUPE delegates at the conference. Although it has to be said, that the original conference size of 2000 plus under NALGO's original claim would potentially have made the position of COHSE and NUPE members even worse. The final 'deal' of a conference around 1500 delegates therefore represents concessions by all three partner unions.

### Conference: Who runs conference?

NALGO had won the concession from COHSE and NUPE for a Rules Revision Conference *on the same basis as in NALGO*<sup>23</sup> and in several reports and publications NALGO had reminded its members that they could submit rule amendments at the first UNISON conference if they so wished.<sup>24</sup> At the first UNISON conference there were 131 amendments submitted from just 31 branches. Of these, 70% *could be construed as 'unstitching the deal'*- were submitted by 8 branches, with 19 from the Doncaster branch alone.<sup>25</sup> When considered in conjunction with the data on 'speakers' at the conference, it is clear that the vast majority of those branches submitting amendments were former NALGO branches.

The UNISON Executive in September 1995 considered these developments in the union's national conference and noted,

*... significantly the past 2 years' rules revision agendas have seen what appears to be a concerted attempt by a small minority of branches to make wholesale changes to parts of the rule book, which were the subject of detailed discussion, prior to vesting day, consideration by the three partner unions' conferences and the subject of a membership ballot.*<sup>26</sup> See table 5.2.

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<sup>23</sup>NALGO 1992 [1]. op cit. p7. This included agreement that the conference would be: annual, part of the main conference and up to half a day set aside.

<sup>24</sup>NALGO 1992 [2]. op cit

<sup>25</sup>UNISON 1994 [1].

<sup>26</sup>UNISON 1995 [1].

table 5.2

Unison National Delegate Conference 1995:  
Resolutions and Rule Amendments

General resolutions		Rule Amendments	
Total No of branches submitting	143	Total No of branches submitting	58
No of branches submitting either 1 or 2	99	No of branches submitting either 1 or 2	38*
Of the remainder:			
1 branch submitted	13	6 branches submitted between them	125**
1 branch submitted	14		
1 branch submitted	21		

\* = 47 rule amendments: \*\* = 48% of Agenda

Source: UNISON 1995 [1] p2

We may conclude from this that UNISON was developing a level of concern with structural issues similar to that which had been established in NALGO. [See chapter 4]

### Conference: Which Gender Runs Conference

Throughout the merger process all the partner unions gave support to the concept of the New union being fully inclusive of all the groups of members that it would represent '*with one voice*'<sup>27</sup> and that to do this the New Union would have to pay careful attention to its structures to avoid them 'withering on the vine'.

*.... even more importantly, they need to be reflected in the way the institutions of the new union **actually** work in practice. Left to themselves, structures can easily become hollow shells in which the relationships do not properly embody our values. All our new structures and systems of working, therefore, need to be checked against our broader aims and values.*<sup>28</sup>

To assist this approach, the concept of 'Proportionality' was adopted and defined as, *the representation of women and men in fair proportion to the relevant number of female and male members comprising the electorate.*<sup>29</sup>

<sup>27</sup>COHSE, NALGO, NUPE. 1990 [2]. p5

<sup>28</sup>COHSE, NALGO, NUPE. 1991 [2]. op cit. p4.

<sup>29</sup>UNISON rules. D 2.10.2.



An initial examination of the register of delegates to the National Delegate Conferences in 1997 and 1998 shows an increased female presence, which on the face of it would appear to be a positive step towards pro rata involvement for women in having a say in running the union. But a more detailed examination shows that female members, far from being the majority voice, are actually seeing their position worsen. Despite the additional numbers and the percentage increase of females as a proportion of conference delegates, their participation in conference [as judged by formal contributions to the debate] is falling as male delegates consolidate their traditional role as 'policy makers' within the union. [see table 5.3 ] table 5.3

Delegates/Speakers at UNISON National Delegate Conference 1997 and 1998

	1997			1998		
	delegates		delegates	delegates		delegates
	% of conference	speakers as % of total speakers	% of speakers	% of conference	speakers as % of total speakers	% of speakers
women	795 (46.35)	222 (48.8)	12.9	957 (54.69)	188 (40.6)	10.7
men	920 (53.65)	233 (51.2)	13.5	793 (45.31)	275 (59.4)	15.7

source: Haunch 2000. p22.

This supports the findings of McBride whose research spanned the 1994 and 1995 UNISON national conferences and which showed that although proportionality was a helpful mechanism to increase women's [nominal] participation in union activist positions, it has not reduced the disproportionate influence of male activists. Jointly, McBride's findings and this research data identify a trend out of keeping with the principle of proportionality and against women's' full integration and participation in the union.<sup>30</sup>

### Conference: Left Influence, Gender, Former Union and Service Group

The marginalisation of blue-collar workers at UNISON's National Delegate Conference has not been a product solely related to former union association but has been in no small part due to the highly politicised nature of UNISON's own

<sup>30</sup>McBride. 1997. p186-189.

conference. Data collated on the main delegate speakers at the union's 1998 national conference reveals just how far radical, left politics have surfaced as a 'contour of control' in shaping the nature of the debate at this principal policy making forum. [See figure 5.1]

figure 5.1

UNISON National Delegate Conference 1998.  
Principal, Lay Delegate, 'Floor' Speakers: \* Politics, Gender and Division

speaker No	No of times spoken	gender	known political affinity	former union	UNISON Service Group
1	12	male	Labour Party	NALGO	Local Government
2	8	male	Socialist Labour* <sup>1</sup>	NALGO	Local Government
3	6	female	not known	not known	Local Government
4	5	male	Labour Party	NALGO	Local Government
5	5	male	Labour Party* far left [CLPD] <sup>2</sup>	NUPE	Health Care
6	5	male	Socialist Workers Party*	COHSE	Health Care
7	5	male	unknown	NALGO	Local Government
8	4	male	Labour Party	NALGO	Local Government
9	4	male	Labour Left* Briefing	NALGO	Local Government
Officer contributions for comparison					
General Secretary	5	male	Labour Party	NUPE	N/A
Deputy General Secretary	6	male	Labour Party	NALGO	N/A
<sup>1</sup> Socialist Labour - formerly known as Militant <sup>2</sup> [CLPD] Campaign for Labour Party Democracy					

Source: Observation and Analysis of conference speakers and collation of internal ephemera

\* Refers to the number of contributions from individuals during 'all Conference' and not to a specific debate resolution.

Of the 9 principal, delegate speakers, 4 [45%] were known to have far left sympathies: 3 [33%] were Labour Party Members'; and for 2 [22%], it has not been possible to determine their known sympathies. The far left delegates controlled 23 occasions [41%] of the debates: Labour Party delegates 21 occasions [39%]; and the unknown group, 11 occasions [20%]. There is no question that men generally dominated the debates. No less than [8] 89% of the main contributors were male, with only 1 [11%] female. By former union, 6 [67%] were former NALGO members; 1 [11%] was a former COHSE member; 1 [11%] was a former NUPE member; and 1 [11%] is unknown. The Service Groups to which the speakers belonged shows that 7 [78%] were from Local Government and 2 [22%] from Health Care. As far as the research has been able to determine, none of the group of the main speakers was a blue-collar worker.

Although further research is necessary, [1 year may not be typical] we can still reasonably conclude that when this analysis is combined with the earlier data on conference participation, that UNISON Conferences are: [See figure 5.1]

- ♦ dominated by men
- ♦ heavily influenced by far left factions
- ♦ overwhelmingly controlled by former NALGO activists through their virtual monopoly of the agenda and the subsequent debates.
- ♦ heavily influenced by the Local Government constituency of the union
- ♦ blue-collar members appear marginalised and excluded from 'active' participation in the most important policy making forum of the union
- ♦ not reflective of the former constituencies of COHSE and NUPE. There is every reason to suppose that the under-representation of former COHSE and NUPE members as identified at the 1994 national conference has worsened, but the failure of UNISON to monitor these processes militates against further accurate analysis. However, evidence cited elsewhere in this thesis lends credence to the argument that blue-collar members and their interests, have been side-lined as priorities.

Additionally, the contributions from this main group of speakers were often concerned with rule changes, such issues as the 'right to campaign' and the formal, internal relationships of the union<sup>31</sup> and associated with those members keen to secure power in the new union.<sup>32</sup> And as we have seen, in COHSE and NUPE, such matters were of less importance than in NALGO. Therefore, the union needs to develop a blue-collar agenda as well as a white-collar agenda, and at the same time, establish a concept of democracy that does not de facto alienate any one section of its membership. At the centre of this concept lies the notion of 'trust' which depends upon a combination of appropriate structures, shared values and a common culture. [See chapter 6]. In the event that a return to the principle of 'member-centred' is not foreseeable, the central problem of elitism breeding isolation will remain.

### **Fair Representation: A Mechanism to Redress Imbalance**

*The New Union will go further than any other in putting equal opportunities into practice. Through proportionality for women and fair representation it will ensure that representatives accurately reflect the make-up of their members<sup>33</sup>*

Fair Representation unlike Proportionality was a somewhat late entrant in the merger negotiations and was a concept which it was hoped would help to include low-paid manual workers from [mainly] NUPE in activities of the union's lay democracy. It was introduced into the merger negotiations [and accepted] prior to COHSE joining the negotiations. However, the original intention of the concept became widened [and obscured] and in the UNISON rule book it appeared as,

*... the broad balance of representation of members of the electorate, taking into account such factors as the balance between part-time and full-time workers, manual and non-manual workers, different occupations, skills, qualifications, responsibilities, race, sexuality and disability.<sup>34</sup>*

<sup>31</sup>UNISON 1998 [1]. e.g. Motions 184. Emergency Motions 1 and 2. Rule 3 and 4.

<sup>32</sup>Fryer 2000. op cit. p29 -30.

<sup>33</sup>NALGO 1992 [4]. p6.

<sup>34</sup>UNISON rules D 2.10.3

Such is the imprecision in this all embracing definition that a senior, national support worker declared,

I don't think that anyone knows what Fair Representation means [Jimmy, national support officer]

If that is so, the application of the principle as well as the spirit of the rule makes the adherence to the concept exceptionally difficult and potentially threatens the *raison d'être* of the rule itself. For if the meaning of the rule is lost, the vigour of its implementation must be in doubt.

### **Fair Representation and Self Organised Groups**

The question of how to assist 'disadvantaged' groups has troubled British trade unions for many years, but it is only in relevantly recent times that the matter has come to the fore and received priority attention. As detailed in chapter 3, NALGO was perhaps one of the first unions to make specific, constitutional arrangements - self-organisation - for women, black members, lesbian and gay members, and disabled members as part of its drive to raise the profile of 'equality issues'.<sup>35</sup> Though as shown in chapter 2, both COHSE and NUPE had a greater percentage of women members on their national executives than NALGO, but had chosen to tackle 'disadvantage' via alternative measures. This indicates that self-organisation may not be the most effective approach to encourage participation in the democratic fora of a trade union for groups traditionally recognised as disadvantaged. NALGO pressed hard and won in the merger negotiations the right to maintain the principle of Self Organisation. This gave self organised groups the right to:

- ♦ elect their own representatives to other levels of self-organisation and to other appropriate levels of the Union's organisation
- ♦ Have adequate funding and agreed funding and other resources
- ♦ a regional committee of their own with access to, and direct full membership of the Regional Committee

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<sup>35</sup>NALGO also introduced specific measures for women in line with the other self-organised groups, but NUPE was the first trade union to adopt positive action initiatives specifically for women.

- ♦ a National Committee, with the right to send motions to the NEC and the unions National delegate Conference [See figure 5.2]
- ♦ a National Conference
- ♦ publish an annual report

figure 5.2      The Influence of Self-Organised Groups  
at UNISON National Delegate Conference 2000

Conference Resolution Number	Resolution Content	Referring Constituency
74	Discrimination in Employment	National Lesbian and Gay Conference
125	Safe Housing for Lesbians and Older Gay Men	
87	Disability Leave	Disabled Members National Self-Organised Group
99	Against Domestic Abuse	National Women's Conference
102	Rotational Shifts	
112	Stephen Lawrence	National Black Members Committee

source: UNISON internal data

Whilst there is increasing evidence that self organisation may have a positive role to play in the union and the wider society, it also has the potential to divide UNISON's diverse membership across many fronts, including class and politics.<sup>36</sup> A high profile example of this divisive potential was in the election for the General Secretary of UNISON in 1995, won by Rodney Bickerstaffe, but where another candidate, Peter Hunter stood on a platform vehemently opposed to self organisation, calling it a 'drain on resources' and came a creditable second.<sup>37</sup> This indicates that although self organisation has support amongst some activists, members generally are not as convinced of this type of 'non-mainstream' democracy. For blue-collar workers, who have no separate provision within UNISON's rules, self organisation may act as a further barrier to their voice in the

<sup>36</sup>Colgan and Ledwith. 2000. p26.

<sup>37</sup>UNISON 1995. [3].

union's structures, not only because it is another constituency with which blue-collar members have to compete, but because self organisation is often perceived as being based around a middle-class [white-collar] agenda.<sup>38</sup>

### **Union Governance: The National Executive Council**

I don't know about weighted voting, I think that they should have weighted fucking speaking' [Archie. ex COHSE national official quoting an Executive Council [former NUPE) member]

The first UNISON [Interim] National Executive Council was comprised of the three partner unions' Executive Councils. A system of calculating votes weighted according to the size of the Executive Council of each partner union was prescribed in rule as a measure to avoid the domination by any one union, but principally, because of the superior numbers of the NALGO Executive over the other two partner unions. However, as the comments from Archie demonstrate, [and as argued earlier] constitutional measures are unlikely to encourage equality of engagement unless adopted as part of a more wide-ranging approach to trade union democracy.

A key indicator of the effectiveness of the Fair Representation rule in encouraging and enabling manual workers to participate in the democratic processes of the union, is the frequency with which Executive Council 'restricted access' seats have been contested.<sup>39</sup> In 2000, Eight [57%] of the fourteen, regionally elected seats were not contested, and in over 14% [2] no nominations were received. Only just over 28% [4] of seats were contested. See table 5.4

table 5.4. UNISON NEC Elections 2000: 'Restricted Access' Seats

total No of seats open to contest	contested	not contested	no nomination
14	4 (28%)	8 (57%)	2 (14%)

source: UNISON 2000 [5].

<sup>38</sup>Colgan and Ledwith. op cit. p20. Lawrence. 1994. op cit. p147.

<sup>39</sup>These Executive Council seats can only be contested by low-paid, female members [as defined by UNISON rules] which was intended to favour former NUPE members.

This suggests that low-paid manual workers are either not interested in participating in the higher levels of the democratic processes of the union, or, are finding it too difficult to compete and participate in those lay structures.

### Union Governance: Service Group Executives

If the picture concerning the participation by manual workers at the highest level of the lay democratic order looks bleak, the situation is considerably worse [and worsening still further] when it comes to participation by low-paid manual workers in the other national lay member fora, the Service Group Executives [SGE].<sup>40</sup> In 1994, the first year in UNISON when elections for these governing bodies were held, there appeared to be an initial indication that Fair Representation at least in local government, the largest Service Group, had benefitted low-paid [ex-NUPE] manual workers. [See table 5.5].

table 5.5 UNISON Service Group Elections 1994

service group	ex-COHSE			ex-NALGO			ex-NUPE		
	male	female	low-paid	male	female	low-paid	male	female	low-paid
local government	0	0	0	11	9	0	0	4	12
health care	9	7	1	0	1	0	3	5	0
higher education	0	0	0	6	8	1	6	3	4
water	0	0	0	11	4	0	2	0	0
gas	0	0	0	13	11	0	0	0	0
electricity	0	0	0	10	3	0			
sub totals	9	7	1	51	36	1	11	12	16
totals	17			88			39		
%age share of Service Group seats	11.8			61.1			27.1		

Source: UNISON 1994 [2].

Some six out of the twelve low-paid seats won by former NUPE members in local government went to low-paid, female members. No male, former NUPE members

<sup>40</sup>The Service Group Executives are the Lay Governing Body of a particular constituency who act as the Authority on all service conditions matters, e.g. pay claims. There are 6 such bodies: Local Government, Health Care, Higher Education, Water, Gas and Electricity.



were elected in this category. Of the twenty former NALGO members who were elected in this Group eleven [60%] were male. In Health Care, more than half of the former COHSE members elected, nine [53%] were male. Allowance needs to be made for those areas where the partner unions traditionally had not had membership, i.e. gas and electricity. The overall influence that the Service Group Executives potentially have on union policy, particularly in relation to pay and conditions of service, should not be underestimated. And in this case, former NALGO activists were in the driving seat.

Since 1994, the Service Group elections have deteriorated as foci of democracy and authority within the union with the majority 'low-paid' seats often not contested. Whilst it may seem that this is a gender issue, in fact it has implications about the way in which low-paid women members view the need for Fair Representation as a bedrock of the wider union. There appears to be a distinct lack of interest from members in either how, or who, runs the union, despite what activists or the union's national conference may argue.

There is a total of 201 Executive seats across the combined Service Groups, but in the elections for 2000, less than twelve percent [24 seats] were contested. If this a reflection of members' priorities, nearly nine out of ten of them show no interest in the union being 'member-led'. In the remainder of seats, a hundred and twenty [60%] candidates were unopposed and over a quarter, fifty seven [28%] received no nominations, with many of these being in the 'protected' category for low paid members. This suggests that the vast majority of UNISON members are not concerned with the formal and constitutional relationships of their own union and that the primacy of the lay member democracy issue is over emphasised as a priority of the membership. [See table 5.6]

table 5.6

## National Executive Council/Service Group Executive Elections 2000

type of seat	total No of seats	election required	elected unopposed	no nomination received	No of protected seats not contested in previous category
National Executive Council	51	34	15	2	
Service Group Executive					
Electricity	15	-	9	6	
Gas	13	-	6	7	
Health	39	11	21	7	7
Higher Education	39	3	20	16	12
Local Government	38	6	27	5	4
Police Staff	26	1	15	10	
Transport	10	-	10	-	
Water	21	3	12	6	2 manual seats, specifically created to attract manual members
Totals	252	58	135	59	27

source: UNISON internal NEC Report: restricted circulation. April 2000

From this, we can conclude two distinct, but closely linked trends. The policy of 'Fair Representation' is not working adequately as a mechanism by which manual workers are enabled to play an equal part in the lay democracy of the union. And, manual workers as a group have been marginalised within the lay democracy, whilst at the same time, the power base within these structures has become increasingly centred around a non-manual cadre.

Of course, it may not be the correct measure by which to judge the integration of manual workers into the formal UNISON lay democracy, other factors raised above also need to be taken into account. There are no doubt, those who would question the whole ethos of still attempting to assess UNISON's membership in terms of

manual and non-manual members, perhaps arguing that such an analysis is in itself a barrier to integration and the creation of the 'new union' by maintaining or resurrecting former union values. But as shown in chapter 4, the differences in former union membership characteristics and the characteristics of their unions are more likely to be the basis for conflict than consolidation of interest. The whole concept of acknowledging the differences of the 'old' unions and trying to create a framework to harness those differences as a positive measure of the union's ability to act, and be seen as a 'broad church' is a pre-requisite to 'membership merger' as opposed to union structural integration.

Indeed, if the trends indicated in the recent NEC/SGE elections are not reversed the potential for conflict may accelerate as the union's policies and priorities become increasingly out of step with the wishes of the majority of its members. The danger for UNISON is that it interprets non-participation as 'satisfaction' with a system of democracy that is discredited in practice and disregarded by most members. There appears to be little prospect of matters being changed from the top where the voice of manual workers has been muted by a combination of their withdrawal from the lay activist forums, and the very formal and complex structures of the union. Simon a senior ex-NALGO national officer explained what he saw as the problem,

... most of the manual workers [national lay representatives] are low-paid women, they contribute less at the meetings. At smaller meetings they contribute, but they find it intimidating at the larger meetings and it puts them off. There has been some intolerance towards them. We've been doing some work to help them. We have had working groups. .... We have had women refusing to go into the meetings. We've tried to address it, to get people to be more tolerant. [Simon. ex-NALGO, senior national officer]

The data on the NEC/SGE elections suggests that much work remains to be done to ensure that those members less able to compete for recognition of their demands and articulate their concerns, are not marginalised or ignored and that further effort is needed to encourage the participation of those that still attend key, lay fora.

### **Integration and Participation: What the members experienced**

In February 1994 the Senior Management Team [SMT] of UNISON discussed the future of blue-collar members in the union under the heading - *Blue-collar Workers: Destiny or Strategy*<sup>41</sup> - in which it recorded amongst other matters:

- ♦ *blue-collar workers are a declining section of the workforce, but 35% of the manual workers are unorganised*
- ♦ *evidence that ex-NALGO branches want early mergers to facilitate 'take-over'.*

These concerns prompted the union to establish a Joint Working Party on *Integration and Participation* to encourage a broad spectrum of the union's membership to become involved in UNISON's lay democracy.<sup>42</sup> A series of 'Focus Groups' were held at the 1994 Health Care Conference. The subsequent report was damning of the development of UNISON with a widespread feeling that the promised, improved service to members had *actually worsened*. In itself, that is not surprising as the union was still in a state of transformation. However, the evidence concerning the disparity between COHSE and NUPE on the one hand, and NALGO on the other, was stark, and substantially confirms through the views and experiences of members themselves, that NALGO traditions and values had, even at that early stage, become established as the dominant influences. The complaints from COHSE and NUPE members included:

- ♦ [the feeling] .... *that they had been excluded by ex-NALGO by a combination of organisation, campaigning, by the management of a 'slate', and a sheer unwillingness on ex-NALGO's part to consider the importance of fair representation and proportionality. The criticism and bitterness, from the ex-NUPE members of the focus groups can scarcely be exaggerated.* [my emphasis]
- ♦ [they] *were keen to point out that the virtual exclusion of full-time officers disadvantaged them in ways that did not do so for those from ex-NALGO.*

These comments highlight why NUPE members, even at that initial stage of UNISON, felt disfranchised through the loss of former contact with full-time officers who acted and spoke on their behalf. This was a relationship that could be

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<sup>41</sup>UNISON 1994 [3]. Item 5.

<sup>42</sup>UNISON 1995 [2]. p5-6.

characterised as 'democracy through proxy'. It also demonstrates that not enough was achieved in the merger negotiations to protect the interests of those less skilled and less able to articulate their own needs and demands. Paradoxically, later that year [1994] members still voted to change the union's rules to turn UNISON from a member-centred to a member-led union which supports the view that the concept of a 'member-led' union is difficult to deny, but even more difficult to define.

The report continued,

- ♦ *ex-COHSE felt that they were being effectively kept out of the new union and those from ex-NUPE believed that ex-NALGO were simply trying to run the [National] Conference as if it were still a NALGO Conference.*
- ♦ *some felt that they were looked down upon by their new colleagues from ex-NALGO particularly as far as certain patterns of speech, expression and behaviour were concerned. .... [and] felt that they had simply been 'swallowed up'.*
- ♦ *[the feeling that the union was] .... full of 'red tape' and that too little had been achieved with over emphasis upon processes, procedures and constitution. .... [and] 'stitch ups' in elections [because] NALGO were better prepared and better organised to take advantage of election arrangements and election procedures.*<sup>43</sup>

These views were generally rebutted by ex-NALGO members as the result of the less advanced state of democracy in the other two unions. NALGO's failure to recognise and acknowledge the causes of the distress of COHSE and NUPE members as deep rooted disadvantages associated with differences in [including] class, status, and education has encouraged a belief in a supposedly, superior convention of democracy based on the NALGO model. Over time, this will contribute to a disregard for the values of COHSE and NUPE and reduce the importance of constructing mechanisms to meet the needs of the kinds of members that they represented.

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<sup>43</sup>UNISON 1994 [4].

### **Political Independence and Labour party Affiliation**

All three partner unions insisted on protecting their arrangements concerning their political traditions: COHSE and NUPE their affiliation to the Labour Party, and NALGO with its formal non-alignment to any political party. The matter was resolved by the establishment of two political funds: the Affiliated Political Fund [APF] used to support Labour and the General Political Fund [GPF] that continued the NALGO position of campaigning around issues rather than political parties. Although these arrangements were crucial to satisfying the demands of all three unions they did not present the longer-term difficulties of those other key issues discussed above, probably because everyone got what they wanted from the agreement and because it was easier to define the contours of the 'Political' problem. The control of the APF was vested in the hands of those members [initially COHSE and NUPE] who paid the political levy to support the Labour Party. NUPE, in Bickerstaffe's words, also saw the APF as a 'refuge' for manual workers where they could continue to influence union policy without the need to compete with white-collar, [former NALGO] members.

Since then however, there have been attempts to 'undo' the arrangements for the Political Funds. At the 1994 National Conference the report of the Standing Orders Committee ruled 'out of order' a number of motions designed to make voting on the APF open to all members. This report was rejected by the conference, placing in doubt the whole philosophy of the two Political Funds and clearly threatened the relationship between UNISON and the Labour Party. In the end, the matter was resolved in favour of the formally, agreed arrangements thanks largely to the protected status of the APF in the 'entrenched' rules.<sup>44</sup> It was seen in some quarters as sections of former NALGO attempting to control the APF in a way that had not been possible during the merger negotiations. If the moves had succeeded it would have paved the way for UNISON not to affiliate to Labour in future years. The evidence suggests that the APF has not been accepted as a 'sacrosanct' principle by influential sections of the union who continue to press for control of the APF, other than through the parameters agreed during the merger negotiations. If they succeed,

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<sup>44</sup>UNISON 1994 [5].

this 'refuge' of blue-collar [COHSE/NUPE] members will be subsumed into the mainstream culture of the union which has already adopted a mantle harmful to manual worker traditions and ethos.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has sometimes chosen to view the differences between the partner unions as a division between NALGO and [COHSE and NUPE]. But it would be wrong to portray COHSE and NUPE as having coterminous agendas. However, the analysis offered in this chapter is based around the reality that the ideological battle in the new union was between the relative informality of both [COHSE's] and NUPE's internal relationships, and the more structured approach of NALGO. The reader should always bear in mind that there were three partners to this merger even if the events suggest that it was a contest between just two competing ideals.

The quest for the New Union was driven by NUPE national officials, whose bottom line **was** the New Union. The willingness, or maybe necessity, of NUPE, and to some extent COHSE, to concede key NALGO demands helped to establish the NALGO culture in UNISON. Those key issues of: member-led, branch autonomy, finance, conference, and the right to campaign were settled in NALGO's favour. The agreement that UNISON would be member-centred was reversed at the first UNISON National Conference, since when the union has been member-led. This fundamental change was in some respects predisposed in NALGO's regard because the specific rule on a member-centred union was not entrenched and ex-NALGO delegates who were in the majority had been advised prior to merger by their national leadership, that the rules of the New Union could be changed at UNISON's first conference. That change also demonstrates that [some] UNISON activists were prepared to override the wishes of the members to install their preferred version of a member-led union.

The general arrangements for UNISON National Conference have not generally supported either women or manual worker members active involvement in this important forum. Participation in Conference by women has fallen even though

their presence at conference has increased. Both former COHSE and NUPE members have witnessed a disproportionate former NALGO presence at National Conference which has contributed to their marginalisation in the union's lay fora

The elections for the Service Group Executives have been largely ignored by the vast majority of members who have shown little interest in 'leading the union'. As manual workers have become less involved with the formal democracy of the union, their place has been taken by white-collar, often former NALGO activists who are operating in a system of union governance and 'union lifestyle' that in NALGO's own words is '*NALGO writ large*', and which militates against less confident and less articulate manual workers.

The other key issues of branch autonomy and the right to campaign have reinforced the NALGO convention at the expense of the customs and values of COHSE and NUPE members who cannot compete equally without the assistance of full-time officers which they are denied because of UNISON's member-led ethos. The concept of self organisation has brought some limited benefit to Self Organised Groups but this has been at the expense of potentially widening class and political divisions. Manual Workers are not seen as a 'disadvantaged' group in UNISON and self-organisation may have contributed to their marginalisation in the union.

Fair Representation was a constitutional measure that was intended to ensure that manual workers representatives in particular 'got a fair crack of the whip' in UNISON. Unlike Proportionality, Fair Representation does not carry the status of an immutable obligation and this has facilitated those wishing, for whatever reason, to turn a 'Nelson's Eye' to it. As a whole, UNISON has not tracked and upheld the principles of Fair Representation, in part this has been due to the difficulty in defining exactly what is meant by Fair Representation.

A cadre of activists have set out to wrest the control of the APF from [mostly] former COHSE and NUPE members and assert the right of members generally, as opposed to just APF contributors, to have a say in the conduct of the Fund. This



raises doubts about UNISON's future association with the Labour Party. If as rumoured, that in Scotland there is less than 50% of members paying to the APF because of a concerted attempt by some lay members to move UNISON closer to the Scottish National Party, this may be the first step to formal separation with Labour and a move nearer to the old NALGO position of non-alignment. If that happens, manual workers will have even less say in the running of UNISON and be more marginalised than they are now.

The one issue on which NALGO conceded ground was that of the central collection of subscriptions, but evidence from confidential documents suggests that tolerated, dilatory action at local level has caused the national union severe cash flow problems and to overspend. Unless this is resolved, the national union may be forced to sell assets to finance revenue demands because it is unable to ensure that branches meet the requirements for the submission of members' subscriptions as set down in rule. If that occurs, NALGO will have witnessed the fruition of all the union's pre-merger demands.

End Note: June 2001.

After this thesis had been completed the 2001 UNISON National Delegate Conference voted to reconsider the union's formal links with Labour. Details are still awaited of the resolution and voting figures. That said, the position of UNISON now looks to be moving towards the non-alignment discussed and predicted in this chapter.

UNISON Rules.

Rule B2

UNION DEMOCRACY.

To promote and establish a member-centred union and to carry out and fulfil decisions made by members in a spirit of unity and accountability. [Rule 2.2.]

Rule G6. p32

VISITS BY EMPLOYED OFFICIALS TO BRANCHES

6.1 An employed official of the union may visit a branch at the request of either the branch or the official, provided that no such visit will be made without agreement of the Branch Committee or Branch Officers.

6.2 The national Executive Council or the General secretary or the other official acting with the authority of the National executive Council is entitled to request an employed official to visit a branch where it is necessary to further the interests and policies of the Union.

6.3 An employed official is also entitled to visit a branch:

- .1 for the purposes of financial checks and inspection.
- .2 in the event of industrial action
- .3 where it appears to the General Secretary or the Regional Secretary that a branch may no longer be functioning effectively.

### **Key Events in the Merger Process**

1974 NALGO and NUPE establish a Liaison Committee

1984 COHSE and NUPE formally agree to work together more closely

1989 NALGO and NUPE commence discussions with a view to merging

1989 [August] COHSE adopts a 'Twin Track Approach' and agrees to join NALGO and NUPE to form a pre-eminent, industrial union for the public services.

1989 [Autumn] National Ambulance Dispute. COHSE and NALGO agree to coalesce behind NUPE's national negotiator in media campaign.

1990 [15th February] National Executives of COHSE, NALGO and NUPE agree draft of a formal report on merger for submission to that year's conferences.

1990 [May/June] First agreed report on merger issued to national conferences by the now, 'partner' unions - The Challenge of a New Union.

1991 [May/June] second report issued by partner unions to national conferences - A Framework for a New Union.

1991 [June] NALGO unilaterally amends 1991 report. This prompts COHSE and NUPE to 'suspend' negotiations during the summer months and threatened the very merger itself.

1992 [March]. NALGO hold special, conference to debate final report and unilaterally amend report

1992 [May/June] third report - The Final Report issued by National Executives to national conferences. Recommends merger.

1992 [Autumn] ballots of partner union members agree merger

1st July 1993 UNISON formed [Vesting Day] and Alan Jinkinson, NALGO General Secretary becomes first UNISON General Secretary - 'First Amongst Equals'.

1994 [June] first UNISON National Conference votes to change the union from 'member-centred' to 'member-led'.

1994 [December] Tom Sawyer, NUPE Deputy General Secretary leaves UNISON.

1996 [January] members able to decide whether to contribute to the Affiliated Political Fund which had until then prevented former NALGO members from directly participating in Labour Party matters.

1996 [February] Rodney Bickerstaffe becomes first 'elected' General Secretary of UNISON.

## Chapter 6

### Understanding Trade Unions: Culture, Form and Character

#### Introduction

A great deal of sociological enquiry has been conducted on trade unions but relatively little has centred on understanding how and why trade unions are structured and organised differently from each other. Often, public service trade unions have been judged by their 'difference' to trade unions in the private sector and even then analysis has tended to concentrate on a perception of the union at the national level.<sup>1</sup> Trade union mergers on the other hand, have received and continue to attract attention as new waves of 'joining together' offer analysts opportunities to refine patterns of organisation and offer further explanations for change or constancy.<sup>2</sup> This has resulted in a lack of insight of the inner machinations of trade union mergers and an absence of a specific, conceptual framework by which to judge them.<sup>3</sup>

By contrast, there is an overwhelming volume of opinion, much of it contradictory, on employers and commercial organisations that do not exhibit many of the features that distinguish trade unions as discrete communities. Employers and commercial organisations have a distinct managerial structure and are not subject to the constraints of democratic procedures or the balance of responsibilities between full-time officers, members and their representatives.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, the literature on 'culture' or more precisely, 'organisational culture' has been developed around employer and non-trade union organisations. To assume that trade unions are best analysed by assessing their 'cultures' is to deny that there may be more appropriate alternatives. The use of organisational culture as an analytical tool is rejected in this thesis on three counts:

- ♦ the lack of agreed definition on 'culture'

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<sup>1</sup>Terry, 2000. op cit. p214.

<sup>2</sup>See Undy et al. 1981. op cit. Waddington. 1995. op cit..

<sup>3</sup>Fryer, 2000. op cit. p28.

<sup>4</sup>Kerr and Waddington. 2001. p6.

- ♦ the bias of organisational research that has largely reflected the vested interests of [managerial] white males, as opposed to women, minorities and blue-collar and clerical workers<sup>5</sup>
- ♦ because of the use of 'culture' as a 'weapon' by key personnel during the merger negotiations, suggesting that culture itself should perhaps be questioned as an appropriate framework of analysis.<sup>6</sup>

That said, this chapter examines broadly the concept of 'culture' to demonstrate that the absence of an agreed definition of 'culture' and the doubt about its use are not necessarily an asset in understanding the traditions, philosophies and practices of trade unions. However, it is important not to see this chapter as in-depth critique of organisational culture, rather as an acknowledgement of its limitations in analysing trade unions.

There have been several alternative approaches that have tried to define trade union behaviour but two of these - the cultural web and unionateness - are also rejected as unsuitable constructs by which union behaviour and in particular the UNISON merger, may be judged. A brief reference is made to the 'personality' of a trade union, but this is also rejected as the originator did not develop what remains an untested, but intriguing concept. However, a new approach - *Union Form* and *Union Character* - has been suggested to help inform our understanding of trade union development, how unions respond to their members' needs, and to 'unravel' some of the initial thinking about the UNISON merger.<sup>7</sup>

The divergence in emphasis that the partner unions placed on either Union Form or Union Character governance and practices had the potential to create conflict and expose divisions in the new union. [See chapters 7 and 8]. Key to this thesis is how the partner unions, and subsequently UNISON, dealt with the conflict stemming from the differences between their respective ways of governance, priorities, principles and socio-political values and the differences of class, status, income and

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<sup>5</sup>Martin. 1992. p3.

<sup>6</sup>Fryer. 2000. op cit. p38.

<sup>7</sup>Fryer. 1998. op cit.

employment of their members. Five alternatives for dealing with that conflict are identified along with their implications for UNISON. In so doing, it raises issues about the key role of the union's Leadership in promoting change and tolerance at a time when relationships in the new union would be unstable.

### Organisational Culture

*Everyone intuitively 'knows ' what culture means or at least that it is important. ... People seem to like to talk about culture. The word is also economical: one word signifies a broad range of intangible societal and organisational phenomena. **It is a word for the lazy.** [my emphasis] .... [culture] has no fixed or broadly agreed meaning even in anthropology, but variation in its use is especially noticeable in organisational studies .... the concept of culture seems to lend itself to very different understandings, ideologies, rules, norms, symbols, emotions, expressiveness, the unconscious, behaviour patterns, structures, practices, etc. ... differences in research purposes and interests, definitions, foci ... [which] make it impossible to talk about organisational culture .... [and] should be abandoned in favour of some slightly less precise [and less contested] term' ....<sup>8</sup>*

These comments reinforce Fryer's assertion about the general lack of understanding of the meaning of 'culture' and the deployment of culture by protagonists during the merger negotiations as a means by which to deal with difficult situations. It may be *lazy*, sociological empiricism that conveniently falls back on 'culture' to explain situations that have not been fully researched or sufficiently analysed, but for many 'ordinary' people it makes for an easy handle by which to identify a given set of circumstances and or perceived ideals as the following remarks demonstrate.

The COHSE culture is still around in the Health Service. ... there is a definite feeling that they [COHSE members] don't like the wider union. They don't like people telling them what to do. In the crudest terms they don't like ex-NALGO. the culture, they distrust them ... [I want] a different culture, closer to the NUPE COHSE way, a partnership. [Arthur, ex-COHSE national official]

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<sup>8</sup>Alvesson. 1993. p.1-2 .

Arthur attributes the differences in the relationships between members, and members and officers as the community attitudes of the partner unions delineated by their the styles of governance. His views do not rest in a sophisticated evaluation of why COHSE members do not like UNISON but in a 'snapshot' caricature of a NALGO that he sees as an alienating influence on COHSE members which he refers to as 'culture'. It is also an example of matters that [in some cases polarised negotiating positions] were not seen as a desirable quality for the new union and were dealt with through a rather euphemistic use of culture instead of through a direct challenge to the problem that may have been seen as abrasive or demanding.

It should not be surprising that 'culture' is misused or misunderstood by people wishing to encourage or resist cultural change because exactly what is 'culture' and how it is defined is still at issue as the following examples show.

1 *...'culture' in organisational analysis refers to shared values and beliefs which are seen to characterise particular organisations.*<sup>9</sup>

Usually there is some measure of agreement amongst union members about some of the central functions of a trade union, such as the benefits of collective bargaining, or the help and advice available to members. But very often, and in UNISON as will be seen in chapters 7 and 8, there are considerable contested values and beliefs which divide the membership and paid officials. Therefore, should we discount or ignore those differences as 'non-culture' despite the fact that this pattern of 'behaviour' characterises the union?

2. *Culture is a characteristic of all organisations, through which at the same time, their individuality and uniqueness is expressed. The culture of an organisation refers to the unique configuration of norms, values, beliefs, ways of behaving ..... [this way of behaving] is manifested in the folkways, mores, and in the ideology to which members defer, as well as the strategic choices made by the organisation as a whole.*<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>Dawson 1992 p.136

<sup>10</sup>Eldridge and Crombie. 1974 p 89



It is accepted that norms, values and beliefs can be useful indicators of a union's nature and internal relationships, but the absence of a shared perspective in this definition neglects the centrality of belief in collective organisation which is the cornerstone of trade unionism. There are those who argue that only what is shared is, by definition cultural,<sup>11</sup> in which case we are left with large areas of trade union life that remain outside of the cultural framework and bereft of formal understanding. This definition also assigns to trade unions an assumption that members support the policies and decisions of the union by their act of signing up to membership, yet we know that most members join trade unions for help at work should they need it, not because of ideological commitment to trade unionism.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, it is doubtful if many trade union members are concerned about strategic planning in their unions, witness the absence of members from union meetings and their low participation rates in membership ballots.<sup>13</sup>

*3. ... the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group from another'.<sup>14</sup>*

It is difficult to relate this definition to trade unions and their members because of the non-conformity that trade unions often champion as a sign of resistance to authority and an indication of their liberal tolerance of diversity and difference. Indeed, it has been claimed that the special features that separate trade unions and commercial organisations are what makes 'cultural' change in trade unions more difficult to accomplish.<sup>15</sup> That said, we can sometimes see a high degree of unity of purpose in union members such as during industrial disputes, but that level of shared mind is infrequent and atypical of their behaviour. Indeed, the speed with which the Thatcher governments were able to 'de-programme' union members' attitudes to trade union militancy suggests that Hofstede's definition may be inappropriate in relation to trade unions.

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<sup>11</sup>Schein. 1991. op cit. p245-7

<sup>12</sup>Kerr. 1992. p39-54.

<sup>13</sup>Kerr and Waddington. 1998. op cit.

<sup>14</sup>Hofstede 1994. p139.

<sup>15</sup>Kerr and Waddington. 2001. op cit. p6.

Sometimes 'culture' is referred to as the normative or 'social glue' of an organisation that holds together its various component parts through mutual beliefs and concerns, avoiding conflict, tension and fragmentation.<sup>16</sup> Yet internal conflict can often be seen in trade unions as factions struggle for influence and supremacy. This was graphically demonstrated during the 1970s and 1980s in some of the civil service trade unions whose lay leadership vacillated between right and far left with predictable regularity. The general lack of factionalism in both COHSE and NUPE looks not to have been typical of trade unionism in Britain [See chapters 3A, B and C] and indicates that use of organisational culture here to analyse the data may be inappropriate.

Another difficulty surrounding the definition of 'culture' is that there is disagreement on whether culture is something that an organisation has or is.<sup>17</sup> This has implications for those wishing to bring about *cultural change*, for if culture is innate in an organisation then it may be far more difficult to alter than if the organisation had adopted a cultural style to meet its needs.<sup>18</sup> In part this is due to the 'culture' being buried so deeply in the organisation's rituals, assumptions, attitudes and values that 'culture' does not become apparent until it changes.<sup>19</sup> This helps us to understand why Arthur and other key personnel in the UNISON merger negotiations defer so readily to the concept of culture even if they are unable to decode it fully. To borrow a famous quip [about pornography], *I can't tell you what it is, but I know it when I see it*.<sup>20</sup>

### **The Cultural Web**

Brewster and Lloyd introduced the concept of the 'Cultural Web' to avert the confusion around organisational culture and to demonstrate the links and influences that contribute to an organisation's nature and the wisdom with which it is received.<sup>21</sup> Although this was developed originally as a tool for 'managers' [as

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<sup>16</sup>Alvesson. op cit. p.19.

<sup>17</sup>See Smirchich. 1983.

<sup>18</sup>Ogbonna. 1993. p42.

<sup>19</sup>Goffee and Jones. 2000. p71.

<sup>20</sup>ibid. p9. quoting Supreme Court Justice Earl Warren.

<sup>21</sup>Brewster and Lloyd. op cit. p5.

opposed to senior, trade union, officers] it was used initially by the partner unions and subsequently UNISON, to help them through a period of change when it became apparent that there was a need to 'manage' rather than simply 'lead' the new union.

The cultural web is said to comprise of:

1. Control systems in organisations
2. Organisational structures
3. Power structures
4. Rituals and routines
5. Symbols
6. Myths and stories

This approach may be useful for managers or union leaders who are contemplating 'change management' in that it can demonstrate the inter-reliance of each part of the cultural web on the others. That is, if you pull one cell of the web in a particular direction it requires the support of the whole to maintain a sense of equilibrium and prevent the web from breaking. It does not, however, add significantly to our ability to understand the UNISON merger and the potential for conflict arising from the differences in the memberships and in the ways in which the partner unions conducted their business. Once again, it raises the question of 'should we attempt to judge trade unions by the same measures that we use to define employers or commercial organisations?'

### **Blackburn's Union Character and Unionateness**

An early and innovative attempt to specifically treat trade unions as bodies different from commercial organisations was the concept of 'unionateness' developed by Blackburn who used this as a framework to try and determine the character and social class of a trade union.<sup>22</sup> It is useful to consider this seminal work as it informed much of the thinking on trade unions for more than a decade, but since then has received scant attention. Although the concept has some severe limitations, not least because it is mainly concerned with the 'external' aspects of a

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<sup>22</sup>Blackburn, 1967, op cit. p18-19. see also Bain et al 1973. Prandy et al. 1965. Hyman and Price. 1983.

trade union and was based on empirical evidence from studies of white-collar unions, it is important because it is one of the few works to recognise that traditional thinking on trade unions has substantially failed to increase our knowledge as to why trade unions differ in their structures, ethos, customs and behaviour.

Blackburn measured union character by a scale of *unionateness* with unions being 'more' or 'less' unionate according to the extent to which it is a whole hearted trade union, identifying with the labour movement and willing to use all the powers of the movement. .... the level of unionateness depends on the commitment of an organisation to the general principles and ideology of trade unionism. ....<sup>23</sup>

From this, a trade union that wasn't affiliated to the TUC would be less unionate than one that was. So too, one that was affiliated to the TUC but not the Labour Party [as NALGO was], would be less unionate than both COHSE and NUPE which were both affiliated to the Labour Party. However, NUPE's higher participation in industrial action made it more unionate than COHSE whose general philosophy was less militant. Over thirty years has elapsed since Blackburn's work was published during which the condition and structure of the British trade union movement has altered in depth, influence, and some would argue, ideology,<sup>24</sup> therefore a more contemporary approach would add greater relevance to the analysis. Nevertheless, the work was instrumental in focusing attention on what is still a much neglected locus of trade union research, which at the time led to discussion on what sort of unions white-collar workers prefer. And in the context of this thesis, it underlines the point that white-collar unionism and blue-collar unionism may have incompatibilities, not just in their structures, but across the range of their philosophies, policies and standards.

Without adaptation, judging the character of UNISON by *unionateness* would be exceptionally difficult because of the unique position of the union's two political

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<sup>23</sup>Blackburn, op cit. p. 18-43

<sup>24</sup>An excellent summary of industrial relations in Britain post Thatcher, is Marsh 1992, op cit. See also McIlroy, 1995, op cit.

funds - the General Political Fund and the Affiliated Political Fund - which allows UNISON to be both affiliated and not affiliated to the Labour Party at the same time. [See chapter 5] This cuts across the key issue - Labour Party affiliation - which Blackburn saw as the defining feature of unionateness, and so limits the suitability of this model of analysis.

### **Trade Union Personality**

*The purpose of social enquiry is to suggest useful and general conclusions about the behaviour of people and organisations .... The character of organisations, like that of people, is very much a product of their ancestry and the circumstances of their early growth. Once these things are set, only a rather radical change in an organism's environment can usually disturb its character; and sometimes disturbance is fatal. In people, the quality these things impart is called personality. In organisations it is called [to the extent that it is recognised] tradition.*<sup>25</sup>

Unfortunately, Turner did not develop this line of promising argument, but more recently others have expanded this theme with the suggestion that organisations have feelings, an attribute more usually associated with personality.<sup>26</sup>

Albrow presses the importance of acknowledging that organisations like people are influenced by emotion.

*... it is probably the very reception of the idea of culture in organisational studies which has created obstacles to the recognition of affectivity as a central theme. .... One of the unexpected problems I have found in being chairman, first of a division and then of a company, is the fact that many people judge the position of the company by one's own apparent mood, even to whether one smiles or not. ... there can be little objection to speaking of organisations having feelings .... we can identify dominant emotions which characterise the organisation as a whole, emotions which are appropriate to specific occasions within it, or which belong to the performance of particular roles. ... If we leave*

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<sup>25</sup>Turner. op cit. p14.

<sup>26</sup>Albrow. 1997.

*out the facts of people's emotions in our accounts of organisational behaviour, the accounts will be distorted to the detriment of both organisations and people.*<sup>27</sup>

These following comments from Arthur about UNISON suggest that organisational personality can assist us to broadly gauge the 'aura' or 'feel' of a trade union.

We've retained more of the oral tradition in Health, it's warm and cuddly, but it's changing. [Arthur, ex-COHSE national official]

However, as a framework for understanding the inner concerns and influences that decide the outcome of trade union structures, governance and practices the concept of personality offers insufficient direction to make its application an effective model of analysis.

### **Dispensing with 'Culture'**

The struggle to understand and explain the dynamics in trade unions came to the fore during the UNISON merger process where negotiations became polarised between NALGO on the one hand, and COHSE and NUPE on the other, as each camp struggled to retain their traditions and have them accepted as the standard in the new union. The sharpness of the divisions between the formality of NALGO and the relative informality of COHSE and NUPE prompted the development of the concept of Union Form and Union Character as a model by which to analyse the natures of the partner unions and so start to grasp the reasons why UNISON evolved as it did.<sup>28</sup> Fryer attributes the original thinking on this to Turner [op cit]. The subsequent use of Union Form and Union Character in chapters 7 and 8 of this thesis is an attempt to test and develop this concept against empirical evidence and represents a specific alternative to organisational culture to deal with patterns of trade union activity and behaviour. It may be that this model of analysis is not adaptable for use with other organisations and may therefore have value only in the trade union context.

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<sup>27</sup>ibid. p94-111.

<sup>28</sup>Fryer. 1998. op cit.

## Union Form and Union Character

Fryer rejected an analysis of the merger using organisational culture as a framework on four accounts:

- ♦ there is simply no clear definition about its precise meaning.
- ♦ many of the theoretical [and sometimes ideological] assumptions on which the notion of organisational culture rests are rarely uncovered in a systematic fashion leading to flawed analysis.
- ♦ some uses of the idea of culture include elements of Union Form and Union Character.
- ♦ the term 'culture' was used as a bargaining tool at various times by the parties in the merger negotiations without full recognition of its true meaning and implications.<sup>29</sup>

Consequently, he suggests that 'culture' itself should be a topic for research.

Union Form is said to include,

*all those explicitly rational arrangement of structure, organisation, finance, rules, procedures, membership composition, staffing and approved management structures ..... it is intended to include but go further than the notion of 'union government' ..... is also intended to capture both formal and informal arrangements, as well as those which are sanctioned, approved or tolerated [though not necessarily officially] on the one hand and those practised in the union without approval or indulgence, on the other.*<sup>30</sup>

Union Character is,

*that rich collection of aims, values, purposes, ways of working, relationships, moods, signs, symbols, rights, 'feel' orientations and identities which go to make up what has sometimes been referred to as the 'ethos' of an organisation.*<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup>ibid. p12-14.

<sup>30</sup>ibid. p13.

<sup>31</sup>ibid. p14.

Figure 6.1 includes key elements from both Union Form and Union Character. These kind of issues were very often at the centre of the merger negotiations [see chapters 5 and 7] but their origins lay in the contributions of the histories of the partner unions. [see chapter 3]. More recently many of these issues surfaced in how the partner unions conducted their affairs. [See chapter 4].

figure 6.1

Some key Elements of Union Form and Union Character

Principal Union Manifestations	ORGANISATIONAL FORM	ORGANISATIONAL CHARACTER
	in writing	vision
	structure	aims
	membership	values
	membership	principles
	composition	relationships
	governance	ways of working
	rules	purposes
	regulations	priorities
Key Properties Claimed	clarity	developmental
	certainty	persuasive
	concreteness	enabling
	legality	insubstantial
	visibility	normative
Typically how changed	votes	leadership
	power/authority	learning/training
	motions	conviction/persuasion
	meetings	practice/examples
	instruction	crisis
<sup>1</sup> Fryer uses Organisational Form and Character here but later changes it to Union Form and Union Character		

source: Fryer 1998.

Fryer [chief academic adviser in the merger] recalls that those issues which may be said to be *Union Form* were most closely [but not exclusively] associated with NALGO, and conversely, COHSE and NUPE were keen to press issues of Union Character. Those who wished to see certainty of outcomes endorsed Union Form arrangements as they were measurable and tangible. By contrast, Union Character practices relied on experiences and traditions that were difficult to define and even



more difficult to quantify and were also seen as the product of a less advanced democracy.<sup>32</sup> Examples of how these concepts surfaced during my field work are seen here.

An example of Union Form - comments from an ex-NALGO official who was asked what he would like to change most of all in UNISON.

... our systems of management are not entirely developed. .... The Union Membership Records. IT, financial arrangements, the admin. and the ... general workplace organisation. [Simon. ex-NALGO national official]

An example of Union Character - a former NUPE steward was also asked about change,

It's not personal enough. We need to see more of the regional officers in Homes, schools and libraries. It Needs to be high profile so that members can say "look, that's Molly, we know her." [Molly, ex-NUPE steward]

The main intention of this chapter has been to argue for an alternative approach to 'culture' when discussing trade unions and how they govern themselves. The inclusion of the two examples above demonstrate that Union Form and Union Character may be used cautiously as a model to enhance our understanding of why trade unions differ in their styles of governance. However, this model of analysis remains untested against empirical evidence and the benefits and disadvantages may only become apparent when the theory is assessed against the data. Chapters 7 and 8 use Union Form and Union Character to evaluate two case studies - a national perspective, and a local view. Notwithstanding this caveat, it is clear that if the partner unions had histories of, and preferences for, a new union built around principles of either Union Form or Union Character that this would create division and discontent that would inevitably be reflected in the governance of UNISON.

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<sup>32</sup>ibid. p13-21.

## Dealing with Differences: Conflict Resolution

The actual differences arising from the merger are dealt with specifically in chapter 5. Here the principle of handling those differences is addressed. Five options and their consequences are identified for resolving conflict:

1. Maintain that differences don't really exist, thereby ignoring them. This heralds the prospect of not just individuals becoming disenchanted with the union, but particular stratum refraining from membership because the perception is that UNISON is structurally unable or unwilling to meet their needs. Chapter 4 identified substantial differences in the needs, skills and abilities of the members of the partner unions and to ignore these differences would be to deny many members access to the facilities of the union and restrict their participation in the lay democracy.

2. Say that they do exist, but are not significant enough to warrant action, and that in any case, the passage of time will eradicate them.

This stems from the ill-thought out view that everyone is equal, has equal rights, equality of interest and equality of opportunity. It singularly fails to acknowledge that the reduced capacities of some groups are exacerbated by the increased capacities of others. Sidney, a very senior national official of recently merged trade union formed summed it up thus,

White-collars have better facilities, are better able to organise themselves; they have desks, phones and a regular place of work and they have better communicating strengths. Blue-collars don't have that. White-collars don't have their kind of job description, ergo the buggers take over. [Sidney, senior official of a public service union]

In other words, there can be no equality of opportunity if the ability to participate in the union is structurally barred. It is helpful here to recall the words of Janet,

Activists are required to be aggressive paper crunchers. [now] Those that are not highly literate etc. are marginalised. It is too difficult to participate. [Janet, ex-NUPE, national official]

union to represent all grades and disciplines and the notion of a union that could transcend barriers and present a large and resolute front to the employer. However, if the unity and solidarity of the membership is seen to falter in the face of unresolved conflict, or that conflict is incorrectly thought to have dissipated, it may lead to a future legacy of mistrust and a perpetuation of historical conflict that the new union was meant to eliminate. This would cast doubt on the future stability of UNISON and add to the scepticism of those who doubted the wisdom of the merger because of past events and relationships.<sup>37</sup>

5. Recognise that there are differences, in both need and expectation, and construct contingencies to deal with them.

The inclusion in the 'Final Report'<sup>38</sup> of the principles of 'Proportionality' and 'Fair Representation' was an attempt to address some of those 'recognised' imbalances, but their status as 'guidelines' rather than rules, belies more fundamental weaknesses in UNISON's structure and operation. Empirically, the evidence suggests that the *eventual* inclusion of 'Fair Representation' was more of a Parthian shot than a pursuit of an immutable principle. Data from UNISON implies that the union has already suffered membership loss because of structural and organisational difficulties and that radical action is needed to address the reasons of those members who have chosen to cancel their membership.<sup>39</sup> To combat the disenchantment UNISON required a determined strategy of support for members, set by the Leadership, supported by the membership and implemented by the union's staff, at an early stage in the new union and carried through in to the medium-term. But as chapter 5 shows, this option was curtailed in spirit and scope during the merger negotiations.

### **Leadership and Conflict Resolution**

*Power is the medium through which conflicts of interest are ultimately resolved. Power influences who gets what, when, and how. .... [but] one discovers in talking with members of an organisation that hardly anyone will admit to having*

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<sup>37</sup>Morgan. 1986. p158.

<sup>38</sup>COHSE, NALGO, NUPE 1992. [1]. op cit.

<sup>39</sup>Kerr and Waddington. 1996. p12.

*any real power... [and] the organisation often has to be content with satisfactory rather than optimal solutions to the problem, with negotiations and compromise becoming more important than technical rationality ....*<sup>40</sup>

As noted earlier, trade unions unlike commercial organisations are constrained by their democratic procedures and the need to take account of members' wishes as opposed to 'management's preferences. This makes the job of 'leading' the union more difficult and complex than many are prepared to recognise as the next comment shows.

Compared to this union, I think managing ICI is pretty fucking simple, it's just profit and loss. Managing this is difficult. [Pat. ex-NUPE national official]

However, if the conflict generated by the different styles of governance of the partner unions is to be resolved, the [collective] leadership of UNISON will have to exert its authority in much the same way as any commercial organisation that wishes to effect change management. The work around the 'cultural web' conducted for the partner unions [and UNISON] by the Cranfield School of Management would appear to have been a recognition of this problem. Nevertheless, the ability of the paid officers to deliver results through 'change programmes' is wholly dependent on the co-operation and support of the lay members whose priorities may differ from those of officers. From this we can surmise that those either wishing to effect change or prevent adjustment in the power relationships within UNISON would of necessity, resort to control via the relative certainty of Union Form governance. [See chapter 7]

## **Conclusions**

This chapter has addressed the problem of 'how do we describe and understand trade unions'? This has been done because if we understand those complex factors that determined the development of the partner unions, we can then start to explore and deal with their differences. In the past, public service trade unions have been compared with trade unions in the private sector which has ignored large scale

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<sup>40</sup>Morgan. op cit. p155-180

divergence between public service unions, including the partner unions, and which would be emphasised in the UNISON merger. It has also been acknowledged that trade unions have distinct qualities from employers and commercial organisations and that these differences may be more appropriately investigated and understood through a dedicated framework of analysis. However, it was first necessary to assess current thinking and to explain why they are not the most appropriate concepts and models of analysis by which to understand trade unions.

Organisational culture, often just referred to as 'culture', has most usually been the preferred route of analysis when studying discrete communities. However, this research model was rejected primarily because there is continuing disagreement on a definition and because much of the theory has been built on management and commercial studies rather than trade unions.

Alternative models of analysis to organisational culture were also considered and subsequently rejected. The 'cultural web' was initially designed to assist managers through periods of change and did not lend itself to unlocking key events and components of the UNISON merger. Blackburn's *Union Character and Unionateness* was creative but was not directed at how and why trade unions differ because it was not designed to interrogate the nature and style of a union's governance. The concept of trade union personality was not used because it had not been sufficiently developed to aid analysis, although it clearly had merit with other authors now prepared to consider affect, emotions and personality as a legitimate aspect of organisations.

The concept of Union Form and Union Character was deemed the most appropriate by which to judge the UNISON merger and is used cautiously to interpret the empirical evidence in the case studies at chapters 7 and 8. It was developed directly from the UNISON merger and was an attempt to utilise the knowledge and experiences gained at first hand during the merger negotiations to explain how the partner unions' different traditions and histories would give rise to inevitable conflict.

UNISON would need to deal with this conflict in a positive and open manner to overcome the barriers of difference and divergence if the union was to have a united membership. This chapter has examined five options for resolving conflict, of which only one - recognising differences and constructing contingencies to deal with them - has the potential to treat the root cause of unrest. But as the most difficult option to enact it suggests that this may not be the mechanism chosen by UNISON to try and resolve conflict. In this respect, the role and importance of the 'Leadership' is pivotal, but the constraints of union democracy may inhibit the ability of those leaders to exert sufficient influence to reduce tension and promote inclusiveness.

## Chapter 7

### A Case Study of UNISON: a National Perspective

#### Introduction

The concept of *Union Form* and *Union Character* is used in this chapter to analyse and understand the emerging governance of UNISON. The informality of the governance of COHSE and NUPE was underwritten by inter-personal relationships based on trust and a mutual acceptance that the union was a 'co-operative' of members and paid officers in pursuit of common goals. Fryer styles this approach to union governance as *Union Character*.<sup>1</sup> By contrast, the governance of NALGO had evolved along quite different, even incompatible lines, as seen in the very formal and ordered ways in which the union ran its affairs. This Fryer terms as *Union Form*.<sup>2</sup> Fryer also argues that the 'softer' values of Union Character were unlikely to survive against the 'harder' more tangible aspects of Union Form in the UNISON merger, not least because they were concepts of governance that were fundamentally at odds with each other.<sup>3</sup>

Matters of Union Form and Union Character differed in value in the individual partner unions, and those who preferred Union Character as a means of union governance resented the disruption of the relatively settled relationships that had developed in their unions by the intrusion of the structural manoeuvrings and power plays from those who expected UNISON's relationships to be set down in rule and regulated by the constitutional authority of the union. Fryer noted that where parties in the merger negotiations sought a degree of certainty and assurance on important issues that they resorted to cementing their agendas through rules, procedures and codes of practice. But those who placed greater value on relationships, intentions and shared ethos championed the 'advantages' of Union Character governance. Fryer's work is helpful, but as a new concept by which to understand trade unions it remains untested against empirical data. This chapter tests that thesis against field data and shows that the concept of Union Form and Union Character is helpful in

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<sup>1</sup>Fryer 2000. op cit. p29-41.

<sup>2</sup>ibid.

<sup>3</sup>ibid.

understanding the forms, processes, systems, ethos and philosophy of the UNISON merger and potentially that of other trade union mergers.

Data from interviews with UNISON national personnel are used to investigate the strengths and weaknesses of Union Form and Union Character through an assessment of how they influenced the relationships between full-time officials, between full-time officials and lay members, and between lay members.

The increasing impact of Union Form in UNISON is demonstrated via the inclusion of a schedule of the formal activities of lay members fulfilling their role as leaders and governors of the union. The chapter then shows how this aspect of Union Form has assisted the development of an elite oligarchy of lay members who effectively control much of the power and authority in the union.

It is argued that the model of Union Form that prevailed in NALGO always had the capacity to migrate into UNISON at the expense of the much weaker concept of Union Character which needed the consistent and energetic support of key personnel to maintain its efficacy.

Finally, the chapter demonstrates how the concept of Union Form, was used on occasions by supporters of Union Character, as a protective mechanism to maintain the values and principles of Union Character. The sharp divisions of principle between these two concepts of union governance are perhaps best understood as a 'contest' between [rights and obligations] and [relationships and tolerance].

### **Union Form and Union Character: Rights v Relationships**

The NEC is mostly comprised of people who have got full-time release. They're not lay members. They're full-time officers just like you and I. ... On a personal level I wished that I never had to meet the NEC again. I hate Prima Donnas. .... The corridors of power here are tramped by articulate middle-class people. ... During the merger negotiations we had a number of away days, we had one in Manchester and another at the Moat House in Liverpool, I



remember talking to one of the NALGO Trots', [name] about how we need to listen to members, his eyes just glazed over. It was [for him] all about conference and meetings. [Terry. ex-NUPE national official]

The NEC and its committees are too large. We now have committees shadowing departments instead of the other way round; staffing arrangements, the UMR, the communication between the Union and its employees is not strong enough, particularly with middle managers who were not involved enough. ... I'm not sure of the function of the regional service groups, it seems to be a layer of committee bureaucracy. [Seamus. ex-NALGO national adviser]

The excessive committee structure and bureaucracy. Until officers deliver we can't say to lay members 'self-destruct'. The committee structure is pretty overwhelming. We've got to get our act together. It is an unworkable size. The structural review is part of the solution. [William. ex-COHSE national official]

The first comment from Terry manifests the central problem of how Union Character is seen by its supporters to be the essence of the union's future success and how Union Form is viewed as a detriment to the well being of the union and used by those who seek to control the union through debate, skill in meetings, procedures, prescribed rules and patterns of behaviour that are at odds with the informality and shared values that are the hallmarks of Union Character. But as chapter 5 highlighted, it was concern over several key issues, such as the size of the National Delegate Conference and the 'member-led' principle, that supporters of Union Form [mainly, but not exclusively NALGO] were keen to see enshrined in rule as a safeguard of lay member democracy free from 'unconstitutional' interference from the union's full-time officers. Relationships based on Union Character rely on trust, shared values, respect and empathy for the opinions of other 'partners' in the relationship. Union Character relies on a 'division of power', perhaps unwritten, that is reflected in the informality of the relationships between members and full-time officers and avoids the use of formal regulation to promote

democracy within the union. In effect, it is a form of co-determination of union governance..

The greater degree of certainty surrounding Union Form is expressed in rights and obligations, authority and deference, and relativities circumscribed by rule. Supporters of Union Form like Seamus see the solution to problems in better systems and in getting the structures right so that the structures and formal relationships of the union can be organised, and more importantly, act as a reference of constancy and certainty. Understanding the formalities and rules that accompany this view is the key to the power and control of the union.<sup>4</sup> And once understood, those formalities and rules can then be used to change the balance of power [away from the principles of Union Character], and increase the control of the union by those who rely on Union Form to regulate authority within the union. A prime example of this was the original agreement for the new union to be 'member-centred' and the preparedness of NALGO [and undoubtedly some COHSE and NUPE] members to wait until the first UNISON National Conference to change the rule to 'member-led'. [See chapter 5]. This indicates that supporters of Union Form recognised their [potential] ability to re-construct UNISON more in-keeping with Union Form principles rather than the somewhat nebulous notion of Union Character.

### **Union Character: Strengths and Weaknesses**

The contest between the concepts of Union Character and Union Form was present throughout the merger negotiations and showed itself in the interviews with many of the personnel involved with the union at a national level. With the odd exception, interviewees who identified most strongly with ideas and themes that could be attributed to Union Character were either ex-COHSE, or ex-NUPE. And conversely, ex-NALGO contributors were more supportive of the manifestations of Union Form. This was not always true, as exponents would if the need be, selectively use the arguments of the other camp to emphasise their point. The

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<sup>4</sup>Morgan. op cit. p144.

earlier comments from William about reducing the size of lay member committees are a case in point.

Those participants who were committed to a union built around Union Character, have understandably, judged the merger and success of UNISON by that same measure. Where Union Character has not been sufficiently strong to maintain partner union traditions, such as the preference for valued inter-personal relationships, this has been attributed at times to the intolerance of its opponents, rather than a possible, inadequate response to a highly complex, bureaucratic exercise.

Occasionally Union Character did overcome Union Form, such as in the 'espoused' ethos and ideology of the new union,<sup>5</sup> but generally that was not the case. Belatedly, it has been recognised that Union Character is a relatively, weak concept if forced to compete with Union Form. These further comments from William encapsulate this point.

NUPE thought that [their] personalities would dominate. They were very coherent and cohesive in wishing to take over. The NUPE ethos was to go into the organisation of the new union. The interim NEC was a big shock to them. The NUPE people didn't speak up; they jumped ship and joined NALGO. There was no foundation to the organisation of NUPE and COHSE, the membership just collapsed. They just couldn't hold their own. [William. ex-COHSE national official]

One is bound to question the basis for the NUPE belief that their [officer] 'vision' for the new union would prevail. It suggests once again, that the agenda set and supported by NUPE's Leadership may not have been supported by the union's membership. [See chapter 5]. Furthermore, NUPE looks to have overestimated the strength of Union Character governance when faced with the panoply of structures and rules in UNISON. NUPE's failure to recognise this implies that Union Character governance has an inherent inability to respond effectively to proposed

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<sup>5</sup>See UNISON Rules. 1993. p2.

alternative forms of governance in ways that protect the values of the supporters of Union Character principles, other than through the championing of the 'quality' of the ethos of this approach to trade union democracy. But in situations where a claim on power is at stake, individuals and groups will inevitably resort to capturing 'quantity' [via control of key functions and positions] as surety against the uncertainty created by new relationships and where the old power relativities could be disturbed by those new relationships.<sup>6</sup>

This relative weakness of Union Character is seen the following contribution from Gordon, an ex-NUPE, national official who explained that the collapse of the blue-collar voice was because the Union Character practices NUPE championed were disfavoured by a majority of activists in UNISON.

In NUPE there was trust, it was more like a family, EC meetings were very informal. .... There were poor things about NUPE, maybe we did too much for [EC] members. We fell short on training for them. If we hadn't, maybe they would have held their own better. ... I used to count the votes at the [UNISON] NEC meetings, manuals were not participating. In NUPE there were 26 on the EC, now there are 67. [Gordon. ex-NUPE national official]

What these comments demonstrate is that Union Character is a highly successful medium for conducting the internal relationships within a trade union, providing that a substantial majority of the participants readily support the practice and that it meets the needs of the union's members. Union character is built around personalities, values, standards, understandings and inter-personal relationships,

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<sup>6</sup> *Power stands behind every association and sustains its structures. Without power there is no organisation and without power there is no order .... Authority itself cannot exist without the immediate support of power and the ultimate sanction of force.* Coser and Rosenberg. 1996. p150-1

This supports my contention that the NUPE position on the division of power through the 'partnership' between lay members and paid officers without the need for that relationship to be circumscribed by rule, looks to have been insufficiently thought through. The NALGO support for a 'written order' looks to have been more in keeping with mainstream organisation norms than the NUPE and [COHSE] positions where power and authority had the potential to vacillate between members and officers - even if it didn't. It is that 'potential' rather than 'intent' which Union Form governance limits.

and where the personalities are circumscribed by opponents of the principle of Union Character, the inter-personal relationships that are the 'glue' to the union's success are minimised and down-graded, rendering the concept as a flaccid and insubstantial method of trade union organisation.

However, this may be only part of the problem. NUPE had been deeply involved in pressing high profile, pay campaigns for several decades, and latterly was intensely caught up in fights against CCT. The presence of a 'common enemy', in this case a Conservative Government determined to reduce public expenditure and trade union power, restricted the opportunities for the union's members to concentrate on internal organisation and policies as they tried to contend with large scale job losses and cuts in pay and conditions of service. These conditions, argues Dawson, do not encourage internal unrest. But where a community is dominant in its environment and faces little or no threat from external forces, it develops intra-organisational conflict.<sup>7</sup> Such was the situation in NALGO which had been relatively untroubled by CCT and had a comparatively, short history of major, industrial disputes.

Where contests of power and authority take place in communities it is almost always through the formal rules, rights, obligations and the capture of the resources of the organisation. Power is not achieved solely on the back of personality, although personality may be one of the 'assets' used as a tool to achieve the command of those elements on which power is based.<sup>8</sup> From this we can deduce that NUPE members, and to a lesser extent COHSE members, had had little opportunity to become versed in the skills of internal, strategic wrangling and were immediately at a disadvantage with NALGO members who had achieved office and authority through the use of formal power plays, rules, rights and obligations. Therefore, in the merger negotiations and on into the new union, where trust and crucial inter-personal relationships had not had time to develop, it was inevitable that written and constitutional guarantees would be adopted in preference to personal assurances. Simply put, 'a bird in the hand was worth two in the bush'.

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<sup>7</sup>Dawson. *op cit.* p163.

<sup>8</sup>Morgan. *op cit.* p176.

## **Union Form: Strengths and Weaknesses**

NALGO was more like the relationship in Local Government between officers and councillors, that was the view of activists regionally and nationally... The problem for the NEC was getting Rodney and Alan Taylor to recognise their existence. ... There was a complete disregard for committee decisions. I believed in UNISON but not at any price. The cornerstone was member control. NALGO was pure unionism not tainted by industrial unionism .... generally speaking NALGO was a big family ... Right and Left saw themselves as a family who perhaps disagreed on policy matters, but it was back-to-back to defend the structure. The Right said that we would lose the family if we merged. We didn't really, both Right and Left appreciated the democratic procedures .... Just before I left, I was having a piss in the toilets at Mabledon when Bickerstaffe came and said to me, "I believe you're retiring soon Johnny." What's it got to do with him? He keeps tabs on everyone, he's a megalomaniac. At the TUC he changed the view of the delegation which was different to national conference decisions ... in NALGO, the district secretaries met twice a year with Dave Prentice, [Deputy General Secretary] there was nothing in the constitution [allowing this]. We tried to get a regional convenor meeting [in UNISON] but it was blocked by officers. Now the regional secretaries and lay officers meet, but it is meaningless. The thing that drove the merger in NALGO can't happen in UNISON, the respect from Head Office for lay activists isn't there now. [Johnny. ex-NALGO, national activist. retired]

These are the comments of an ex-NALGO activist who was very influential in the union and in the merger negotiations and as such carry significant weight. The references to the 'formal', Council-type relationship between [the appointed] paid officials and [elected] activists, the importance of committee decisions [members not officers decided] and the need to defend the structure, [the ability of members to challenge policy or practice through the democratic process], indicate that the formal, constitutional arrangements in NALGO were paramount and that the union was structured around these concepts. The somewhat ambiguous reference to 'the family' is more difficult to interpret, indeed, it was the only mention of this concept

in relation to NALGO during the research, but suggests that the acceptance of fundamental disagreement was to be expected amongst 'relatives' who saw it as a sign of a healthy democracy.

However, a major difficulty with Union Form is that it relies heavily on defining systems, formats, charters, protocols, rights, obligations and rules. And it does so at the expense, and sometimes exclusion, of the less rigid aspects of the relationships between individuals and the separate but inter-linked sections of the union. This has a stymieing effect not only on the smooth running of the union, but also on the ability of the union to act in a responsive manner to the needs of members when necessary. This was characterised by one ex-NUPE national official who said,

I used to have a trite phrase; I used to say, "We have a powerful NEC; we have powerful service groups; we have powerful regions; we have powerful branches, and all this in a member centred union. [Adam, ex-NUPE national official].

These sentiments from Adam epitomise the view of the supporters of an approach to union governance through Union Character and emphasise that the concentration on the distribution of power and authority in the union has meant that members' needs may have become of secondary importance. Further, that as relatively few members are involved in the formal, representational arrangements of the union, that Union Form is the preferred method of organisation of those who see relationships in terms of power over people, not power of the people. The rules establishing this power are indicative of the relationships between the rulers and the ruled, and are not just a property of the rulers.<sup>9</sup> Billy, an NEC member [ex-NUPE] explained how he saw this relationship in UNISON.

Some activists have a thing about lay member power. In many areas of Unison there is something rotten in the state of Denmark. .... I'm amazed at the activist mistrust at every level. They think that there is a conspiracy to do them down. The first thing is to recognise just who is your enemy. .... I wouldn't want to be an officer in this union - When you know everything, why do you need an

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<sup>9</sup>Clegg and Dunkerly. 1980. p448.

adviser? [sneers] It's an abuse of being a member. It's an abuse of power. It is about being a control freak. There are some wonderful people from that tradition [NALGO] who are equally horrified, but who are impotent to change things. [Billy, NEC member, ex-NUPE]

This perspective emphasises Clegg and Dunkerley's point that rules, in this case, the member-led principle, say more about the nature of the interface between activists and officers, than the value and quality of the rules themselves. The use of the member-led principle and its primary importance in UNISON's constitution indicates that the crucial articulation between paid officers and lay officials was felt by members to be [potentially] unbalanced, undemocratic and still to be determined. It also confirms that where trust has not been established between two parties, even where they have ostensibly co-terminous objectives, that one party will seek to secure their own position and at the same time limit the influence of the other through structural measures. But as shown in chapter 5, although the UNISON rules explicitly prescribe for the participation of lay members in the running of the union's affairs, lay members have ignored in large numbers this part of the formal relationship with the union. By that measure, Union Form may inhibit participation rather than encourage integration.

### **A System to Support Union Form Governance**

As chapter 5 detailed, the strength of the member-led principle held by NALGO eventually became a dominant feature in defining the nature of UNISON and how that has developed in UNISON may be seen in the opportunities beyond branch level, that lay activists have to formally present their views and take decisions about the union. Figure 7.1 shows a summarised calendar of lay member fora at national and regional levels. Senior Management Team [SMT] meetings are also provided as a comparator. This data provides support for evidence cited earlier about the 'bureaucratic' nature of UNISON's lay member democracy and emphasises how Union Form governance generates an intricate network of administrative structures to oversee and regulate internal and external union policy and direction. In the absence of trust of others and respect for their [alternative]



values and beliefs, decisions are legitimated through committees that provide for equality of ownership of those decisions and a [nominal] limiting of individual power and authority.

However, as figure 7.1 shows, the volume of 'meetings' generated by the UNISON system of governance raises questions about the validity and effectiveness of many of these fora as a contribution to democracy and effective administration within the union, particularly as the data is far from complete and does not include information from all service groups, regions, pay negotiations and a myriad of other issues that the union could be expected to deal with.

figure 7.1 UNISON Lay Activists Meetings 2000

month	NEC meeting	other national meeting	regional meetings	total	officer meetings
January	4	1	2	7	1
February	2	7	4	13	5
March	3	8	3	14	4
April	5	9	1		2
Scottish TUC x 4 days.*					
Wales TUC x 3 days*					
May	10	5	4	19	4
June	National Delegate Conference and Service Group Conferences x 7 days*				
	1	1	1	3	2
July	6	7	1	14	2
August	5	2	0	7	1
September	6	3	1	10	2
TUC x 4 days*					
Labour Party Conference x 6 days*					
October	5	9	4	18	4
November	6	6	0	12	3
December	1	2	2	5	3
TOTAL	54	60	20	137	33

Source: UNISON [4] 2000

\*Totals exclude: TUC and Labour Party Conferences, National Delegate Conference and Service Group Conferences.

If all of these caveats are taken into account it is quite likely that the total number of meetings, working groups and conferences, etc. will have exceeded three hundred during 2000. By comparison, the SMT has just 33 meetings scheduled, although it is accepted that a full range of other meetings will also involve all, or some of the Senior Management Team members at various times. However, the difference here is that the SMT are full-time paid officials who are formally charged to manage the union on behalf of members, but as the data highlights, are potentially side-lined by the authoritative position of the lay representational arrangements. These arrangements are a clear expression of Union Form as the preferred, operational mechanism for a significant section of lay activists to bolster their grip on the member-led principle.

### **Democracy, Oligarchy and New Alliances**

The disproportionate influence of the National Delegate Conference by a few, highly political activists was discussed in chapter 5, but these oligarchic tendencies do not stop there. Although it has not been possible to obtain quantitative data, qualitative evidence from interviewees indicates that at national level a hard-core of activists effectively control the union's lay democracy. Interviewees from all three partner unions expressed concern about the 'unacceptable level of 'attendance' at Mabledon Place, the union's national headquarters, by this cadre of activists. This should be seen as an expansion of the influence of Union Form and thereby a decrease in the practice of Union Character. Ex-NALGO officials were, if anything, more critical of this development than their counterparts in COHSE and NUPE, but generally, all three groups saw the increase in committee meetings and the like, as being out of control as the following comments show.

I recall people saying, "we ain't gonna have all these fucking NALGO committees." Look at it, we've got more than ever of them now. [Jimmy. ex-NALGO, senior official]

We have a very strong democratic culture. .... I don't want to knock those people who spend 5 days a week in London, it is important that those democratic structures are there, but there are small groups, not necessarily on

political grounds, who manipulate the democratic process. ... I come from a union that was egg-bound with committees, but not as much as this union [UNISON]. It is absolute nonsense. .... A lay rep' who attends twenty meetings a month doesn't make it a democratic organisation, and if they [activists] had the guts to examine themselves they would realise this. There are lay committees for every day of the week. [Percy. Ex-NALGO national official]

The committee structure is pretty overwhelming. We've got to get our act together. It is an unworkable size. [William. ex-COHSE national official]

The structure of the Service Groups is a nightmare. Did I say nightmare? It's not. The plethora of committees is being addressed. [Barbara. ex-NUPE, national official]

This interview evidence re-inforces the data on meeting schedules in figure 7.1 and demonstrates that there is concern amongst senior full-time officials about the excessive 'bureaucratisation' of the union's administrative and democratic processes. But, such is the strength of Union Form and those who actively advocate its use as a cornerstone of 'common governance', that altering the union's ethos and ways of working to something less exacting, looks exceptionally difficult. The problem is compounded because key activists often hold multiple office and are unlikely to curtail their own agendas as it would be a denial of the veracity of Union Form.

### **Union Form: Out of NALGO into UNISON**

NALGO was more like the relationship in Local Government between officers and councillors, that was the view of activists regionally and nationally. [Johnny. ex-NALGO national activist. retired]

The practice in NALGO of running the union along very formal lines confirms that Union Form is not only about as Fryer argues, a preference for dealing in

certainties,<sup>19</sup> but is also a mechanism by which power and authority may be legitimately pursued. Union Form is unlikely to attract criticisms of patronage and nepotism, whether real or perceived, and avoids the charge of 'dynastic succession' that carries the implication that democracy has little part to play in the governance of the union. In the Western World, the concept of a 'free democracy' is popularly symbolised as an individual's right to vote for a preferred political party, or to stand for Office in an election where all men and women are deemed equal. However, equality of principle does not necessarily mean equality of opportunity. [See chapters 4 and 6]. Those adept in the adherence to, and manipulation of Union Form are those most likely to succeed in winning office, influence and authority where political alliances and oppositional populism are the received practice. Where members have previously operated in an environment that rotated around Union Character and are therefore relatively unfamiliar with Union Form, their response has in a large measure, been to withdraw from the democratic process. [see chapter 5]. Additionally, there have been some, albeit a [significant] minority, who have adopted the principles of Union Form 'to stay in the club,' but without the real interest in political power that many, ardent supporters of Union Form pursue. Interview data suggests that support for Union Form from this group [some of the ex-COHSE and ex-NUPE people] rests on a 'Gravy Train' arrangement with former NALGO activists as a quid pro quo for their support surrounding the 'old NALGO' agenda. Billy again on the NEC situation,

There is a gravy train element. In NUPE the commission was in the rule book. Now money is siphoned off to the SWP and CDFU. The lay network has a grip on it. There are areas of corruption. The lay member network is corrupt. [Billy. NEC member. ex-NUPE]

Jervais, an ex-NUPE, national official confirmed this view, but went much further arguing that the 'corruption' was more deep seated and widespread.

On the NEC, what is it 58, they go where they want, when they want. They all go to the TUC. Our delegation is over a hundred. They party, they socialise; I don't know what they do. ... We send 120 delegates to the TUC. We send 49 to

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<sup>19</sup>Fryer 2000. op cit.

the Labour Party, but only 10 are from the NEC. .... The black members committee want to go to Australia, to send 4 or 5 places. There isn't anything that they can't get without going. How much will it cost? It's a complete farcical waste of money. The international committee will reduce it, but half will go. .... Its an awful thing to say but some of them just come for the socialising. They are known as the 'shoppers and shaggers'. You see them coming down the street with their bulging shopping bags from Oxford St. It wasn't all rose tinted glasses in NUPE, some of them knew how to swing the lead; we had problems with some of them trying to stay on an extra night at conference, there was an element of that. .... [Jervais, ex-NUPE, national official]

These comments from Jervais acknowledge that the potential for 'dubious' practices amongst the lay member leadership exist across union governance whether it be Union Form or Union Character that has been adopted, but that the paid officials have a responsibility of leadership to try to attenuate 'excesses'.<sup>11</sup> Ironically, this view is directly analogous with the situation which prevails in local government where council officers have a duty to guide and advise elected councillors on constitutional and other matters. Supporters of Union Form governance [mainly, but not exclusively] NALGO, have not adopted this premise even though much of the NALGO tradition of governance and union structure resembled the local council paraphernalia. This suggests that union members see the governance of their union differently from the democratic practices in civic and national elections. It may be that in UNISON members feel 'ownership' of their union gives them the right to a greater say in the union's affairs than they have come to accept in other electoral institutions where 'officials' are often thought of as the real policy makers.<sup>12</sup> However, the alleged trade-off of 'power for the trappings of office' was

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<sup>11</sup>This scenario encapsulates perhaps the central ethos of the supporters of Union Form - that unelected officials should not have the right to restrict the *legitimate* activities of elected representatives who may not be re-elected if the members think that they have failed to act in a decorous and responsible manner'. This stance incorporates 'the democratic process' as the brake on questionable actions, not the [arbitrary] decision of paid officers.

<sup>12</sup>A considerable part of the anti-union legislation enacted by the successive Conservative governments after 1979 [see chapter 2] reinforced this notion by

not seen as confined to lay members and was said by some to lie at the very heart of the Leadership in UNISON. Jervais again,

Jinkinson as the first general secretary, he allowed a lot of things to develop. [that shouldn't] For example, the NEC were consulted on everything. There is a vast committee structure [because of him]. There is a myriad of committees which we are now trying to reign in. He was never a very strong leader. ... I thought that he was the pits. He loved his chauffeur. It was his one big thing: he would get him to drive him 50 yards just so that he could be seen getting out of a chauffeur driven car. He had a very lavish lifestyle. He used to come out with lots of left-wing rubbish. He was very anti-Labour Party; he made speeches to rubbish it. He espoused left wing views, but when he went home at night he didn't believe them. It was just to keep his NEC happy. ... [Jervais, ex-NUPE national official]

Whilst this may be said to be a harsh or extreme interpretation of events, it does signify that when faced with a panoply of measures to control the union, which are built around patterns of Union Form, that individuals are unlikely to be able to resist the pressure to 'come into line', and may well seek accommodations as the price for acquiescence. By the same token, those wishing to retain power are willing to accept questionable practices, providing resistance to their ideals and agenda is limited. Although such accommodations may well be unwritten and unspoken - *a pact of silence*<sup>13</sup> - the relativities and lines of authority between the parties are often set in practice through a formal bureaucracy which legitimates actions through 'agreed' decisions, which in reality are unlikely to be challenged or frustrated by timid and conservative bureaucrats keen to maintain their status.<sup>14</sup> Jervais mistakenly attributes Jinkinson's actions to a discreditable style of leadership, when in fact, the style of leadership was a direct result of the bureaucracy in which he had served for many years. For NALGO, he was in fact an excellent leader in a system of governance that the union preferred. Whether or not

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encouraging trade union members to view their union as a flawed democracy in which unelected [thus unrepresentative] officials held sway unchecked.

<sup>13</sup>Selznick. 1943. p486.

<sup>14</sup>Merton. 1949. p493.

that style of leadership, or indeed those preferred by COHSE and NUPE were appropriate for UNISON is debatable. However, what is clear, is that the leadership style adopted by UNISON's first general secretary was pivotal in setting the parameters of the relationship between paid officers and lay activists.

### **Why Union Form is a Robust Contender**

Internal research conducted on behalf of the partner unions in 1993 immediately prior to the merger warned of the danger of transposing the NALGO preference for a complex, committee system into the new union and of the importance of full-time officers resisting the excesses of this expression of Union Form. About NALGO it said,

*.... the [NALGO] committee system as it stands now is considered untenable as a model for UNISON. There are far too many ineffective committees that waste precious time and resources and there is no practical mechanism for disbanding them. The committee system taken as a whole is therefore in need of radical reform. As far as making effective decisions is concerned, however, the internal criticism goes rather deeper. It is not the committee system per se which prevents officers from being as effective as they might be, but the lack of concerted effort on the part of officers to develop a strong management ethos. In other words, their own criticism is that the committees are used as an excuse, and I quote, 'to duck and ignore problems', - as a cover for not taking responsibility. The implication is clear, the opportunity to develop a strong management ethos has been there all along and it is institutional inertia which has prevented it from being developed. There is a real concern that this inertia should not be transferred into UNISON.*<sup>15</sup>

It is evident that this warning, as stark as it was, still under-estimated the tenacity of Union Form practices to resist change and the relative weakness of alternatives to Union Form governance where this is embedded in the practises of the union. Union Form is able to resist attempts to attenuate its potency on five counts:

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<sup>15</sup>Ouroussoff [2]. op cit.

- ♦ wresting power from those who hold it can be interpreted as 'usurping democracy', especially, as in the case of UNISON, where the principle of member-led is at the heart of Union Form.
- ♦ those with power, and this applies generally, will fight to keep hold of it.
- ♦ changing the rules to alter the power balance means that those wishing to reduce the strangled hold of Union Form must involve themselves, at least initially, in the very machinations that they are seeking to halt. Put simply, to remove those in power, you must first achieve power.
- ♦ whatever its drawbacks, the manifestations of Union Form, e.g. written rules, procedures, codes of practice and structures are tangible and quantifiable and open [potentially] to 'democratic' reform.
- ♦ Union Character relies on four central pillars: trust, personality, inter-personal relationships and track record, and where Union Character has not developed as an aspect of union governance it will be seen by its opponents as a mechanism to water-down rights, rather than ameliorate partnerships.

This is helpful in explaining why at UNISON's first NDC the rule describing the union as member-centred was changed to member-led. Although Fryer has argued that it was not simply a matter of domination by a single union post merger,<sup>16</sup> the strength of the NALGO [successful] defence of the union's preference for the conduct of the new union's affairs in line with Union Form principles, ensured that the debate about the member-centred versus the member-led issue was predisposed in favour of Union Form and NALGO activists, who held a majority hand at the conference. The uncertainty of the new relationships during the early days of UNISON made it inevitable that members when faced with a dilemma, would resort to the safety of prescribed rules rather than promises and assurances. Indeed, NUPE attempted to circumvent the battle over the rule book of the new union by unexpectedly producing a complete draft of rules quite early in the negotiations.<sup>17</sup> And whilst this undoubtedly helped protect certain aspects of the new union, such

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<sup>16</sup>Fryer, 2000. op cit. p37.

<sup>17</sup>NUPE through the union's legal advisors, appointed a barrister and an academic who were expert constitutional lawyers who prepared the draft UNISON rules and which subsequently became the template for the first UNISON rule book.



as the APF, once in play, the rule book became subject to those well versed in debate about the constitutional and structural aspects of union governance. The failure of the member-centred rule to be designated as 'entrenched' attests to the failure of both COHSE and NUPE negotiators to recognise the weakness of the rule and an over reliance on Union Character to preserve it. As we saw in chapter 5, NALGO had advised its members that rules could be changed at the first UNISON conference and clearly did so in the knowledge that their members were most likely to win the subsequent rule debates. It was clear acknowledgement that Union Form practices would still prevail in the new union.

### **Union Character and Relationships**

Most people believed in getting the new union through, not doing the dirty on each other, tempers may have flared then, but we were working together towards one goal - but we got there. ... [now] At my level, people are still fighting the battles of the past. There are worse suspicions of each other than when we were working towards a common goal. There are people still around who would like to go back, but few are serious about it as an option. .... Ouroussoff did strike a raw nerve. There was a lot of truth in those descriptions, it was really about head office personalities. ... Rodney Bickerstaffe goes to great lengths not to be partisan. [Rita. ex-Nalگو, senior adviser]

The earlier discussion on Union Form essentially centred on how this method of union governance was championed principally by NALGO, lay members and the subsequent effects it has had in UNISON. Though it should be noted that COHSE and NUPE did resort to deploying Union Form if it suited their purpose. And, as Fryer remarks, they may have been better to rely on Union Form more often to protect cherished aspects of Union Character.<sup>18</sup> As in the merger negotiations, it is aspects of Union Character in the everyday dealings in the new union that decide if the manifestations of Union Form run smoothly. Rita's comments emphasise just how important were the four pillars of Union Character, trust, personality,

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<sup>18</sup>Fryer, 2000, op cit.

inter-personal relationships and track record in creating the 'spirit of co-operation' that allowed the detailed and sometimes, highly emotive, merger negotiations to be conducted with tolerance, a shared vision, and at times, a very necessary sense of humour as the following demonstrates.

On one occasion, NALGO presented a discussion paper 'on the day' to COHSE and NUPE who clearly were unable to read and digest the contents. NALGO though wished to have some initial feedback and asked Colme O'Kane, the COHSE Deputy General Secretary for some initial comments.

Colme O'Kane. I have reservations about it.

Dave Prentice. What reservations?

Colme O'Kane. I don't know yet.

Dave Prentice. Well what are the intellectual arguments against it?

Colme O'Kane. I don't know, but we'll have some reservations. We don't like it.

Source: various interviews with national officials.

However, Rita's comments also suggest that the trust said to have developed during the merger negotiations did not survive the transition into UNISON. This could either be because it never really existed in the first place, or, because the tenuous hold it had established in the early character of the new union was insufficient to resist the substantial weight of the 'aggressive' nature of Union Form spearheaded by the [now] rule of a member-led union.

### **Defending Union Character**

NUPE knew exactly what they were doing, what were their tactics, ideas, shapes and what they wanted - the key people in the right jobs. The right people to pull the right levers. ... Tom [Sawyer] was an emollient. Just like he was at the Labour Party. It must have been like watching tennis for him [swings his head left and right] between COHSE and NALGO. ... I want it [Unison] to be much more coherent. The staffing structures, it's almost a franchise situation in the regions, like a burger franchise. We need more

direction, control and communication. We need to do fewer things better, but that is very difficult to do in an organisation like this. It's almost a federal state where the message is filtered and lost. [Michael. ex-COHSE, senior national official]

The first NEC was NALGO dominated. Tom was superb at handling the NEC. [Julian. ex-NALGO, senior national official]

Tom going was a pity. He was a real strategist, just like he was at the Labour Party.<sup>19</sup> We didn't have the skills and talent, [after he left] but I'm not sure how much he could have done in UNISON, as he did in the Labour Party. NALGO didn't like him. There was a fear of him. It was a major loss. [Winston. ex-COHSE national officer]

These comments about Tom Sawyer the former, deputy general secretary of NUPE epitomise the fundamental difficulty faced by those who set store by the principles of Union Character - Union Character needs committed, skilled individuals, with the determination and tenacity to protect the union and its members from the incursive nature of Union Form. Like all relationships, Union Character needs constant monitoring and adjustments as circumstances change. This may be relatively easy in a relationship where the basis of that relationship has been 'settled' and where the concerned parties actively support the continuation and direction of the relationship. Such was the case of the 'family' relationship in NUPE. [See chapter 3C]. However, when the principle of Union Character is challenged it may be necessary to 'beat off' the threatened attack [from Union Form] through a considered set of responses and actions that have been eschewed previously as unnecessary and even potentially inimical to those relationships thought to have been settled. A consequence of this response is that those who adopt such a strategic defence of Union Character are likely to be seen by their opponents as

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<sup>19</sup>The need to act strategically to defend Union Character emphasises that on occasions this concept of union governance may demand support from Union Form practices because by itself, Union Character may not be able to resist an agenda built around Union Form governance.

scheming and manipulative individuals rather than skilled advocates of an alternative style of union governance. Supporters of Union Form governance may well see this as evidence of the domination of lay members by paid officials in those unions where Union Character prevails, and not as a considered response to preserve values associated with Union Character. In short, Union Character advocates may have reinforced inadvertently, misconceptions and characterisations about themselves, and confirmed to Union Form advocates the need to ensure that members, not officers control UNISON. Union Character also requires the support of a wide constituency to achieve the consistency of approach necessary to challenge and resist the highly vociferous and rehearsed lobby of well resourced activists who see Union Character acting against their interests.

### **Union Form, Union Character and Leadership**

Whilst one man, in this case Sawyer, could not have possibly championed the case for Union Character single-handedly, his departure looks to have been a signal for some activists to expand their attempts to further exclude full-time officers from the running of the union. A confidential paper with restricted circulation was issued amongst an elite group of lay activists on the NEC and in other key areas seeking to consolidate their grip on the union's structures and policy making forums. It was said that the group had achieved its first objective - the election of Alan Jkinson - and that it was now pressing ahead with the rest of its agenda to establish control of the union.<sup>20</sup> If this is true, then we may assume that those involved were reasonably confident of being able to 'manage' UNISON's first, general secretary, who, from evidence already presented, was happy to continue in the new union with the 'local government' relationship that had prevailed in NALGO. Additional evidence implies that this was perhaps a 'two-way street' and that complicity by the general secretary was suspected in return for support for a further term of office.<sup>21</sup> An NEC

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<sup>20</sup>This was reported to me during an interview with a senior national official who had a detailed knowledge of the contents of the briefing note, but had not been able to secure a copy. This research has also failed to obtain a copy.

<sup>21</sup>A deal was struck in a restaurant in Brussels at a meeting between the three, partner union general secretaries. This entailed Alan Jkinson, the NALGO general secretary being the first 'appointed' UNISON general secretary. Bickerstaffe would be nominated by the NEC for the post of general secretary after Jkinson retired in 1996, but he would be required by statute to be elected by a membership ballot. It

member alleged that Jinkinson had touted for support amongst former NALGO elements with the intention to scupper the deal that Bickerstaffe would be the nominated candidate of the NEC.

Alan Jinkinson tried to do deals with people. Bickerstaffe never met anyone.

He didn't do deals with anyone. [Billy, ex-NUPE NEC member]

Others saw Jinkinson as acting more directly to keep Union Form practices and against building relationships that respected the traditions and values of COHSE and NUPE.

Jinkinson sold out. He set out to recreate NALGO. At the Senior Management Team I watched him putting the building bricks in place. It was quite undemocratic. It was the 'I've decided' attitude. This might seem quite trivial, but for interviews in COHSE & NUPE there was a procedure for appointing officers, without consultation, Jinkinson said he wanted regions involved. It affected [adversely] the matching and slotting procedure. At times we were despondent, but we wanted to minimise the risk of a public row. [Tania, ex-NUPE, national adviser]

Tania's remarks are a re-statement of the importance of Union Character in the governance of the union and how once again the four pillars of trust, personality, inter-personal relationships and track record are essential to maintaining a balanced and coherent approach to running the union. Union Form does not require this consistency of approach, for alliances can be struck on individual issues with groups who may, at least nominally, be diametrically opposed to each other, but who are prepared to shelve longer term differences and greater goals in return for more immediate, if smaller, gain. Such was the case in the debate in NALGO

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would appear that this agreement was reached in the spirit of Union Character for it was an agreement that could not bind future NECs to supporting Bickerstaffe and one is left to wonder why it was never covered as an entrenched rule or made a bottom line by NUPE. But Bickerstaffe himself answered that, "I would not have run as general secretary if it meant that we couldn't have the new union as a result. I would have promised not to have run at any time if it meant that the new union wouldn't happen. You have to share that vision, all my predecessors had it, a single public services union. There can be a huge, public sector, trade union that is better than all those small specialist trade unions."

concerning the 'right to campaign', [see chapter 3B] and which Johnny [earlier] described as,

... right and left saw themselves as a family who perhaps disagreed on policy matters, but it was back-to-back to defend the structure. [op cit]

The criticism of Jinkinson's attempts to preserve NALGO's committee system and the local government type relationship between paid officials and lay members also attracted severe criticism from COHSE.

He carried on behaving as if it was NALGO. He said that he wanted to be a UNISON general secretary, but he behaved as if he was a NALGO general secretary. At the NEC he would only speak once or twice. ....Our NEC isn't like that. [now] .... He carried on working de facto in a NALGO way. It was good that we secured his exit. I think that he was a bit of a lame duck. Rodney operates in the same way that Hector did with the COHSE NEC. .... You don't shut Rodney up. It takes a lot to stamp the General secretary's role as being important. Alan didn't do it at all. We used to say, "why isn't he speaking." In NALGO they'd have said, "he's already had his 3 minutes." [Antoinette. ex-COHSE, national officer]

The comments about Jinkinson are not simply about painting the man in a bad light, but are there to show the importance of the strength and commitment of individuals in supporting and maintaining the 'family' relationships that COHSE and NUPE said characterised their unions. Without being nurtured, the principle of Union Character cannot survive. There should be no criticism attached to Jinkinson for not supporting values cherished by COHSE and NUPE for he came from a trade union with an entirely different approach to governance, which on the face of it had served the union very well. And in any case, he had as much right to try and preserve NALGO's traditions and ethos as others had to try and preserve the COHSE and NUPE values and practices. If Bickerstaffe had been first general secretary it may well be that this thesis would have reported the undue influence of Union Character in UNISON's culture. The point about this whole debate is that

Union Character is about people, Union Form is about procedures, and the two are largely incompatible.

Sawyer appears to have recognised the limitations of Union Character in an environment where a very, significant element of activists are determined not to adopt it as a rallying standard.

On the NUPE way of life, we couldn't have done more, but there was a clash of cultures. [Tom Sawyer. ex-NUPE, deputy, general secretary]

That is debatable. It may well be that Union Character measures were of little help in preserving the NUPE values, but radical, structural measures could have softened the effect of the NALGO ethos and practices. The prime example of this was COHSE's insistence on Service Groups and a two day Health Care Group National Conference, which has according to an ex-COHSE official, preserved much of the COHSE *modus operandi*.

Members and activists are still the same, the very first conference (health) felt like every other conference I'd been to. It is an oasis of the COHSE and NUPE culture in UNISON. [Angela. ex-Cohse national official]

## **Conclusions**

Union Form and Union Character as dimensions of union governance have been shown to be incompatible concepts. Union Form derives its superior tenacity over Union Character from the delivery of tangible results and the procurement of power and authority for those who seek to play a leading part in the democracy of the union. The use of Union Form as a method of union governance developed in NALGO partly as a response to a relative lack of external threat to the union's development and expansion. The union often replicated the traditions of local government, including the strict separation of the executive from the management, and the bureaucratisation of decision making.

By contrast, COHSE and NUPE were trade unions that operated in much less formal environments and had settled their own styles of governance through

traditions based on the inter-personal relationships between officers and lay members and partnerships of mutual trust, though in NALGO [and elsewhere] this was perceived as a naked power relationship with full-time officers commanding the alliance. The dominance of the NALGO type, Union Form practices has caused COHSE and NUPE officials to re-evaluate their previous relationships with lay members with whom they now see a widening gulf on consensus government. It is also clear, certainly as far as NUPE is concerned, that there was insufficient weight placed on the ability of Union Form practices to resist checking, and an over-estimation of the capacity of Union Character to 'woo' support away from the rigours of constitutional debate and the formal setting of internal, union relativities. Where activists from COHSE and NUPE have been confronted with a choice between Union Form and Union Character, a significant minority, have opted to support NALGO's traditions of formality and activist control of the union in exchange for a 'sleazy' settlement not strictly related to union interest. This has facilitated the emergence of a hard-core group of political/union activists who have expanded the bureaucracy of the union to permit their status and presence to equal, if not surpass, that of the union's national, full-time officers.

This analysis supports the contention raised in the chapter 5, that there is a growing schism between the 'official' nature and practices of the union as determined by activists and the rule book, and members, who are for the most part, insulated against the conflict in the union's structures and between some of sections of the lay membership and some full-time officers.

Where aspects of Union Character have been successfully preserved this has been because Union Form was used to ensure that those wishing to 'undo' the basis on which these aspects of UNISON were agreed, could not readily do so without entering into a major, constitutional battle. Two outstanding examples of this were the protection of the APF in rule [see chapter 5] and COHSE's insistence that the price of merger was a 'ring-fenced' two day national conference for the Health Care Service Group. Both of these principles have come under attack, but have survived intact because of their 'guaranteed' status and because there has been sufficient,



pro-active support from key personnel committed to keeping Union Character as the prevailing influence.

Where Union Character as the preferred form of governance within UNISON has failed this has been because insufficient activists see it as a medium through which a 'member-led' union may flourish, and because full-time officers have not been prepared to try and resist empire building by influential, lay activists. Notwithstanding this last point, Union Form is a more appealing concept to the masses than Union Character and therefore inherently stronger because it appears as a dispassionate agent for ensuring well meant, democratic order. Whereas Union Character, irrespective of the historical credentials it may display, is open to the criticism of patronage and dynastic autocracy. The proposition of a member-led union and its associated issues is a difficult notion to disagree with, and because most members will view this as a pre-requisite of union democracy, those people who champion control of the union through 'democratic' means will find it easier to raise support for Union Form governance than those who advocate union governance by Union Character, whose basic message is 'trust me'.

## Chapter 8

### A Case Study of UNISON: A Branch Perspective

#### Introduction

This chapter uses Union Form and Union Character to analyse to what extent the merger of the three, partner unions has been successful and a genuinely new union created at branch level. Five branches form the basis of the case study; two were NHS branches and three were in local government. Interview data from branch activists and evidence obtained from observation at branch level meetings are used to explore how relationships in UNISON branches have developed and how the practices, ways of working, norms and values of the partner unions have influenced the branches in the case study.

Some of the branches studied show that where there was disharmony, and in some cases, downright hatred between branch representatives, and that this was where Union Form played a significant role in governance of the branch. And further, that in those branches where a 'new' UNISON style of organisation and representation was developing, that this was due to branch representatives having adopted a focus on Union Character as a preferred model of governance. Or in one specific case, where Union Form and Union Character jointly regulated relationships in a large branch.

The chapter also confirms the contention in chapter 5, that a formal, comprehensive, lay democracy does not guarantee genuine participation by members in the union's governance and raises a fundamental question about the integrity of the union's general approach to member involvement in the decision making process. Bennett has argued that members are relatively ambivalent about the way that their trade union is run and see the concept of member-led and a strong, central/national leadership as complimentary and even desirable. And that members choose when to opt in and out of the decision making process according to the issues at stake, preferring to leave the more, mundane business to union representatives.<sup>1</sup> If that is true, it may well be that a 'member friendly' union

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<sup>1</sup>Bennett, 1998, p14.

'ambience' is more important than the constitutional arrangements for representing members interests.

### **Union Character and Union Meetings in Health Care**

The annual general meeting of Health Branch D. Region 1.

Venue a pub. A buffet is provided by the branch.

20 members present. Regional Officer in attendance.

Vote allowing smoking - very informal, in fact, nobody really voted

Chairwoman. "So the rest of you are not bothered, so we can carry on smoking. .... Thanks to all stewards for their hard work - most of whom do it in their own time and are out of pocket. .... If it's all right with you all, we'll move the agenda about because some have to go to work. We'll do the elections first. .... that's the officers all back in. We can now get back down and do the job. .... Stewards elections, Rachel, do you fancy doing the steward. .... that woman there is interested in being a steward. ...."

A nursing issue is raised and dealt with [outwith the order of the business] ... "so that our two psychiatric nurses can leave early to go on duty. ... [two members then leave] ... Take care Christine. Would you like to take some of the buffet with you for supper?"

Pay claim is discussed. Branch Secretary and Chairwoman give report. Members advised that they can look at the list of correspondence received by the branch ... "if you are interested?" No comments.

Nominations for the NEC. .... [no one seems interested and no nominations are forthcoming] "If you trust us we'll send it off" .... There are no objections.

### Any Other Business

Job evaluation and generic workers.

Mick, a porter, speaks about low morale and gets support from meeting. (the most verbal contribution so far) - "there has been a loss of £75 per week". - he continues and explains directly to the meeting "generic ..... "in engineering terms it is cogs."

A female member. What about women in these genetic posts or whatever they're called?

A male member. Does that mean women would have to move dead bodies?

Another female member. I wouldn't do that, I came for a cleaning job. ....

For the 1st time a member raises a hand for permission to speak - no one else has

Mick again. ... I'm not frightened of the fucking head of Hotel Services. I think he is the ugliest twat I've met. [highly amused laughter, then some sexist comments. Meeting breaks up in laughter, no one seems offended.] Mick leaves the meeting.

Chairwoman. We're not in the halcyon days of the 60's and 70's. Now trade unions are more into negotiations, twats or not. [more laughter] ...

A male member thanks Branch Secretary for her ... motivation and work.

Apologies are taken at this point just before the chairwoman closes the meeting.  
Buffet is consumed.

This brief extract from the proceedings of the Annual General Meeting of Health Branch D epitomised the highly informal approach and lack of 'professional' etiquette of the branch activists to the conduct of relations with members generally and the regulation of stewards inter-action with each other. Although the branch administration had produced a formal, written agenda and circulated the minutes of the previous meeting to members at the meeting, neither the branch officers nor the members present at the meeting used these expressions of Union Form as mandatory tools of governance. A principal aspect of the administration of the meeting was that it chose not to follow blindly the rules and protocols, but chose instead to ensure that members' concerns were addressed as a first duty. A prime example was the willingness and flexibility of the meeting to cater for nurses on

night duty who could not wait until the end of the meeting to ask about their own difficulties. Seaward has argued that trade unions are,

*... often schizophrenic in their attitudes to the work process and would be greatly aided by the adoption of a clear and simple perception of their role within industrial relations. This must, of necessity, mean concentration on their economic function.*<sup>2</sup>

The preparedness of the branch to minimise formal proceedings, disfavour Union Form governance and focus on the pay and conditions of service of the union's members, indicates that Union Character encourages member participation by addressing real rather than perceived needs, and reduces the potential for alienation between member and the union. Coates and Topham forcefully contend that it is the quality, not the quantity of participation that encourages democratic governance in a trade union and that preoccupation with structural forms is evidence of dysfunction and irrationality.<sup>3</sup> In that sense, Union Character is a better guarantor of democracy than the prescription of Union Form where rights, obligations and power operate as a force majeure, as in the case of the member-led tenet.

A similar picture of 'efficient informality' emerged in health branch F. I arrived at my first branch committee meeting on a dark, wintry night, was warmly welcomed, given a cup of tea and presented with a plate of vegetarian sandwiches especially arranged for me. There was much cordial chit chat before the meeting and no one seemed to mind my presence. Indeed, one steward asked me for advice on a problem with his employer which I side-stepped. The meeting commenced and the branch secretary formally introduced me. I then explained briefly about my research and how I hoped that it would help the union to provide better services to members. The chairwoman then said in a warm fashion,

We say what we have to say in front of them, not behind their backs. [a reference to full-time officers]

<sup>2</sup>Seaward. 1989. p30.

<sup>3</sup>Coates and Topham. 1980. op cit. p68-69.

Another steward, female adds,

You're welcome ducks.

Throughout the meeting jovial banter passed between the participants. During a serious debate on a £400 phone debt incurred by a former steward the branch secretary advised the meeting,

Can I tell you what I have actually done.

The meeting broke up in laughter. It was clear that 'unofficial' action of the branch secretary was not unusual or disliked and that expediency rather than protocol was acceptable.

A year later I attended a further branch committee meeting. The general ambience had not changed. A guest speaker from a union backed charity made a plea for funds and support. There was an amenable reception to the speaker with one or two comments from stewards when the chairwoman responded

I think I can speak for the rest of the shop stewards and personally .... we will take you up on all these.

Then she prompted the meeting to make a donation. A £100 was suggested, then £200. The branch secretary cracked a joke,

You can tell the treasurer isn't here, shall I pretend to be her? [laughter from the meeting] You can't have £200.

More laughter from the meeting. It was obvious that the treasurer was seen as a prudent watchdog on the branch's finances.

### **Union Character and Union Meeting in a District Council**

I had not been particularly surprised by the situation in the Health Care branches because of the marked absence of former NALGO members which had allowed former COHSE and NUPE members to continue conducting their affairs relatively unaffected by a wider UNISON influence and which I had perceived generally in

my own work in the north west region. This supported the views of those interviewees who believed that the Health Care Service Group had remained effectively 'NALGO free'. It was unexpected therefore, to find an equally informal style of conduct at a local government, branch committee meeting where former NALGO members considerably outweighed former NUPE members.

A special meeting had been called to discuss the 'Single Status' national agreement<sup>4</sup> and to which I had been invited. I was warmly received and the branch secretary announced to the meeting,

This is the chap I was telling you about, he'd like to make arrangements to see you.

The meeting seemed pleased that someone was interested in the branch. Coffee was served, manual worker stewards in their 'dirty clothes' sat amidst white-collar staff. The atmosphere was very relaxed. The branch secretary [former NALGO] effectively controlled the meeting with which the chairman [former NALGO] seemed content. The branch secretary tried to encourage stewards to take-up posts in the branch administrative structure, but with little success. He turned to me, laughed, and openly declared,

We'll have names against all of these posts so that when we send it off to head office they'll think that we're very, well organised.

This indicated that whilst the policies of the national union may have dictated the filling of posts in accordance with Fair Representation and Proportionality, that reality in the branch was pragmatically sealed by the non-participation of members per se. This concern with the actual lived processes and relationships of union life rather than the theoretical aspirations of union structures defines and separates the contours of Union Character from those of Union Form.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>A national agreement that harmonised blue-collar and white-collar conditions of service.

<sup>5</sup>Fryer, 2000. op cit. p31.

### **Union Form and Union Meetings: Demonstrating Relationships**

Branch B, a large metropolitan branch had two, joint branch secretaries. I was told that this was because they had not been able to agree to a merger and that this arrangement was seen as a compromise to assist the move towards a unified branch. I had arranged with branch secretary J to attend a meeting to discuss my research, but he suggested that I should also check with branch secretary K who was currently on leave. Despite several attempts I could not contact K until the morning of the planned meeting. K said he knew nothing about my arrangements, but I could see them both after a scheduled stewards' meeting that afternoon. I arrived at the venue in good time and was made to wait two and a half hours whilst the stewards continued their meeting. No one sent out word or apology for the delay.

When I was admitted, the atmosphere was tense and the body language of several stewards was not friendly. One remained looking out of the window with his back to me; another had his feet on a desk and smirked at me. They were a formidable group of gatekeepers.<sup>6</sup> I introduced my research and reminded the meeting that the deputy regional secretary [X] had written a letter of introduction to them about the research.

Secretary J. I've only seen X twice. Once to tell us we should merge and the second to tell us we had to merge. We'll discuss it [the research] with them [stewards] afterwards.

Secretary K. It depends on how much work this is going to cause us. ....

Secretary J. I know why X sent you here.

P. Haunch. He didn't send me. I set out a list of criteria and I selected from a long list, but your branch was chosen because you have joint branch secretaries. You obviously did this for special purposes to cope with certain problems and I thought that this was a case worth looking at.

This last comment seemed to break the ice and shortly afterwards the meeting endorsed my access to the branch.

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<sup>6</sup>Burgess, 1984, p48.



This scenario was in marked contrast to that experienced in those branches discussed above where it had been sufficient to chat with the branch secretary and where there had been no animosity to me or through me against other full-time officers. It demonstrated quite starkly the potential of the member-led principle to frustrate even the most innocuous matters, irrespective of the support that they may have had from elsewhere in the union's hierarchy. The lack of trust between branch stewards, the poor articulation with the union's regional administration and the clear antagonisms in the branch that prompted the formal vetting of my research request, indicated that Union Form, not Union Character regulated relationships within the branch.

Backing for this contention is shown in the 'Branch Convenor duties' issued a few months later as a response to the earlier failure to reach a workable understanding on the division of labour. [See appendix 8.1] Described separately to me as a job description/person specification the document is a remarkable insight into how Union Form may be manifested in 'low trust' situations. Apart from tasks that may be expected to be part of any such job, such as recruitment and membership representation, there is a requirement for the convenor to act as a manager or watchdog over other stewards to see if they perform their duties sufficiently well to merit the payment of an Honoraria. Rather than an agreed equilibrium of co-operation, the relationship defined in the document resembles the traditional employer/employee contract and mimics the tenor of the relationship between the national union and its paid officers. It is also remarkable to find such stringent regulation in a community that functions on the good will and the voluntary work of individuals. It emphasises and confirms Fryer's assertion that where parties seek certainty of outcomes, they resort to Union Form to regulate relativities.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>Appendix 8.1 also demonstrates how Union Form can be disadvantageous to manual workers through the terms set to uphold this principle. For example, *Successful applicants will have an understanding of trade union issues and possess strong organising, representational and communication skills, both written and verbal*, and as has been shown in earlier chapters, these latter points often militate against manual worker traditions and expectations.

Branch C. Annual General Meeting. Another meeting that had been difficult to arrange. The newly elected branch secretary apologised for her previous discourtesy and invited me to help myself from the extensive buffet.<sup>8</sup> As I chatted to the early arrivals a steward remarked.

We haven't had a quorate branch meeting for the last two years.

Those present did not think that the fifty members required for the meeting to be quorate would be reached that night.

On the way to the meeting room the branch secretary said to me,

The branch secretary's job in this branch is mainly admin., though I am on the negotiating team for single status. It's the convenors who have the main responsibility. Have you come to see if it's [the branch] working? It's not. There were 8 branches before we merged, there was concern to stop Z from having all the power. ... We've already changed the timing once. [of the AGM following a complaint by steward Y]

Later, steward Y whispers to me,

This meeting has been deliberately called at this time to suit the city centre staff and stop my members from coming. My cleaners and caretakers can't get here, they're working. My highways members want a shower or a bath before they come here, they're dealing with sewers and all kinds.

The reliance by the branch on formal meetings as a model for assessing the opinion of members had been attacked on a previous occasion by a white-collar, branch steward who warned of the dangers of seeing consultation with members in such formal and restricted terms.

We hold meetings in the middle of town at lunch-time, if we take that as the members' view, we're stupid. We get an unbalanced view. [Helen, senior steward, ex-NALGO]

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<sup>8</sup>My initial access to the branch had been arranged through the previous branch secretary a year earlier and I had not been introduced to the new post holder, who at one time had declined to talk to me on the telephone as she was "too busy".

However, the plea went unheeded, and as seen by the following situation at the AGM, constitutional propriety remained paramount even if that propriety would be unlikely to produce a constitutional forum for membership participation.<sup>9</sup> As only thirty four members were present, the AGM was abandoned and, the branch discussed matters such as single status, but only after a guest speaker from the Socialist Workers Party had made a plea for branch support for his candidature in the forthcoming NEC election. From comments from several members it was apparent that there was a cadre of Socialist Worker Party supporters in the branch. Later a number of these stewards sold copies of the Socialist Worker Party newspaper to branch members. The 'discussion' led by Socialist Worker Party supporters revolved around an attack on the UNISON national agreement on Single Status and then degenerated into a mud slinging bout at local managers. The meeting ended after one and a half hours with a plea from a senior branch officer for members to act as stewards.

Little business directly relevant to local issues had been discussed meaningfully and key branch elections had failed to happen. The recurrent lack of interest of members in the mechanics of the branch administration supports Bennett's contention that members choose when to be involved in union matters and that structural measures, of whatever model, do not guarantee democratic governance. Indeed, although this branch had no less than sixteen branch officer posts that needed to be endorsed at the AGM, and had produced six, written, official reports on various matters, members abstinence from the branch meeting suggests that this formal relationship between the branch and members may militate against members interests and involvement.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>Branches are required by UNISON rules to hold an AGM. Therefore, the branch could not legitimately ignore this, but it does serve to underline the necessity for UNISON to consider adopting alternative methods of consulting members other than through poorly supported, formal branch meetings. See Fairbrother et al. 1996.

<sup>10</sup>The reports ranged from a comprehensive balance sheet of branch finances to comment on the national conference for retired members.

## Union Character and Branch Governance

The data on the health branches and the District Council branch demonstrates how Union Character had manifested itself at branch level meetings and facilitated interaction amongst branch representatives and their members. What the data does not answer is why these branches have adopted Union Character to regulate intra-branch activity. Fryer's assertion that Union Character was usually associated with COHSE and NUPE, and Union Form with NALGO, does not explain this cross-union backing for Union Character which at national level emerged as a weak concept of governance. [See chapter 7]

Figure 8.1 identifies factors from these three branches upon which Union Character appears to be contingent and which has a direct bearing on UNISON practices, structures and policies.

figure 8.1

Factors Associated with Union Character in Branch Governance

branch	health branches	local government district council
size	medium	small
location	small town/rural	small town/rural
dominant section of members	nurses	white-collar
former union	predominantly COHSE and NUPE	mostly NALGO but significant minority of NUPE
time off for union duties for principal representatives	little or none	little or none
union facilities employer contingent	minimal. small amount of clerical support in 1 branch.	minimal. No administrative or clerical support.
evidence of far left right politics	negligible	non evident
relationship with regional and national union	good	good
unity of purpose - a UNISON agenda	yes. Former union not apparent	yes. Former union differences positively addressed
relationship with full-time officers	very good frequent presence	FTO issues did not surface during data gathering

The data indicates that Union Character governance has become established in these instances where:

1. none of the branches are large [ $<1500$  members]
2. none are metropolitan, local government branches
3. facilities and time-off for trade union duties trade are limited
4. a marked absence of factionalism
5. lack of a power struggle
6. relationships within the branch and with the wider union are positive
7. a 'settled' relationship between members and full-time officers
8. white-collar/professional staff occupy key branch officer posts, but blue-collar members are encouraged to play an active part in branch affairs
9. interpersonal relationships rather than former union affinities influence the governance of the branch
10. tolerance of differences
11. self organisation not apparent
12. primary concern is with members' work related problems

Of these, the most significant [negative] correlation is the absence of a large, metropolitan membership. This evidence also belies the sometimes claim that the NALGO system of governance is a universal phenomenon throughout the Local Government Service Group. The analysis suggests that within the NALGO approach to union governance there were differences of opinion, but that the numerical superiority of the metropolitan branches marginalised the non-metropolitan membership. It also enhances the findings on union governance contained in chapter 7, but with a significant addition, the domination of UNISON by former NALGO members is not simply a question of NALGO versus COHSE and NUPE, nor indeed local government versus other service groups, but that of activists from metropolitan, local government branches controlling the union's lay representative structures and determining the priorities of the union. And that sometimes, far left politics augment the potential for unrepresentative governance. Complaints by members about local government dominance in UNISON have been raised in earlier research but there is little evidence that UNISON has responded

positively to the research recommendations.<sup>11</sup> Overall, these findings support the analysis in chapter 5 of ex-NALGO, local government branches controlling union policy.

### **Union Form and Branch Governance**

By contrast, Union Form governance was a hall mark of two of the large, local government branches - one a metropolitan borough council, the other a 'Unitary' authority [effectively the same] - in which there were no former COHSE members. In these branches open conflict and a power struggle were pre-eminent characteristics that typified intra-branch, and sometimes, extra-branch relationships.

Although these branches had Union Form governance it does not seem to have assisted them in governing in ways that have routinely encouraged formal participation by the membership in the branch structures and prompts the question, especially in the case of branch C, of why the branch leadership persisted in this kind of association with their members. It may be that an unforeseen consequence of the rules and procedures that are one of the hallmarks of Union Form, is that it exposes lack of compliance with those very rules and procedures. By contrast, Union Character can alter its parameters to suit changing circumstances and claim to be responsive to members' demands. One senior branch officer questioned the point of holding an AGM,

There has been no AGM, it has failed twice because it was inquorate ...  
between you and me. I'm not sure what they are for. [Harry, branch officer,  
Branch C, ex-NALGO]

The relationship in Branch B between the branch leadership and the members also reflected a tenuous link with authoritarian control, with a branch officer admitting that the branch leadership was pursuing an agenda out of keeping with members' wishes.

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<sup>11</sup>Fairbrother et al. op cit.

Yeah! We probably are out of touch with some of our members. .... Ordinary members don't see a lot of the power struggles. .... relationships aren't as honest as they should be. [Sam. branch officer. ex-NALGO]

It may be that intrinsic failure of members' meetings removes the uncertainty of the democratic voice of the membership as to who should govern and how they should govern, and leaves the power and authority in the hands of the branch leadership by default. And although power may favour one faction or another from time to time, it is preferable to the alternative of the diffusion of power through genuine membership participation and is a mechanism for the self-perpetuation of the leadership,<sup>12</sup> Bennett's contention on the diffident nature of the membership notwithstanding. Where activists do not favour Union Form governance they are faced with the dilemma of either compliance or opposition. Compliance may lead to a withdrawal from activities or even membership, whilst opposition may be marked by antagonism and conflict, as in the case of these two branches. Figure 8.2 identifies conditions associated with Union Form governance.

figure 8.2

Factors Associated with Union Form in Branch Governance

branch	metropolitan 1 - branch B	unitary - branch C
size	large	large
location	large town	city
dominant section of members	substantial numbers of blue-collar and white-collar	
former union	NALGO and NUPE	
time off for trade union duties	equivalent of 4 full-time representatives	equivalent of 3+ full-time representatives
union facilities employer contingent	an extensive former NALGO office and a smaller former NUPE office. Administrative and/or clerical support	a medium sized office, though somewhat crowded. Administrative and/or clerical support
evidence of far left/right politics	none witnessed or reported during this research	several far left activists though none in key posts or released on full-time trade union duties. High profile at branch meetings

<sup>12</sup>See Michels 1962 for further discussion on the 'Iron law of Oligarchy'.

branch	metropolitan 1 - branch B	unitary - branch C
relationship with regional and national union	poor	poor
unity of purpose -a UNISON agenda	no. Split on former union lines	
relationship with full-time officers	poor for former NALGO	turbulent with senior, regional officials

From this we can deduce that:

1. large, urban based branches have a greater propensity for Union Form governance than rurally centred membership
2. the potential for power struggles is enhanced where no one section of membership has a given supremacy over others
3. trade union facilities and concessions from employers on time-off for trade union duties do not always translate themselves into improved services to members or improved relations with the employers, but can contribute to intra-union instability
4. far left politics is not a pre-requisite to Union Form branch governance, but may exacerbate low trust situations and thereby contribute to members perceived need to seek regulation of their union through structural measures
5. where former union allegiances hold fast, parties will resort to Union Form governance to try and resolve intra-union difficulties
6. the division of power and authority will remain at issue not only because individuals may wish to pursue office, but because the divisions are primarily associated with former union alliances and traditions associated with white and blue-collar unionism.

### **Union Form and Relationships**

Everyone's hating each other. In NALGO there were intense differences of opinion but we remained friends at the end, for example, myself and the SWP. ... In this branch it is personalities. In NALGO everyone used to ... now let me think ..... there's a new phenomenon ..... I get the impression that certain people see being elected in UNISON as a cushy number, they get facility time. In



NALGO it was not to boost their egos ..... I'd prefer not to name them. They brought their personal baggage with them. .... [slaps pen on table with great force, clearly very angry] OK I'll name them [G ex-NUPE and H ex-NALGO]. There was harassment from G and others, .... maybe they're aiming at me because of the influence I have with members, ... but then a complete arsehole .... maybe we should put that faction in place .... it's the acceptable versus the unacceptable .... everything is suffering because of that - the internal warfare. .... Those that are in it for their own gratification should bugger-off. [Harry, senior branch officer, metropolitan branch C. ex-NALGO]

These comments from Harry show how he saw the difficulties experienced by the branch leadership as rooted in former union loyalties and not just a case of 'personality clashes' between activists. But as demonstrated earlier, former union loyalties do not necessarily dictate pre-formed concepts of union governance. Harry's observations neglect the underlying causes of friction that may be attributable to the style of governance that had developed in the branch and was continuing to influence the branch structures and internal relationships. Although Harry thinks that the breakdown of inter-personal relationships would be resolved if the participants changed, it is most likely that the problems would resurface, as a major consequence of Union Form governance is that it encourages competition for authority and power. The use of Union Form to regulate internal relations has not enhanced the propensity for blue-collar activism in the governance of the branch and has accentuated differences that are manifested in conflict and distrust. The following comments from an ex-NALGO activist highlight the difficulty that some former NALGO members have in envisaging union governance and participation in union activities other than through formal structures which are seen as the 'correct' or 'better' way to conduct affairs.

There are inner wrangles, pockets of power, complaints by members against members. For example, there was a smear campaign during the (branch officer) elections. There has been a lot of problems about trying to get [Harry] out of office ... people are not prepared to change. ... Because of the culture

that they come from we have a running battle with manuals, we can't get them on to committees - we've tried. Statistically they are underrepresented, it's as though they see meetings as not appropriate to manuals. ... I wish we could all get on as a branch, but it's pistols at dawn for some. [Brendon, Equal opportunities Officer, ex-NALGO]

Brendon's remarks also imply that a disinclination by blue-collar members to 'fall in line' is perceived as a conflict over power and leadership and not as a rejection of a style of governance that was seen as less helpful to manual workers than some alternative approaches to branch governance. The comments from Harry and Brendon remind us that where the principle of Union Form governance is challenged, that the rejection may well be expressed through the breakdown of relationships between the parties, some of whom see union governance in structures and rights, and those who wish to protect the values of trust and mutual respect associated with Union Character.

In this UNISON branch the memberships of the partner union branches had merged under strong protest and the absence of a strategy to overcome either real or perceived difficulties has contributed to the antagonisms in the new branch. Some of these antagonisms were not solely related to the previous relationship between former NALGO and NUPE branches, but resided in a deeper split between approaches to union governance and matters relating to class. The lack of vigour and clarity with which UNISON has pursued Fair Representation<sup>13</sup> has left manual workers feeling isolated and rejected by a system of governance that they see as harmful to their interests because it does not recognise the additional needs of many blue-collar members. Barry explained it thus.

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<sup>13</sup>In August 1997 the UNISON NEC established two committees that did not comply with the principles of Fair Representation and Proportionality. Several NEC members objected but were out-voted by the rest of the Executive. Five members of the NEC then walked out of the meeting in protest. This signalled to the wider union that Fair Representation and Proportionality could be ignored with impunity. It also demonstrated that structural measures in themselves do not guarantee democracy in the union and that alternative measures may also need to be considered.

Harry has a sort of arrogance towards the rest of us. It's not the way he acts, it's the way he thinks. ... Willy, he's been a manual worker, he thinks like a manual worker. ... They have to have manual reps', though I don't think they like the idea. ... I think that we're resented in some quarters. [Barry, senior branch officer, metropolitan branch C, ex-NUPE]

Insistence by manual workers of their inclusion in the governance of this branch through Fair Representation has been interpreted in some quarters as a concern to get manuals in key branch posts, but paradoxically, is seen as a lack of interest by manuals in other aspects of branch governance. This suggests that supporters of Union Form see the solution to manual worker marginalisation as the inclusion of blue-collar representatives in formal, branch structures, when in reality it may be necessary to use alternative avenues of membership participation with which manual workers feel comfortable. Left alone, conflict generated in branches where Union Form has a dominant influence, has the potential to reinforce differences at the expense of ignoring external threats. And as Morgan has identified,

*In organisations characterised by internal strife or an ethos of cut throat competition, ... destructive impulses are often unleashed within, creating a culture that thrives on various kinds of sadism rather than by projecting its sadism elsewhere. ... unresolved persecutory anxieties ... may lead to a culture characterised by all kinds of tension and defensiveness.*<sup>14</sup>

Whilst Union Form governance is moulded around structures, rights and obligations it is distinguished by the antipathy, distrust and fear of its protagonists and which sets it apart most decisively from Union Character governance. Chapter 7 explained how Union Character could remain a preferred method of governance providing that it had a general consensus of support. Union Form may not require such an extensive lobby of support, but it does require advocates to 'play within the rules'. Where Union Form governance is actively rejected by one section of a constituency then Union Form is likely to see its opponents participate selectively in the formal affairs of the branch. Moreover, that participation may be intended to frustrate the

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<sup>14</sup>Morgan. op cit. p220.

aspirations of Union Form rather than see it as a mechanism for genuine integration. The use of the Fair Representation clause by former NUPE members to insist on blue-collar participation demonstrates this point.

### **Union Character and Relationships**

There are former NALGO stewards, there are former NUPE stewards and there are UNISON stewards who haven't been in either. As far as I know it is OK. We have different traditions and ways of looking at things, but we are meshing in. We've got to know each other now, we no longer refer to them as THEM. We are together. .... [Member-Led] I haven't heard the phrase, I suppose it means issues coming up through the members, but they don't. ... It only bothers most people when things go wrong. I don't know how you can have a union run by members, like in [this] Borough Council. In practice you have to put your trust in a few. [Howard. steward. branch E. ex-NALGO].

We still have to work out the internal wrangles. There is a lot on their side [NALGO] I don't know about. ... 60 of us blue-collars went into a 250 strong white-collar branch... The US and THEM is passing over now. .... If you're off sick for a period you get a £25 Marks and Spencer's voucher. .... I'm happy, I've always enjoyed being a steward. ... [Member-Led] It's about members being consulted more. We ask the members and they tell us. It's always been the same format. [Andrew. steward. branch E. ex-NUPE]

Both these comments from stewards in branch E demonstrate the benefit of governance determined through Union Character. In contrast to Union Form governed branches, this Union Character branch was hallmarked by positive relationships, a tolerance of differences and a respect for former union traditions. Furthermore, this encouraged members to recognise former union traditions as a platform on which to build a framework of inter-action and preparedness to consider change. In two Union Form branches the tendency was to see those traditions as an opportunity to resist change and reject the aspirations of 'opponents' no matter how legitimate those aspirations. In branches where Union Character had

a prevailing influence, a lack of concern with personal power and authority has contributed to a concentration by branches on matters of priority to members rather than the values espoused by some activists.

Where Union Character governance has been adopted there has also been a positive rejection of Union Form expressions which are viewed as inimical to relationships with members and thought to encourage factionalism. When hostility was expressed it was usually directed at sources outside of the union where those sources were seen to compete with UNISON's influence in the workplace. Also, there have been beneficial knock-on effects that are not strictly related to branch governance but which are nevertheless linked to the principle of effective unionism vis a vis the maintenance of good inter-personal relationships, a practice that has been extended to the industrial relations axis with the employer.<sup>15</sup> The branch officers of Health Branch D explained,

I've just recruited an ex-RCN District Nurse, I'll use her to break the RCN. A lot of RCN and RCM members have dual membership. UNISON outweighs the RCN in numbers and in stewards and representation at meetings. For example, on night shift rotation we won over RCN members. I've told them, I'm not doing anything without a membership form in my hand. .... We recruit very well from officers. [managers] It is confidential this isn't it? [speaks quietly] Our Chief Executive is a member, and senior managers are joining. .... The NEC don't listen about branch needs. I've seen it at the regional council, hidden agendas, your eyes are opened. There are people with ulterior motives, I'm not going to say (who). [Melanie. Branch Secretary, ex-NUPE]

This branch is enough, I give twenty five hours a week to the union. The NEC go through everything. I'm sure *some* really, really care. Others do it for power. For some, it's just the way up the ladder, the ladder into --- perhaps it's just the trip. I don't feel the NEC earned it by merit. they get it by networking. I don't

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<sup>15</sup>The Director of Human Resources [a UNISON member] of the NHS Trust for this branch said that the option of derecognition had been considered and rejected because the Trust wished to maintain its relationship with UNISON because industrial relations, "are generally good and effective. There is a need to be working in collaboration. .... I feel we can talk and work with each other."

approve. I feel a lot of power goes with networking. [Hillary, Chairwoman, ex-COHSE]

The concern of this branch with the recruitment of members and the notable success of attracting staff across the wide range of grades and income strata confirms the early claim by UNISON that it could represent all grades of staff. Providing that is, Union Character is allowed to have a significant influence on the style of branch governance, and by implication, on governance throughout the union. The disdainful perception of activism beyond branch level and the corruptive potential of the power and authority of elected lay office, pinpoints a fundamental feature of Union Character governance that decisively sets it apart from Union Form governance. This forthright rejection of the member-led tenet as a prerequisite for effective, democratic unionism, allied to the [perceived] system of 'undemocratic' networking and [perceived] arrogance of the national, lay leadership, undermines the philosophy that union democracy must be centred on the formal structures of the union that place one group subject to the authority of another. Who runs the union is far less important than how the union is run. It is hardly co-incidence that members and stewards in branches separated by service group, catchment constituency, former union, length of service, experience, employment and sometimes many miles, have had either little or no knowledge of the member-led principle, or see it as an impediment to the effective representation of members interests. The fact that these stewards represent non-metropolitan branches strongly implies that the issue of UNISON being a member-led union [whatever that means] is an issue that mainly concerns local government, metropolitan branches and re-emphasises the disproportionate influence of this type of branch within the union.

### **UNISON Governance: Straddling Form and Character**

Branch A was a large metropolitan, local government branch with more than 4000 members which had merged on day 1. As a deliberate act the branch had chosen to have a low-paid woman as the branch secretary in recognition of the majority role of women members in the union and the importance attached by the new union to

eliminating low pay. This post is full-time and another filled by a male [white-collar] is for two days a week, but in the early days of the new branch the employer withdrew the time-off arrangements. The branch secretary, a reluctant conscript described the situation.

You do the job because you care about people. The NUPE members wanted me to be branch secretary. I said that if they [other stewards/branch officers] show me what to do .... I knew nothing of the purple book and little of the green book<sup>16</sup> .... I couldn't have done it without the ex-NALGO lot .... They've been terrific. We don't have this in-fighting. ... It really took off because of the council withdrawing facility time. .... We're adopting mostly the NALGO methods of working it's an advantage .... the branch admin' staff are very good. I have lots of problems that I pass on to the regional officer who is around when we need him. .... Before UNISON, the NALGO regional officer did all the appeals, now we do far more than we ever did. It's a good thing. [UNISON Branch Secretary, ex-NUPE]

Some months later I attended a branch committee meeting. The atmosphere was very friendly with some informal discussion on the inquorate nature of the previous meeting. The meeting was conducted formally by the chairman, but in a relaxed way. The branch secretary gave a formal, verbal report and other reports of branch sub-committees were included with the written minutes of the previous meeting. They were very formal and efficient and referenced in a similar style to Council minutes. Despite this, any discussion about their contents was quite informal. Nominations were requested for a vacancy on a branch sub-committee. The chairman whispered to the branch secretary,

"What about proportionality?"

No nominations voiced. Chairman asked the meeting,

"Volunteers, probably female? "

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<sup>16</sup>Conditions of service handbook for white-collar and blue-collar local government employees.

A little later the meeting discussed the Government's 'New Deal'.<sup>17</sup> A steward [later confirmed as an SWP member asked what was the union's policy towards New Deal.

Branch secretary. "UNISON policy is to support New Deal."

Steward. "No, no, I mean Branch policy."

Branch Secretary. "If it was an issue there would be a motion on it at national conference, and there isn't."

This ends the debate on the matter

At the AGM the following year 20 members were present and the formal meeting was abandoned as 150 members were needed for the meeting to be quorate. A buffet had been prepared for only 20 people, therefore the branch had obviously not expected the meeting to take place, but was required by rule to convene the meeting.<sup>18</sup> The chairman later advised me,

[W council branch] regularly put a controversial issue on the agenda to get them in. We had redundancies last year and had over a 1000 members. They don't realise what the implications of single status are. We had a motion to reject single status from the SWP, [Socialist Workers Party] but I couldn't accept it on the agenda as it was accepted nationally two years ago by the members. [Alan, branch chairman, ex-NALGO]

The meeting then held a general discussion and made a presentation to a retired activist in recognition of his long service to the union. I was advised by one of the stewards I had previously interviewed that there were six SWP members in the branch and that three of them were present. These SWP members tried unsuccessfully to raise a motion rejecting the single status agreement. The chair was quietly spoken but emphatic.

Chairman. "The advice from Region is that non-negotiation is not an option."

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<sup>17</sup>A Government measure aimed at assisting the unemployed to find a job.

<sup>18</sup>UNISON 1998, rule 3, p29



A member. "Most of the agenda is about appointing officers, what happens to them because we're inquorate?"

Chairman. "They'll remain in office. We refer it to the Branch Executive ..... and hopefully in about ten years time we'll be quorate."

### **An Exception or a Model for Success**

Why should this branch be so different from the other large, local government branches? Figure 8.3 highlights key differences between this branch and those branches that support Union Form governance and which appear to make a substantial contribution to the establishment of a genuinely merged branch built around UNISON principles.

figure 8.3

Factors Associated with a combination of Union Form  
and Union Character in Branch Governance

branch features	metropolitan 2 - branch A
size	large <4000
location	large town
dominant section of members	white-collar but substantial blue-collar
former union	NALGO and NUPE
time off for union duties for principal representatives	secondment previously stopped by employer, now 1.4 full-time equivalent
union facilities employer contingent	part of a main sub-office easily accessible for members, plentiful admin. and clerical support with a 'hands on' role in members problems
evidence of far left/right politics	significant left faction but not holding senior office, readily 'managed' by senior branch officers.
relationship with regional and national union	good. FTO's Tel number, including home number on open display in branch office
unity of purpose - a UNISON agenda	yes, strong evidence of keeping to national union line
inter-personal relationships	good, a conscious attempt to recognise and tolerate differences
honoraria/gratuities	yes, including special payments made to assist personnel with specific problems where that is seen to contribute to the overall service to the members

branch features	metropolitan 2 - branch A
blue-collar branch secretary	a well supported agreement to encourage low-paid members to participate in union activities. a low pay supplement made to reduce gap with white-collar colleagues
industrial relations	cordial working arrangements with employer. UNISON seen by employer as <u>the</u> trade union, but not for senior ranks of white-collar staff

The analysis suggests a strong, former NALGO, local government presence in a large branch does not necessarily mean that an unmitigated system of governance based on Union Form will prevail at the expense of a governance that values the trust, personal relationships and informality of Union Character. Equally, where aspects of Union Form are seen as an asset to providing a service to members they have been adopted and used to underwrite the quality of union support to those members. Such was the case with the new, merged branch using the comprehensive administrative facilities based around the former NALGO branch arrangements which enabled the branch secretary to concentrate on negotiations and representation whilst 'back-up' services were provided by the branch clerical and administrative staff. Further, the use of a formal, written medium to arrange branch business need not in itself be a factor that contributes to the marginalisation of members generally, and blue-collar members specifically. All large organisations need some order of their affairs, but what matters just as much is the willingness to recognise that different sections of membership may need alternative avenues to represent their interests as this steward recognised,

There has been benefits in sharing problems and listening to each other .... It's not a problem being in the same union [as manuals]. To a degree they don't understand our problems and the reverse is true. We're always mending and building bridges. ... Low pay! Last week I wouldn't have known what it was. At the club where I do voluntary work they wanted to pay the groundsman £3.62 an hour. I had to ask what was the minimum wage. .... the manual lad who comes to work and can't read is sitting around the table with someone who has a Ph.D in management. He hasn't a bloody chance unless he is represented by a

steward. That's what stewards are for. [Stafford. ex-NALGO, steward and senior manager. branch A]

The recognition of differences and the need to address the problems and aspirations of all groups of members ranks this branch with the three branches that have adopted Union Character governance on four important fronts:

- ♦ a belief in the principle of UNISON and its ability to represent all groups of members.
- ♦ an absence of a power struggle based on former union lines.
- ♦ a constructive relationship with the union's full-time officers and wider union.
- ♦ little or contained far left influence

Therefore we may conclude that for UNISON to succeed as a truly new union these key factors are a pre-requisite for a branch to develop as an integrated unit able to articulate members' concerns as its primary objective. Additionally, the restricted paid release for trade union duties may indicate, to put it crudely, that stewards have less time to concentrate on internal, union matters and are therefore more inclined to 'pull together' in the face of a common enemy.<sup>19</sup>

## Conclusions

Union Character and Union Form have given rise to quite different styles of union governance at branch level. Union Character is associated with an informal approach to the conduct of meetings and a preparedness to elevate members concerns above the formal requirement of 'democratic' procedures. Participation by members and stewards in the union's democratic structures is valued less than the quality of the service that the union gives to members. Implicit in this approach to branch governance is the view that members have only a selective interest in the internal affairs of their union. This finding upholds earlier research on member participation and the willingness of the membership to let stewards 'get on with it'

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<sup>19</sup>Handy. op cit. p168. suggests that the 'common enemy' scenario is only likely to apply except where participants have agreed on a common objectives and demonstrated mutual trust, as in this branch and seen in the early merger and support for UNISON principles.

so long as the union responds to their needs when required. The reliance on trust and high quality, inter-personal relationships has allowed the 'old' branches to accept and tolerate each others differences and traditions and to meld those separate qualities inside a 'new' UNISON branch. It is significant that Union Character governance has been successfully established in a non-metropolitan, local government branch.

Two metropolitan branches were characterised by inter-personal animosity, suspicion about, and dislike of, fellow stewards from the 'other' partner union, and a near constant concern with obtaining power and authority. Or perhaps to be more accurate, limiting the power and authority of others. Although more evidence is needed, on the face of it, these difficulties look to be based on former union affinities, but differences and expectations surrounding class appear to be at the heart of the friction between white-collar and blue-collar members in branches where Union Form governance prevails. In this regard the analysis of how and why the partner unions developed as they did, as set out in chapter 3, holds the answer as to why UNISON and in particular these branches, have chosen to defend former union practices. Inevitably, the resistance by NUPE to NALGO practices, and vice versa has been seen as an attack on the legitimacy of the views held by the other party. Put simply, 'those that are not with us, are against us'. But the wide-ranging differences of the memberships of the three partner unions always indicated that discord would result with destructive potential unless measures were adopted to deal with the conflict. This chapter has shown that the limited and poorly policed measure of Fair Representation has done little to abate conflict, and may even have increased it in some instances. This is because Fair Representation has not been seen as an integral part of democratic governance and perhaps impedes the wider aspirations of those that seek to control the union through the maintenance of Union Form practices. And whilst those practices may not be fully supported by a substantial section of the membership, such is the pre-eminence of the local government and metropolitan lobbies that the union is unduly influenced in its approach to reconciling the different needs of a diverse membership. It is also the case here that former NUPE members, unlike their representatives in the merger

negotiations have resorted to Union Form to try and protect the values ascribed to Union Character. This endorses Fryer's view that on occasions during the merger negotiations this would have been a better tactic for NUPE [and COHSE] than relying on the justice and quality of the case for Union Character. However, the manual stewards in these particular branches were resilient individuals able to stand their corner and may not be typical of manual members generally which would account for the more usual, marked absence of blue-collar stewards in local government branches.

Union Form and Union Character are not necessarily mutually exclusive. The Health Care and District Council branches acknowledged a need for order and formality in some matters, such as a [nominal] semblance of protocol in meetings, but saw it as guidance, not mandatory. This kind of approach to branch organisation had evolved as a response to the practicalities of managing affairs on behalf of a membership infrequently interested in the structures of the union. By contrast, branch A had consciously adopted a mixture of both Form and Character as a style of governance. This duality of approach to running the branch had led to a quite formal format for union meetings, but the relationship of the branch leadership with the members and each other relied on a considerable, conscious effort to recognise differences and different demands and deal with them accordingly. And although this approach to determining the ethos and ways of working of the branch had not eliminated all such difficulties, [and could not hope to do so] the potential for friction had been reduced. Without this kind of understanding the two Union Form branches had sunk into a war of attrition with factions seeing the curtailment, or better still, the elimination of their opponents as the preferred solution to seeming incompatibility.

Far left political activism was either absent or minimal in the Union Character branches and has been shown not to be a prerequisite for Union Form governance. However, initial evidence indicates that 'leftist' groups have a greater opportunity to flourish where Union Form governance prevails. This may be because the formal practices of Union Form provide such groups with sufficient occasion to present

their arguments to a wider [and potentially more receptive] audience who may see the disciplined unity of these groups as a creditable alternative to a disunited branch leadership. Equally, the modus operandi of far left groups is largely sympathetic with Union Form in that the capturing of power through the 'democratic' process legitimates their presence and activity. Union Character on the other hand may often be seen to be concerned with what is 'felt fair', rather than what is seen as the correct result. Where a branch leadership is disunited this may well be the catalyst for, rather than the cause of 'extremism'. But where the branch leadership is determined to rally round the national UNISON flag, far left influence will be muted and will find it difficult to destabilise the equilibrium of branch democracy.

The principle of a member-led union has little resonance outside of Union Form, metropolitan branches. Union Form has been overtly rejected by those activists who perceive it as a threat to democracy within UNISON through its ability to corrupt the democratic process through a network of individuals brokering for power and authority at the expense of blue-collar exclusion in the running of the union. As well as being a positive adaptation to members needs [rather than stewards aspirations], Union Character is also a rejection of Union Form because members do not see that it has role to play in branch governance where the primary concern is the regulation of the relationship with the employer, and not the regulation of the union. Opponents of Union Character may argue that this is an unrealistic and 'rose tinted' view of the world where openly declared politics and accountability are the signs of a modern, healthy democracy.

## Appendix 8.1

### **Branch Convenor - Duties**

- \* UNISON is looking for a dynamic person with at least two years relevant experience in a similar organisation.
- \* Successful applicants will have an understanding of trade union issues and possess strong organising, representational and communication skills, both written and verbal.
- \* To be the lead Officer within the Branch, dealing with Service Conditions matters, (collective and individual).
- \* To receive members grievances and take such action thereon as may be required.
- \* To support Stewards in the undertaking of their Service Conditions role.
- \* To represent Branch members before MBC (as the employing authority)
- \* To be lead Officer for the Branch at Staff/Management meetings (the core representation to include the Branch Secretary).
- \* To attend weekly meetings of core Branch Officers, in order to consult on and to review their work and resolve problems. Handling all correspondence of a Service Conditions nature.
- \* To attend monthly Branch Committee meetings.
- \* To ensure that Shop Stewards Committees (where formed) are carrying out their defined duties and to liaise with all Stewards accordingly.
- \* Servicing the defined Programme Area/Departments as designated and reporting back to the Branch Committee.
- \* To recruit members and maintain membership levels.
- \* To attend relevant training courses.
- \* The ability to work as an effective member of a team.
- \* Appreciation of the need for confidentiality.
- \* The successful candidate must be able to travel in accordance with the job.
- \* To ensure that Branch Policy is carried out.
- \* To be aware of the elected Stewards performance in ascertaining whether their Honoraria should be met.

## **Chapter 9**

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

#### **Blue With Cold or White with Anger: Manual Workers in Retreat**

##### **Introduction**

Several years ago when this research commenced I knew the answer to this thesis before I knew what was the question; it was easy, NALGO was to blame for everything and it had done down NUPE and all it stood for. Now, I am confronted by scenarios and possibilities that I could not have envisaged at that early, naive level of enthusiasm for [any] confirmation of my prejudices. I have come to understand that UNISON is the result of a complex series of interactions, some of which were 'pre-ordained', and others that owe their position in the new union to the arrangements decided upon by the partner unions. This thesis has tried to identify and understand all those inter-connected aspects of the 'old' unions and putting together the jigsaw of outcomes and influences that together make UNISON.

##### **Expansion, Decline and Inevitability**

The instability and fragility of the membership of British trade unions was highlighted following the election of the 1979 Thatcher government that was committed to marginalising trade union influence. Workforce demographic changes accelerated by socio-economic policies promoted a general increase in white-collar, trade union density and a concomitant decline in blue-collar union membership. Partly as a result of those changes, union membership has become more feminised and concentrated in the public services sector. At the same time there was an overall fall in trade union membership, though some unions successfully resisted decline and continued to play a very influential, independent role on behalf of their members, NALGO was one such union. Such stability however was not typical. Many trade unions were forced to contemplate mergers to avert financial losses and a decline in industrial and political power. This resulted in a continuing shift in the size, shape and composition of many trade unions that has increased their size and diversity.



Amongst the three partner unions, NUPE was most adversely affected by the socio-economic and political changes which prompted the union to re-double its efforts to effect a merger amongst public service trade unions, initially with COHSE and NALGO, but with a longer term aspiration of industrial unionism always in mind.

### **Historical Differences, Contemporary Divergence and the Potential for Conflict**

Each partner union had developed a style of governance and a system of internal relationships that reflected their different ancestries and the types of members that they organised. Although external observers had criticisms about the conduct of their affairs and the relationships between their respective members and paid officers they had nevertheless become accepted within each union. This was particularly true in NUPE [and to a lesser extent COHSE] where full-time officers dominated the running of the union in an unbalanced but 'settled' relationship.

The combination of the differences of the memberships and their respective priorities predisposed the new union to conflict. The concern in NALGO with constitutional matters, such as the fiercely protected independence of branches and the subordination of full-time officers' roles and authority through the member-led principle, was diametrically opposed to the somewhat more relaxed relationships that usually prevailed in COHSE and NUPE. In these two unions the articulation between members and officers was not generally at issue, with members more concerned with matters directly related to their employment, and policies that impinged upon the public services that they delivered. Such incompatibilities would remain in the new union and would need to be dealt with through constitutional processes and by encouraging and convincing sufficient people - both members and staff - of the importance to recognise and respect the diversity of needs of UNISON's broad spectrum of membership. That said, there is little evidence to suggest that the partner unions gave much consideration as to how they expected these differences to be reconciled. In the formal literature there is a considerable body devoted to 'change management' but there is a silence on 'change

union'. This is perhaps another reason as to why it has not been most appropriate to use organisational culture as the key analytical tool in the thesis.

### **The Price of Merger: Acceptance of NALGO's Agenda**

NALGO's negotiating stance and determination to see its agenda accepted as the basis upon which the new union would be built set the parameters within which the new union would be ordered. COHSE played an important role in the merger, but once it had secured the [relative] autonomy for members in Health Care the struggle for control of UNISON was between NALGO and NUPE. However, the NUPE approach to the merger looks to have been flawed by the union's continuing membership decline and a misreading of the vitality of the 'member-led' concept in NALGO. Additionally, the ability of the NALGO negotiators and other key officials to conclude 'deals' across the negotiating table was circumscribed by the union's members who closely monitored the merger negotiations and directed NALGO's [mostly] uncompromising bargaining stance. As a result NALGO was able to secure the union's key objectives - *the member-led lay control principle, branch finance, branch autonomy and the right to campaign, self -organisation, and Political Fund Labour Party affiliation* - at the heart of UNISON. This allowed NALGO to ultimately declare that the 'new union' was *NALGO writ large*.

### **Why NUPE was Prepared to Make Major Concessions in the Merger Negotiations**

It may well be, that the officer/member relationship that prevailed in NUPE simply lulled the national officials of the union into believing that they could by sheer force of will and personality re-create the 'family' atmosphere by demonstrating their personal commitment to trust and partnership in the new union. The data indicates that the NUPE negotiators did not know how to respond to a [NALGO] activist-led assault that was intended to determine the nature of the governance in UNISON, a governance which viewed officers as quite unequal partners in a business owned by the activists. This made for a formidable, if not insuperable obstacle to creating a truly 'new union' with an ethos and intent that neither excluded, nor over included, any particular group of members.

However, without the vigour and tenacity of NUPE the merger would not have happened. NUPE was the driving force behind the merger and it is of paramount importance to recognise the pressures behind the union's resolve to create UNISON, but also to recognise that whilst unions have been able to survive without a strategic vision,<sup>1</sup> in the long run, consolidation and expansion require determined, well-thought out policies that are able to resist employer initiatives that are designed to weaken organised labour. Those pressures included:

- ♦ The rapidly dwindling membership, and with it, a profound loss of political influence on the national stage as well as the loss of authority in collective bargaining.
- ♦ The financial pressures felt by NUPE applied much less to COHSE, and probably not at all to NALGO.<sup>2</sup>
- ♦ NUPE's approach to the merger negotiations, though deeply rooted in a desire to see industrial unionism in the public services, was also driven by the urgent necessity to avert an economic and membership, downward spiral. Furthermore, there had never been a 'better' opportunity to achieve merger and the likelihood of resurrecting the merger, should this attempt have failed, would have been exceptionally onerous.
- ♦ The weakened membership base of the union dictated a foreshortened timescale in which the merger needed to be achieved to avoid an even more damaging and weaker bargaining position later. Clearly conscious of the union's precarious position and declining strength, NUPE was willing to concede considerable ground to both COHSE and NALGO if the end result was the new union. The formation of UNISON would be the start of a re-ordering of the British Trade Union Movement along the lines of a single union for a single industry/service - industrial unionism. This explains why NUPE's bottom line was the 'new union'. During the course of the interviews conducted with personnel at national level in UNISON the overwhelming majority of contributors have said that the creation of UNISON was the right thing to do for both present and future members. In that sense, NUPE's bargaining position which at first may

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<sup>1</sup>Carter. 1997. p14.

<sup>2</sup>Fryer. 1998. op cit. p1.

have seemed overly weak, looks to have been justified, providing the new union 'delivers the goods' to its members.

### **The Need for Joint Action to Avert Conflict**

Some of the difficulty facing UNISON has been compounded by over-optimism and a mis-reading of the evidence by UNISON's leadership. Simply because members from the three partner unions are now organised under the UNISON banner does not mean that old divisions and inequalities have disappeared. Resolving the differences between members and their former unions and the creation of a 'level playing field' demands that key officials and senior lay activists demonstrate a preparedness to examine the needs of the members as opposed to the aspirations of other lobbies. In part, the adoption of *Proportionality* and *Fair Representation* was meant to ameliorate the reduced opportunities of equality of participation that women and [ex-NUPE] manual workers in particular would face in a substantially white-collar, new union.

Even so, these measures have been insufficient to counterbalance the dominance of the union's agenda by white-collar activists that has led to the marginalisation of blue-collar issues and the withdrawal of manual members particularly, and members generally, from the governance of UNISON. This has undermined the said importance of lay member democracy and authority upon which the new union was predicated. This suggests that the priorities established by activists are out of step with members concerns, and if allowed to continue unadjusted, may add to the disenchantment that members have expressed about their union.<sup>3</sup>

The wide variation in the leading issues of concern discussed in chapter 4 has not gone away, it is merely masked under the UNISON colours and as chapter 5 demonstrated, has contributed to the marginalisation of the interests of COHSE and NUPE members. This conflict needs to be recognised and dealt with positively, but as chapter 6 highlighted, this is the most difficult option for dealing with

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<sup>3</sup>Kerr and Waddington 2001. op cit.

disharmony and requires a long term commitment to changing the way the union is run.

If action is not taken to strengthen and broaden the mechanisms to deal with conflict the union will not be able to reverse the flow of manual employees out of membership. It may already be too late for full-time, male manual workers who now are said to comprise less than 1% of UNISON's membership. Historically, this group provided NUPE with key branch activists who now look to have deserted the union, and although UNISON continues to undertake regular membership surveys, there needs to be specific research to determine the precise nature and extent of the problem facing manual workers particularly.

The new union made specific arrangements - self-organisation - for the inclusion of groups recognised as disadvantaged, but there has not been any similar recognition either in the merger negotiations or since in UNISON, of the needs of manual workers. And as Chapter 4 shows, manual workers often carry a traditional and sometimes overlooked legacy of poor skills, education, articulacy and confidence that set them at immediate disadvantage in UNISON. Full-time officers in COHSE and NUPE had effectively acted as a 'Proxy' on behalf of such members but have been prevented from so doing in UNISON. A combination of the union's constitution and the way in which large sections of the lay democracy have sought to minimise paid officer input has reduced the contact between blue-collar members and their former advocates.

### **The Legacy of Union Form v Union Character Governance at National Level.**

The financial and membership stability of NALGO set against the less solid position of COHSE and the critical downturn in NUPE's viability, does not wholly explain why the NALGO preference for formality and constitutional propriety became the dominant style of governance in UNISON. The adoption of Union Form and Union Character as a model for analysing sections of the empirical data, as opposed to organisational culture [and other possibilities] has shown that during periods of uncertainty in the UNISON merger when relationships were

under-developed, that Union Form governance provided order and consistency. As a regulator of power relativities it presented options to the partner unions that could be identified and quantified. In other words, everyone knew where they stood, even if they didn't like where they were standing. By contrast, the perceived vacillation of Union Character governance was unable to offer its opponents sufficient reassurance that it was not a mechanism to maintain and extend the influence and power of unelected, full-time officers. Equally, supporters of Union Character governance do not appear to have fully recognised why their unions had developed along Union Character lines and consequently were unable to argue convincingly about the need to have systems of inclusion and representation that protected blue-collar and less articulate groups of members unfamiliar with the 'professional' but potentially divisive governance of Union Form.

The 'settled' relationships in COHSE and NUPE did not lend themselves to widespread contest or perennial campaigns to re-order the constitutions and priorities of those unions which left their members inexperienced in dealing with the 'formality' of Union Form governance and so contributed to their marginalisation. This has enabled an adept and articulate cadre of experienced constitutionalists to effectively control the union. If Michels Law of Oligarchy<sup>4</sup> is accurate, the prospect for UNISON altering the current status quo looks daunting because power cannot be moved except by power, and in UNISON power is primarily exercised through Union Form practices. The opportunity to infuse Union Character governance standards was dealt an unremitting blow when the rule making the new union 'member-centred' was changed to 'member-led' because although it is difficult to define 'member-led', it is even more difficult to deny that a union should not be controlled by its members.

### **Union Form and Union Character: Limiting the Metropolitan Influence in Branch Governance**

Case study data revealed that a preference for Union Form governance was not universally associated with local government branches, but was a feature mostly

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<sup>4</sup>Michels. op cit.

associated with large, metropolitan branches that were characterised by internal strife linked to former union loyalties. Significantly, a small, rural, local government branch, with a majority of ex-NALGO, members actively shied away from Union Form governance and was developing practices that both blue-collar and white-collar members supported. Union Character governance by contrast, was enthusiastically and overtly championed by branches in the Health Care Service Group. These branches had used non-conformity with UNISON's procedures and rules to encourage a diversity of interest amongst members and a pro-active tolerance of informal democracy and a disregard for personal power.

Although Union Form and Union Character are largely incompatible concepts, they can with adaptation, be used effectively to organise members and service their needs, providing that there is sufficient 'goodwill' and personal commitment to the inclusion of all members and the reconciliation of differences through agreed and acceptable means. In the local government branch where this occurred Union Form had provided structure and order but within a cordial framework of mutual respect for former union traditions and member differences. This, argues Albrow, is recognition that whilst democratic order is equally dependent on resolving organisational dilemmas these should not be seen simply as technical issues, but should take account of the wider needs of the affected community.<sup>5</sup>

Overall, the evidence from the branch case studies suggests that the task for UNISON is not how to convince and persuade Union Character branches to participate more in the general activities and governance of the union, but of how to stop Union Form branches from viewing their approach to union governance as the norm. This is a very important point for the union to address, because whilst the large, metropolitan, local government branches are a significant element of UNISON's membership, they do not reflect the preferences of the membership as a whole. In particular, the Health Care membership have rejected Union Form as unnecessarily invasive in a branches right to respond to members in a more emotive but for them, effective fashion. Moreover, the informality in Union Character

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<sup>5</sup>Albrow, op cit. p2

branches generally, has attenuated factionalism and its attendant pre-occupation with gaining power and authority, and helped to lower barriers to integration between former partner unions and between disciplines.

Conversely, at national level where Union Form governance is 'De Rigueur', blue-collar members may have obtained office, but most have remained isolated from the centre of power, even though some of them have allegedly accepted a dubious arrangement of power sharing. There is no obvious or immediate reason as to why there should be this stark polarisation of governance at the national level and that in many [non-metropolitan] branches, except that the authority and trappings of high office in the country's largest trade union may have a seductive effect on participants.<sup>6</sup>

### **The Positive Effects of the New Union**

So far, this chapter has recounted key issues that have contributed to the differences between the three partner unions, the outcome of the merger negotiations and the potential for conflict in the new union. However, it would be remiss to close this thesis without highlighting some of the key, positive achievements of the merger:

- ♦ UNISON - the name has been widely accepted by members and the public and has helped to eliminate some of the less appealing images often associated with the 'old' unions. For instance, UNISON has begun to make significant headway in the recruitment of student nurses, something which evaded both COHSE and NUPE. Indeed, Bickerstaffe acknowledged that NUPE was unlikely ever to have achieved this.
- ♦ UNISON's profile as **the** union for the public services has appeal to potential members who see it as the only realistic option in most areas where the union organises. So too with employers, many of whom have welcomed the reduction in the number of trade unions with whom they negotiate and the considerable moves towards 'single table bargaining'<sup>7</sup> that would not have been possible prior

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<sup>6</sup>Carter. 1991. p41.

<sup>7</sup>Historically, public service pay and conditions of service for white-collar and blue-collar employees had been negotiated separately, but in 1997 agreement was reached by employers and trade unions in local government to harmonise conditions of service. Similar moves are afoot in the NHS.



to UNISON. This has contributed to making UNISON as **the** union to be listened to.

- ♦ The union's relationship with the Labour Party [and the Government] are generally very good. A UNISON, senior, national officer is currently Chairwoman of the Labour Party and another national official holds a very senior and influential position in the Party. Senior government ministers regularly attend UNISON's national delegate conference and the 'hotline' between UNISON Head Office and Number 10 is well respected and beneficial to both camps. At the 2000 Labour Party Conference, Rodney Bickerstaffe made an impassioned, successful speech on state retirement pensions that was strongly opposed by the Party Leadership, the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Treasury, and although the Party leadership [and Government] lost the debate, senior ministers and the Prime Minister attended a UNISON reception that same evening to wish Bickerstaffe a happy retirement. This indicates that UNISON has a powerful and respected lobby in Westminster.
- ♦ The Statutory National Minimum Wage has clearly been the most significant achievement of UNISON and its long term benefit to millions of low-paid employees cannot be overstated.
- ♦ UNISON's education programme is difficult to better with many of the union's courses now validated by respected universities. However, the most significant success for the union has not been at the higher education level but with the provision of more basic skills to many thousands of members. In April 2001, a government programme aimed at non-professional staff was launched in the NHS and is headed by a UNISON officer seconded to the NHS to co-ordinate the scheme nationally. In addition, trade union members will also be seconded to work with the scheme at regional level. Such initiatives have placed UNISON at the very core of national government policies.
- ♦ The union has also been successful in attracting smaller organisations to 'merge' with it. One such arrangement with the British Association of Occupational Therapists has brought into UNISON a group of professional staff, the like of which UNISON needs to recruit on a large scale, if it truly is to be an 'industrial union'. There have been discussions with the RCN about future co-operation and

potential merger, and although this may be a long way off, it is inconceivable that those discussions would have taken place prior to UNISON. Therefore a hidden benefit of UNISON may well be, not what the union is, but what it is not.

### **Recommendations**

With a membership of 1.3 million it would be naive to imagine that everything will please everyone all the time, but comments from colleagues such as, "no one likes UNISON," suggests that former union traditions are still very much to the fore in people's thinking. Notwithstanding the positive benefits discussed above, there is little evidence that there has been an organisational shift to a UNISON way of doing things. To stimulate a desire to create an inclusive and effective union capable of inspiring members and staff alike to lead the British trade union movement by example, UNISON should consider the following:

### **Non-structural Measures**

1. There needs to be a national debate within the union about what the union stands for. The Aims and Values set out in the rule book have little resonance with most members who as survey data consistently reveal, are primarily concerned with help for problems at work. Until the union's ethos is directed to this end there will continue to be a schism of priorities between members and their union. That debate must start initially with senior officers who must have the courage and determination to ensure that the national lay leadership are aware of the implications for the union if this dichotomy is not interrupted by a willingness to recognise that UNISON is for many members, not what it said it would be - better than a combination of the former, partner unions.
2. Central to that debate is how to address the increasingly fragile hold that manual workers have on participation in the union's formal democracy. I have refrained from suggesting that there should be a 'committee' for manuals, not least because under the present arrangements members generally do not see this as an easy method of influencing policies. Additionally, several interviewees made the point that the term 'manuals' was not liked by blue-collar members who felt it stigmatised them even further when amongst white-collar colleagues. The

union's commitment to and use of regular survey work is helpful but does not reach the specific problems of this group of workers. The data from the Focus Groups that were held during the early days of UNISON were revealing, if unpleasant reading, and one is tempted to ask if that is why such an effective feedback mechanism has been discontinued. Although this research has not been able to study that aspect in depth, there is little reason to believe that the sentiments raised in those arenas have been acted upon. It is recommended that these be resurrected and that they should be actively and openly discussed with staff and the lay leadership, but that this should not be seen as a 'committee thing' but as a national campaign to evaluate blue-collar members' requirements.

3. The thorny issue of whether the union should be 'member-led' or member-centred' is now a sterile debate - the horse has bolted. Interviewees at branch level usually saw little difference in the terms and it is an issue that owes more to the connotations of what 'member-led' meant in NALGO than what either term should mean in UNISON. It is not the structures that matter so much as the intentions that they were built upon. As Albrow remarks, ... *'knowing the same things', sharing cognitive maps, assists collective action. But this must be secondary to trust as it is built through the experience of co-operation, art as developed through close acquaintance with the concrete situation, and skill as evinced in practice. And while we can have a theory relating to trust, art and skill, they are not learnt through it.*<sup>8</sup> The union needs practical advice and assistance to establish trust. Until that is achieved UNISON will remain locked in polemic over the rights and responsibilities of various lobbies whilst the obligations of the union to the members remains of secondary importance. What really matters to UNISON is not so much who leads the union, but who follows it.
4. The role of full-time officers needs to be re-visited and this does not necessarily have to impinge on the legitimate aspirations of branches to conduct their affairs within the overall rules and ethos of the union. The relationship of full-time officers with their trade union employer does not translate directly to that of the council chamber. Officers themselves need help to better understand their roles

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<sup>8</sup>Albrow, op cit. p7.

and obligations to the membership as a whole, rather than to just a select cadre of highly motivated activists. Activists and officers are not mutually exclusive parts of the union, they each require the other, and members require both. It is recommended that as a first tentative step to understanding and accepting the role of the other that there should be some limited inter-change of functions at key committees for a short duration. This may help to remove the feeling that 'the grass is greener on the other side'. Neither group should feel threatened by this, after all, many officers were themselves activists in their own partner unions prior to becoming a paid officer.

5. There needs to be a fundamental rethink about the application of Fair Representation as **the** means of ensuring that the interests of manual workers are addressed. It is clear that at both the national and branch levels that this group of members are finding it difficult, if not impossible to make their voices heard. This may be especially so for male, full-time manual workers who anecdotal evidence suggests now number less than 1% of the union's membership. It is recommend that UNISON as a matter of some urgency conducts a formal audit of all blue-collar members **and** blue-collar lay representatives. The union needs to know if manual workers are represented by their own 'class' at all levels within the union. It is one thing to acknowledge the difficulty of participation for this group in formal election procedures at national level, but if that pattern is repeated across regional and branch fora [and I suspect that it is], UNISON is in danger of becoming a white-collar only union in the very near future.
6. This recommendation is closely linked to the last and rests on the union accepting that the well known disadvantages of class severely limit the potential of many manual workers to participate in their own union alongside their more articulate and self-confident white-collar brothers and sisters. It has been accepted by the union that disadvantaged groups need extra help and resources to compete for their agendas and rights, unfortunately, perhaps the largest group of disadvantaged members has been overlooked and remains under-resourced. If the earlier estimates on manual activists are correct, then manuals are also critically under-represented throughout the union. In this respect, I believe that the union's full-time officers have a crucial role and duty in helping to give voice

to these members, but for this to happen the member-led concept needs to be adjusted to encourage manual workers to seek more overt help from officials. However, full-time officials themselves may not recognise the difficulties facing manual worker members and as in race and gender issues should be offered training and skill acquisition in this context.

### **Structural Measures**

I have deliberately kept these to a minimum, because in a union seemingly weighed down by procedural obligations the last thing that is needed is further constitutional refinement.

1. That the National Delegate Conference be reduced in size and focus. The data indicates that the conference is not conducive to genuine, democratic debate and universal participation, particularly for blue-collar member, and by implication, low-paid white-collar members whose status and standing in the union also requires investigation. Evidence to this end is not collated by the union but needs to be. As part of this initiative UNISON should monitor and report on the Service Group, status, discipline and pay band of delegates and speakers at the national conferences for two years with a view to producing a report for the third conference on just who attends and participates in this premier event in the union's calendar. The results may be eye opening, but they will not be as dangerous as leaving things as they are, which is not a feasible option.

### **The Future**

Super unions look here to stay and further mergers with UNISON may well be in the offing. My 'insider' view may not be as disinterested as some authors would like, but then I have been privileged to have access to data and sources denied most commentators. It remains to be seen if UNISON is ready to face up to the systematic analysis of itself by one of its own. A preparedness to undergo critical self-analysis without first restricting the findings, would indicate to members and staff alike that the union is willing to adopt practices that will put the union at the

heart of members as well as members at the heart of the union. That said, UNISON has as Thornley reminds us,

*been the best collective solution to the problems of millions of individual workers confronted by ... [employers wanting to] curtail earnings, worsen their conditions, undermine their job security and attack the basis of their working lives<sup>9</sup> ... long may it be so.*

BUT, by the union's own undertaking to be a better union and more inclusive than the former partner unions, UNISON has so far failed to match reality with promises.

**END**

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<sup>9</sup>Thornley et al. 2000. p141.

## Chapter 10

### Methodology

*Be a good craftsman: Avoid any rigid set of procedures. Above all, seek to develop and use the sociological imagination. Avoid the fetishism of method and technique. Urge the rehabilitation of the unpretentious intellectual craftsman, and try to become a craftsman yourself. Let every man be his own methodologist; let every man be his own theorist; let theory and method again become part of the practice of craft.<sup>1</sup>*

### Introduction

Chapter 1 established the framework for the thesis, setting the creation of UNISON in context as well as identifying it as an appropriate research site. This chapter explains how the research was conducted and its relevance to the key issues of the thesis. First and foremost, there was a need to develop a clear understanding of the key questions of the thesis as it was this that determined how the research was conducted. These questions were tackled through a wide range of methods. These were : a continuous examination of the formal literature; a search and assessment of documentation from the three partner unions and UNISON; an evaluation of a unique academic archive on NUPE and the UNISON merger process;<sup>2</sup> the use of semi-structured interviews; non-participant observation at UNISON branch level meetings and attendance/participation at academic/trade union forums dealing with union organisation and/or UNISON 'progress'. This variety of perspectives helped to minimise the risk of data being taken as prescriptive and presented as atypical.

None of these methods was superior to another but reflected the need to adopt a flexible approach to reach the required data.<sup>3</sup> However, it was felt that overall, a qualitative rather than a quantitative approach to the research was likely to produce an in-depth understanding of the competing interplays in such a large and complex organisation. This emphasis on in-depth knowledge and the elaboration of images

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<sup>1</sup>Mills. 1959. op cit. p224.

<sup>2</sup>Fryer, principle academic adviser to NUPE and then UNISON has collected and maintained literature on NUPE and latterly on the actual merger that formed UNISON, much of which until now has remained confidential.

<sup>3</sup>Burgess. 1984. op cit. p143

and concepts helped to give voice, interpret historical and cultural significance, and advance theory.<sup>4</sup> It is acknowledged that a statistical approach would have given precision and system,<sup>5</sup> - but the qualitative framework suggests *that ... meanings (rather than numbers) may be more important, more illuminating and more fun.*<sup>6</sup>

In attempting to understand the data, it was necessary to try and see the situations that were being studied from the point of view of the people in the research site, to adopt, as Morgan says, the role of the 'empathic ethnographer'.<sup>7</sup> It was a learning role; the interviews, observations and documentary evidence, the teaching aids. It was an inductive process that produced as many unanswered questions as answered problems.

### **UNISON as the Research Site**

Working as a Regional Officer, initially for NUPE, and now for UNISON raised for me and many of my colleagues conflicting issues that we had not experienced before, such as the tenet of the new union being member-led. Or, why former NUPE activists appeared not to play a prominent role in UNISON. There had of course been other union mergers in recent times including: AEU [largely skilled blue-collar] and TASS [white-collar] organising members across manufacturing, engineering, chemicals and finance. TASS eventually merged with ASTMS in 1988 to become MSF [552,000 in 1992] a left-led, white-collar union which added finance, insurance banking and 'high tech' engineering/electronics to TASS's relatively narrow spectrum of membership.<sup>8</sup> The white-collar union APEX, as a clear defensive strategy in the face of large-scale membership loss merged with the NUGMW, [later to become the GMB], a general union of blue-collar workers.<sup>9</sup> The prime difference between these mergers and the UNISON merger is that none of them encompassed one of the founding ideals of UNISON, that of creating a single trade union [industrial unionism] in the public services. They were, by and large,

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<sup>4</sup>Ragin. 1994. p83

<sup>5</sup>Madge 1981 p37

<sup>6</sup>Dey 1983 p12

<sup>7</sup>Morgan. op cit.. p27.

<sup>8</sup>at the time of writing, MSF and AEEU are actively pursuing merger.

<sup>9</sup>See Undy et al. 1981. op cit. for a fuller discussion on merger strategies.



driven by a political logic as opposed to the [primarily] industrial logic that was at the root of the UNISON merger. This provided a unique opportunity to investigate a union that was purposefully designed to tackle the difficulties of a fragmented opposition to State sponsored antipathy to organised Labour.

### **The Key Research Questions**

This research started out as a hypothesis that manual workers did not participate fully in UNISON because they did not like the 'new union' as much as their 'old' union. The hypothesis developed as the research began to reveal the complexities contained within the original concept. Why could manual workers not thrive in a union which looked and felt 'alien' to them, and what were the factors that contributed to both the perceived and real effects of the merger? My initial view was firmly seated in a crude, superficial assessment of the problem that attributed all of the difficulties and changes to NUPE members being in the same trade union as NALGO [and COHSE] members, however, as the research progressed this no longer held sway as **the** key issue. What eventually became apparent was that the past activities of the partner unions were undoubtedly crucial in their approach to the merger, but equally important was the question, *'in UNISON, if manual workers and their elected appointed representatives are to participate fully in the union's informal and formal processes and activities, what measures are necessary to ensure that they are encouraged and enabled to be involved in the democratic order of the union'?*

Addressing this issue was never going to be easy and suggesting remedies was no less daunting. This was partly due to the complexity of UNISON's membership which reflects the cosmopolitan make-up of society at large where inequalities of class, status, race, gender and power permeate all political institutions, educational systems and the organisation of work. And as Kiloh tells us, *Merely introducing democratic mechanisms cannot alter these inequalities or the fundamentally undemocratic ideology that underlies them .... even when*

*democratic schemes are adopted, they frequently become distorted and continue to reflect the very inequalities which they might be expected to overcome.*<sup>10</sup>

The adoption of the principle of Fair Representation' [see chapter 5] may be viewed in this light because as has been seen, manual workers frequently remain at the fringes of participation in UNISON activities. Of course, it could be argued that the seemingly marginalised position of blue-collar workers in UNISON is little more than a facet of a democracy where the participation of a minority élite is a bulwark against instability. Yet this view ignores the positive correlation between apathy and low feelings of political efficacy and low socio-economic status.<sup>11</sup> This thesis identifies those attributes of blue-collar workers in UNISON that predispose them from becoming as involved in the democratic affairs of the union as their white-collar counterparts. Conversely, this entails identifying the 'advantages' that many white-collar employees have over blue-collar colleagues. This has been done through a comparison of white-collar and blue-collar workers' attributes, and just as importantly, by comparing the difference in priorities of each partner union's membership and how the unions themselves evolved in response to these circumstances. [See chapter 4]. Without this knowledge, our ability to understand fully the nature of UNISON is impaired. So too, it has been necessary to identify the other influences that shaped the new union and in some instances, confirmed or reinforced the status and position of manual workers in UNISON.

### **Partner Union External Influences on the UNISON Merger**

As chapter 2 has shown there were several major factors that impacted upon the merger. This data came from asking the following questions:

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<sup>10</sup>Kioh. 1986. p45

<sup>11</sup>Pateman. 1970. p104.

Fosh. 1981. p81. goes much further and asserts that the evidence does not end with the correlation highlighted by Pateman, but that low skill also correlates with conformity, deference, and an acceptance of present conditions. This obviously raises key issues about the expectations and aspirations of blue-collar [mostly NUPE, but also some COHSE] UNISON members who often found themselves subject to the authority of line-managers who were [formerly] NALGO members, but who were now in the same union.

- ♦ What was the state of the British trade union movement during the years prior to the merger and how may this have affected the negotiations?
- ♦ What were the causes of those conditions?
- ♦ Did the State influence matters, directly and/or indirectly? The three successive Conservative Governments [prior to the merger] were openly hostile to trade unions and keen to see a reduced role for the State in the running of the public services and the public sector. How this affected the propensity of the three partner unions to merge was essential to understanding the wider context in which the merger occurred.
- ♦ What was happening to the workforce composition as a result of the changes?
- ♦ Were all unions affected in the same way? If not, what was different about them.
- ♦ Was merger a new response to changes - what was different about this merger?

### **Partner Union Internal Influences on the UNISON Merger**

I had known for many years that NUPE had long held a vision to merge with other public service unions but in this merger there appeared to be a difference in emphasis to earlier attempts to amalgamate. Therefore, it was necessary to pinpoint those changes in the approach and conduct of the partner unions to the merger for this would hold much of the key to their priorities in merger negotiations and in their respective agendas in UNISON. I therefore needed to know:

- ♦ What changes occurred to their membership numbers and why?
- ♦ Did these membership changes contribute to the 'desire' of the three partner unions to contemplate merger with each other? And if so how?
- ♦ Did the desire for the new union have its origin solely in these changes?
- ♦ Who drove the merger?
- ♦ Why had the merger not happened before?
- ♦ Were there other options available to the three partner unions, particularly if the negotiations were not producing 'the goods'?
- ♦ What did each union want from the merger, and why?
- ♦ Was there a [unwritten] time scale within each union for the merger and did this act as an impetus or constraint on the negotiations

## Understanding the Partner Unions

The early rhetoric of the merger was that UNISON would be a *new* union; better than the sum of its parts; able to represent all its members better than the old unions. therefore it was important to understand how the new union was to be different from the old *partner* unions. This meant examining the origins and historical influences of the old unions, how they were structured, who they represented, what they did and how they did it, the relationships between their constituent parts, and most crucially, the relationships between the three partner unions themselves. It was important to ask why things had changed, and just as importantly, why in some instances, things hadn't changed. After all, as Foley Meeker argues,

*the stability of an organisation, or the lack of change in an individual's behaviour or attitudes, requires explanation; some 'energy' must have been expended to keep them that way.* [my emphasis].<sup>12</sup>

## Sources of Data

The scope of the research questions covered a wide range of data from several quite different sources and following Mills' line of avoiding pre-determined rigidity, a variety of methods were used to collect data according to the questions being asked and the type of data sought. All methods of study were eligible. A responsive and reflexive approach enabled the research to follow lines of evidence and not just lines of enquiry.<sup>13</sup>

The primary sources of empirical data are perhaps the richest font of new knowledge in that they provide direct evidence of what has occurred and what is taking place currently. As it is doubtful that there can ever be a single, true version of events it was essential to 'cross-check' one version of events through other parties/contributors and where possible, by reference to documentation. For instance, the question, *What did each union want from the merger, and why?*, is not just a matter of recording from interviews what was said to the author, it was also necessary to confirm the facts through the accounts of contributors from the other

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<sup>12</sup>Foley Meeker 1988. p15

<sup>13</sup>White and McSwain. 1983. p299.

unions, **and**, indeed from those within the same union. It is not axiomatic that what was said and done in the merger talks was the true negotiating stance. And perhaps just as importantly, was it perceived as such by the players in those talks. An example of this is shown in the following extract from my interview with a senior, ex-COHSE, national official.

We got what we wanted, Service Groups, and then we had the bare faced cheek, we said we wanted Head of Health. We couldn't believe their faces when they conceded it. The competition was then amongst COHSE national officers as to who got it. [Michael. Senior ex-COHSE national official]

## **Primary Data**

### **Semi-structured Interviews**

The use of interviews in social research is not an occasion to solicit [pre-determined] answers to pre-formed questions, but an opportunity for the interviewee to raise important questions relative to the topic under discussion. As a 'guided' conversation it also provides the basis for the discovery of rich detailed data which is not necessarily frequency related.<sup>14</sup> This made it an appropriate method to inform the analysis of the UNISON merger.

In total, 59 individual semi-structured interviews - *interviews with a purpose* - were conducted. Of these, 15 were at national level, 3 at regional level, and 26 at branch level, whilst a further 5 could be termed 'unplanned informal discussions'. Two employers' representatives also agreed to be interviewed. A further element of triangulation was injected into the analysis by the contributions from three independent commentators/advisors. Extended formal discussions with two authoritative, academic authors not associated with the UNISON merger negotiations but familiar with the general field, and one acting as an adviser in a specific capacity, helped to add a broader theoretical understanding of the central issues. A joint interview with the general secretary and his policy adviser of a trade union recently involved in a completed merger, and interviews with two senior TUC officials helped to answer the question 'how was UNISON viewed by the rest

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<sup>14</sup>Lofland. 1971. p75

of the trade union movement?'. A further 5 interviews involving lay activists at branch/regional and national level [not from case study branches] were included to add perspective to the case studies. The interviews were conducted to try and answer key questions in the thesis, a schedule of these is shown in figures A.1. to A.3.

figure 10.1

National Officials interviews: Why the merger and what happened?

former union	COHSE	NALGO	NUPE
general secretary	✓	✓	✓
senior officials directly associated with merger negotiations	1	2	3
national officers	1	2	3

figure 10.2

Relationships:

In What Circumstances do Manual workers Participate in UNISON

	region 1 health care service group	region 1 local government service group	region 2 health care service group	region 2 local government service group
interviews	4	16	2	5
	including 1 joint branch secretary/chair	including 1 joint branch secretary/asst. secretary		
employer interviews	1			1
aborted/cancelled interviews		2		2

figure 10.3 Seeking a Wider perspective: Non-case Study Interviews

category	interviews
unison lay activists	1 ex-NALGO local government service group executive member 1 regional convenor ex-NALGO 1 branch secretary [white-collar members only] ex-NALGO 1 former NEC member ex-NUPE 1 ex-NUPE branch secretary [resigned UNISON joined TGWU]
external special adviser	2
paid officials [regions 1 & 2]	3
general secretary - other union	1
TUC	2
academics	4

The importance of using interviews is to seek clarity and veracity about a set of circumstances. The interviewing of people involved in those circumstances as Scott argues, is that as a first hand, eye witness account they are more likely to be accurate than subsequently produced reports.<sup>15</sup>

### Observation

Non-participant observation was carried out at 13 meetings/conferences. Whilst 2 seminars/conferences of a union/academic nature allowed investigation by observation and participation. The value of observation is that it allows the researcher to obtain accounts of events in the language of the participants and so start to understand the everyday concepts used by these informants. As with the interviews, the observation was conducted to address key questions of the thesis. See figures A.4, A.5 and A.6.

<sup>15</sup>Scott 1990 p23

figure 10.4 The 'New Union' at Branch Level: Is it Working?

	region 1 health care service group	region 1 local government service group	region 2 health care service group	region 2 local government service group
branch committee meetings	1	2	2	1
branch meetings	1 AGM	2 AGM		

figure 10.5 Democracy and Lay Members: Who Runs the Union

conference title	duration	purpose
Local Government special National Conference	1 day	win support for single status employment.
National Delegate Conference	3 days	rule changes, setting policies and priorities

figure 10.6 Examining Changes in the Merger Context

conference title	duration	purpose
New Unionism	1 day	assessing the direction for change
UNISON After 5 Years	2 days	Academic/UNISON assessment - from merger negotiations to 1998

Additionally, there were 3 meetings with UNISON national officials to establish the agreement and facilities to enable the research to commence.

It is recognised that acting as an observer may be seen as a 'less tidy' way of researching social situations than some other methods, nevertheless, it is the surest way of getting to the heart of human experience.<sup>16</sup>

### Documentation

The sheer volume of 'official' documentation surrounding the merger was a major difficulty. Although I had previously seen a proportionate of it during my NUPE years, I had not read it with the critical eye that this research demanded and therefore I had to revisit it to review the 'public face' of the merger. That said, it

<sup>16</sup>Waddington. 1994. p121.



paled into insignificance when set alongside the welter of unpublished papers that in effect acted as a running commentary on the progress of the negotiations and provided insight by which to try and confirm the true negotiating stances and priorities of the three partner unions as opposed to their rhetoric. Whilst I tried to be selective in what I read by selecting themes and following their trail, it became obvious and inevitable that I needed to read, as best anyone could, this quite private process of merger from start to finish. However, as a contemporaneous account of the making of UNISON it provided an opportunity to view the merger from 'inside' to try and overcome the problem of interviewees 're-writing' history either through memory gaps or because the true history did not suit them. It also helped to illuminate the life-worlds of the partner unions and the individuals and groups associated with the merger and overcome the political legerdemain and public rhetoric that confronted the research from the outset.<sup>17</sup> Additionally, documents from branch level, other sources within UNISON and from external union contacts acted as 'checks and balances' to the 'official' literature produced by the three partner unions and subsequently UNISON, and generally helped to inform the empirical background. Collection of the data from the unique archive on NUPE and the UNISON merger negotiations, internal documentation from COHSE and NALGO, along with the assimilation and analysis of current UNISON data, was a long term measure that prompted regular assessment, analysis and re-evaluation as themes emerged.

### **Secondary Data: Informative background evidence**

This was obtained from five main sources:

- ♦ a review of the formal literature as a tool to help inform the theoretical approach to the thesis. Trade union merger is not a new concept and has been investigated by others, [see Waddington, J. 1995. *op cit*, Undy et al. *op cit*] whose work helps to both contextualise this research and highlight any gaps in knowledge, allowing exploration of 'new' concepts.
- ♦ studies of trade union membership trends. For this research, it is important to understand the membership status of the three partner unions and their individual

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<sup>17</sup>Forster. 1994. p148.

positions vis a vis each other, and that of other trade unions, including their competitors. This enables us to consider how these circumstances may have affected their respective approaches to the merger.

- ♦ examination of the socio-economic matters that prevailed prior to the merger negotiations. The merger did not take place in isolation from the external environment of the three partner unions and the more general matters concerning the trade union relationship with Government, the general public, and especially in respect of this research, the changed context of public service industrial relations.
- ♦ consideration of previous academic enquiry into both UNISON [and its predecessor partner unions] and other trade union mergers. This helped to inform the wider theoretical context and to establish what, if any, trends had developed and what part they may have played in the formation of UNISON.
- ♦ the utilisation of formal reports commissioned by the partner unions and UNISON as 'aids to merger and unified status'. Such allegories help us to understand the problems of the merger - as the participants themselves saw them - and their subsequent response to dealing with those problems.

### **The Researcher as an Insider: Advantages and Disadvantages**

A careful consideration was made of the pros and cons of researching as an insider.

These are shown in figure A.7.

figure 10.7            The Pros and Cons of 'in-house' Empirical Research

advantages	disadvantages
know the territory. can shortcut time-consuming bureaucracy	too close to issues, 'can't see the wood for the trees'. real issues overlooked
familiar with key people	past relations may block genuine, disinterested investigation
trust, 'he is one of us'	distrust, 'he is a spy'
Access to much internal information in normal course of work	selective evaluation possible to underwrite preconceived prejudices
constant observation through daily experience of research site	more difficult to establish periodic benchmarks as a gauge of change
participants may be more prepared to divulge 'confidences' if it is staying in-house	participants wary of a colleague [especially of less status and authority] asking searching and awkward questions

advantages	disadvantages
researcher can be seen as an ally 'helping the firm'	researcher may be pressed by [particularly senior] colleagues to disclose information from or about mutual associates
quality results may benefit the organisation enhancing researcher's kudos and regard	negative aspects may mark researcher as disloyal, not to be trusted, and importing bias
ability to discuss current research themes with colleagues	suspicion and distrust of questions and requests for information
support for project through facilities and opportunities	lack of co-operation, jealousy and possible impediments from disenchanted colleagues

### **Researching as an Insider: Maximising the Pros and Minimising the Cons**

Those issues surrounding familiarity and pre-conceived bias were obviated in part by choosing to work outside of the north west region where I was based. Nevertheless, it is inevitable, as Burgess argues, that any statement of subjective meaning will incorporate elements of the sociologist's experience as well as the experience of those who are studied.<sup>18</sup> This does not mean that collated data and its analysis are invalid, for indeed, as in this research, my own experience as a regional officer helped me identify many of the key questions that framed this thesis. Indeed, there are those who argue that to fully understand the positions of informants it is essential for a researcher to become a member of the social setting which he/she is investigating.<sup>19</sup> But as Becker reminds us, it is indisputable that understanding does come with participation, for if that were not the case, men could not write about women, black study white, or vice versa.<sup>20</sup> However, the potential for bias must always be guarded against. This was a particular concern for me and I tried to avoid presenting a stereotypical view from a 'NUPE' perspective that some colleagues may have wished, and others may have expected. Try as we might, Becker advises that we can never fully avoid taking sides, but that the important point is whether the distortion introduced into the work is so great as to render it useless.<sup>21</sup> That said, being 'in the field' requires ingenuity and a quickness of wit, or as Waddington puts it,

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<sup>18</sup>Burgess op cit. p89

<sup>19</sup>Strauss et al. 1964

<sup>20</sup>Becker. 1970. [1]. p47

<sup>21</sup>Becker. 1970. [2]. p132

*The ideal fieldworker is someone who is blessed with a thick enough skin and the ability to depend consistently on their own initiative.*<sup>22</sup>

I have tried to meet the standards of good scientific work and produce a thesis that reflects 'what was going on' in UNISON, though at times that has been a difficult and precarious task. Trade unions are volatile organisations at the best of times, so the benefits of working 'in-house' have at times also been a burden, but they did not outweigh the advantages that I gained through inside knowledge.

Knowing the metaphorical 'lay of the land' reduced the time consuming, but essential task of familiarisation with the subject to be studied, that external researchers cannot avoid if they are to have a clear picture of the organisation's internal relationships. Understanding structures, rule books and terminology, as well as the everyday events that occur within and around the organisation is decidedly easier for the insider. The issue of 'familiarity breeding contempt' was guarded against by continuous re-evaluation of both the theoretical framework and the empirical evidence. In practice, this was done by asking, 'is this what it really seems?', and 'could there be an alternative interpretation?', and, 'is what was said, that which was meant?', 'is it true and verifiable?' This was particularly important during the search of internal documentation so as to avoid the use of selective data [that may nominally] support initial lines of enquiry. With these cautions in mind, extensive reference was made to both formally published and hitherto, unpublished material that imparted fresh evidence about the UNISON merger. It is doubtful that either the volume or span of this material could have been accessed by external enquirers, certainly not in the time available, and as such adds to the unique contribution to knowledge by this thesis.

### **Maintaining Credibility as a Researcher**

At all times, it was crucial that my credibility as a 'professional' researcher was established with both new and longer standing contacts and that my only agenda was the academic understanding of the events surrounding the formation of UNISON. This was done by ensuring absolute confidentiality of both oral and

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<sup>22</sup>Waddington. 1994. op cit p120.

written contributions. Additionally, asking searching questions about NUPE [my former union] demonstrated to those that were aware of my background that my field of enquiry was not so narrowly focused that a skewing of evidence would inevitably result. By the same token, this approach displayed that neither was I looking to support any own pre-formed ideas of my own, or seeking a foundation for a 'NUPE view' of the merger. The validity of this method was confirmed on several occasions when interviewees asked my background and seemed genuinely surprised that as an ex-NUPE officer my line of investigation included a 'warts and all' assessment of NUPE's [and others] role in the merger process.

Sometimes during the course of the field work I found myself in both formal and informal conversation with people who were clearly seeking to draw me into their own conflictual situations and elicit my support for their own position. At these times, it was very difficult to maintain the strictly, non-aligned academic role without damaging the co-operation that I was receiving and still needed in the research. In such circumstances, occasionally I was forced to utter some vague palliative or nod my head at the appropriate time signalling sympathy, but I was careful not to respond in any overt way and resorted to the line of, 'well you know that all this is confidential and that my work will hopefully help the union to improve its services to the members'. These kind of situations have to be confronted by most researchers at some time or another, and at the end of the day, pragmatism will dictate actions that are the least damaging, to the research, if not the researcher.<sup>23</sup>

Naturally, colleagues at all levels within UNISON have shown at some time or another a degree of interest. Some no doubt from a genuine desire to see what the research has unearthed, others perhaps for more undeclared reasons. In fairness

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<sup>23</sup>Roy. 1970. p242. He tells of his dilemma whilst investigating industrial relations in the Southern States in the USA. Pickets were throwing rocks at 'scab' labour, and not wanting to be seen as a 'spy' or company man, *'I made my decision. Sweating freely - it was a warm night - I ran back and forth with the strikers, stopping and swaying and swinging my arms in a balletic imitation of a man throwing rocks. Finally the last car screamed around the bend in the road. With my companions I made a rapid but dignified dash for my own automobile. The cops did not show up.'*

though, very few of the enquiries were 'interrogatory', most could be described as 'when will we see the result?' This supports the view that investigation as an 'insider' can be distinctly advantageous providing the integrity of the research, the researcher, and the researched is maintained. In this regard, whilst my initial interest was in part prompted by my experiences as a NUPE activist and later officer, the discipline of academic supervision, particularly in interpreting data, generated a deeper understanding of the issues under scrutiny and with it the vital need to identify the key questions as a tool to unlocking that data. In turn, the continuing call for 'knowledge' about the research subject inevitably led me to initiate discussions with colleagues during the course of everyday work. By this I was able to compare their experiences and interpretations of events in the unions with those of my own, but I did not allow data or other information from any of the case studies to be used or identified by other parties. Over time, the discussions with colleagues assumed a 'state of the nation' status in which all views were equally valid. A number of colleagues have even delved into long forgotten files and personal archives to find 'interesting' things for me - "you might just find this useful" - was a frequent comment. The research also appears to have stimulated information exchange with colleagues also undertaking academic study who have asked me for opinions and information about their own areas of interest so that a mini 'think tank' could be said to have developed.

### **Disadvantages of an 'Insider' as the Researcher**

On the negative side of in-house research is the inevitable leaning away from one's own job of work to the academic field of interest. This was clearly apparent to some colleagues and was evinced in such comments as, "what will you do when you've finished?" or, "you won't want to be doing this after, will you?" which indicated that they perceived a change of emphasis in my priorities. This emphasises the difficulty of changing roles whilst still maintaining the confidence and 'professional' respect of one's peers.<sup>24</sup> For my immediate work colleagues, these comments appeared to be made with understanding and dispassion. Elsewhere, [but only a small minority] the research was seen as an act of disloyalty and met with

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<sup>24</sup>Powell and Lovelock 1991

complete lack of interest, and occasionally hostility. In such circumstances, there was little that could be done except maintain a professional approach to all matters and be aware of possible 'enemies'.

Perhaps the greatest danger for the insider follows the publication of the research, whether it be in the form of a thesis, an article in an academic journal, or a report for the union. The reporting of findings that may provide unpleasant reading to the host organisation can be a difficult experience. No one likes bad news. Hugh Beynon found this to his cost when his work on the British car manufacturing industry upset the Transport and General Workers Union. [TGWU]

*It is a pity that Huw Beynon's welcome description of conditions on motor car assembly lines ends in a burst of misinformation and old-fashioned union bashing. Beynon, like so many other academics, wants to be on the side of the workers, but with friends like him, workers do not need enemies ..... Beynon, and other lecturers with a similar outlook, should leave their ivory towers and study what is really happening in trade union activity. [Jack Jones. General Secretary. TGWU]<sup>25</sup>*

Beynon's academic credentials, dispassionate and disinterested approach had made him a target for some very powerful union figures and with that the possibility that future sociological investigation could be impeded. For me as a 'novice' researcher, those dangers were more apparent. The pressure to produce a report that 'all is well' held obvious attractions, but the overriding obligation to report 'the truth' and prove it held sway. This was another reason to utilise the variety of methods of investigation so as to negate charges of bias or shallow analysis. In that respect, the task of the insider can be more burdensome in that it is sometimes necessary to 'go the extra mile' to underwrite the validity of the research, because external investigators may be deemed to have less imported bias, though Beynon's experience would suggest otherwise.

The crucial aspect of establishing and maintaining the credibility of the research cannot be over emphasised. At times I felt it necessary to highlight the onerous

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<sup>25</sup>Beynon. 1988. p26. quoting from New Society. 26 June. 1975.

responsibility of doing the field work, and latterly, the very time consuming nature of collating and analysing the vast amount of data that I had collected and how my domestic, recreational and social commitments had suffered as I struggled to meet deadlines or understand complex situations. None of these feelings of being 'under the microscope' were perhaps overtly tangible, but the aura of being different was ever present, even if it was self-induced.

### **Negotiating Access**

To be able to consider fully the 'key' questions identified above, it was necessary to assess how they manifested themselves throughout the union. This was to prevent a skewed version of events as seen from either national level, where much of the pre-merger activity was focused, or local/branch level where merger reality was still happening. Initially, access in principle was negotiated nationally, but this was subject to additional support in the two chosen regions at the level of regional secretary and additionally the lay, regional convenor in region 2. This latter aspect was unexpected, but with hindsight, was an indication of one of the defining issues of UNISON, the member-led principle, and demonstrated emphatically that the 'gatekeepers' were just as likely to be lay members in authoritative branch officer positions, as senior national and regional officials. This in itself raised the key question of 'who controlled the union'? In NUPE, approval from national level would have been sufficient to gain access. Now, both lay member and paid officer co-operation was a pre-condition.

### **Selecting the Regions**

Given that it was inappropriate to conduct the case studies within my own region, and constrained by resources and time, two regions were selected that would allow reasonable access without compromising the overall balance and objectivity essential to the integrity of the research. The principal considerations in selecting the regions are shown in figure A.8 but are not in order of priority.



figure 10.8 Considerations in Selecting the Regions

	region 1	region 2
regional secretary	regional secretary [ex-NALGO]	regional secretary [ex-NUPE]
geography/social complexion	large, many metropolitan areas but also rural communities	large, many rural communities but some metropolitan areas
political make-up	many constituencies tradition of supporting Labour	constituencies traditionally more aligned to Conservatives than Labour
membership [March 2001]	126,004	93,614
local government membership	79,529	58,803
Health membership	34,159	25,794

source: UNISON intranet

### Selecting the Service Groups

It was decided to carry out part of the field research via case studies in the local government and health care service groups as these were the largest sections of UNISON. They were also the areas in which inter-union conflict, pre-UNISON, between the partner unions was most evident. This selection contributed to the balance between the unions and a broad span of membership interests. [See figure A.9]

figure 10.9 UNISON Service Groups and Partner Union Composition

service group	COHSE	NALGO	NUPE	as %age of UNISON membership
local government	no. except for very few in care homes	yes	yes	806,182 [59.6]
health care	yes	yes. but relatively few	yes	424,168 [31.4]
water	no	yes	yes. but declining rapidly	19,667 [1.46]
transport	no	yes	no	3,355 [0.25]
gas	no	yes	no	16,667 [1.23]
electricity	no	yes	no	14,018 [1.04]
higher education	no	yes	yes	41,046 [3.04]
police	no	yes	yes, but very few	25,399 [1.88]

Source: UNISON intranet

### Selecting the Branches

To test the key question *-if manual workers and their elected appointed representatives are to fully participate in UNISON, what structural measures are necessary to ensure that they are encouraged and enabled to be involved in the democratic order of the union?* - it was essential to try and reflect in the selection of branches a variety of scenarios that in general would act as a representative cross sample of the union's structure. My own limited observations, and somewhat insubstantial anecdotal evidence, suggested that former NALGO representatives, at least in the north west region, commanded the majority of branch officer positions, whilst manual workers seemed reluctant to participate as workplace stewards. The selection process thus encouraged the questions, - if manual workers participate in the union branch, in what circumstances does this happen? And, 'what are the barriers that have contributed to the reduced participation of manual workers in the union. It was held that the evidence generated by these 2 questions would then provided insight into the more complicated issue of what the union as a whole needs to do to provide equality of participation for manual workers.

Initially, the Deputy Regional Secretary [DRS] in each region provided a general overview of branches but the final selection was mine. This was done by selecting branches that were, [at least by a thumbnail sketch] reflective of the different stages of 'evolution' in UNISON and where variables such as the former union of the branch secretary, the merged status of the branches, branch size, the kind of employer and geographical constituency of the branch ensured that as far as possible, no two alike branches were short-listed as potential research sites. Following this, telephone discussions were held with the branch secretaries of the identified branches seeking additional local information e.g. type of NHS Trust, and co-operation with the research. Of these, three were rejected as being unsuitable with a lack of branch officers/stewards availability as the primary reason, whilst 6 were deemed as available and co-operative. At no time was there any attempt by UNISON to steer the research in, or away from, its intended direction. Subsequently, the DRSs wrote formal letters of introduction to the branches selected. The author then continued with negotiating directly with branches for access and co-operation. In the event, 6 branches were selected as follows:

### **Region 1**

Branch A. Local Government. Metropolitan. Branch Secretary, ex-NUPE, branch had merged on day one of UNISON.

Branch B. Local Government. Metropolitan. Said to be still operating effectively as two separate branches with two joint branch secretaries [ex-NALGO and ex-NUPE] in post.

Branch C. Local Government. A new branch formed from the [part] membership of five, partner union branches organising a newly formed Unitary Local Authority.

Branch D. A Health Care branch organising in a single NHS Trust in a moderately sized affluent town but with a large catchment area. The branch Secretary was ex-NUPE; The branch chairperson was ex-COHSE; and the branch employed the former NALGO branch secretary as an administrative support worker.

## **Region 2**

Branch E. Local Government. A small district council branch based around 2 main centres of population some 8 miles apart, but with large, sparsely populated rural tracts. The branch was formed from the merger of a small but complete former NALGO branch and the part membership of a large former NUPE branch.

Branch F. A Health Care branch organising across 2 trusts - an acute trust and a community trust both serving a mainly rural catchment area. The branch secretary was ex-NUPE; the branch chairperson ex-COHSE, and an active treasurer who was ex-NALGO.

### **Limitations in Branch Selection**

Overall, it was felt that within the inevitable restrictions that faces all research, that a reasonable balance had been achieved between the conflicting demands of breadth of research site, membership span of former partner union, service group constituency, geographical and [ostensibly] socio-economic context and type of branch. However, it remains a shortcoming of this research that a region with an ex-COHSE regional secretary was not included. Similarly, had more time been available, the inclusion of a health branch centred on a large industrial conurbation, and a local government branch operating in a large County Council, would have added a greater degree of balance to the observed field. It would also have been useful to have included empirical data from the smaller service groups as comparators, particularly as in some areas e.g. gas, they remained essentially NALGO enclaves. A further limitation was the relatively little time afforded to each branch and as such the research suffers from being a 'snapshot' of events. Had more time and resources been available, a deeper assessment may have shown additional evidence to assist interpretation and understanding.

### **The National Perspective**

In essence, for a number of individuals at national level from all three former partner unions, the reality of UNISON began [formally] in 1987 when negotiations commenced to create the 'political' environment for the merger amongst paid

officials, members and activists. A particular difficulty for this research was that it was being conducted more than a decade later when recollections of even important events were likely to be incomplete and possibly misleading. In this respect, I have been exceptionally graced by the co-operation of many of the key players from all three unions and several external facilitators, which has allowed for a significant degree of cross checking and confirmation. Further triangulation of events, many of them confidential until now, has been possible through access to a unique archive of the merger negotiations maintained by the leading academic advisor to the partner unions. Some of those issues, such as, what were the priorities of each of the unions at various stages? what, if any, were the bottom lines beyond which they would not step did the merger ever look in danger of failing? who drove the merger and why? did they contemplate alternatives? did they achieve their stated [and unspoken] aims? and most crucially, why did they opt for merger in the first place? were central to the initial and perhaps longer term outcome of the new union.

It was also important to see if the union accorded with those early aspirations, and if not, what had happened to prevent it achieving its stated aims. Was the talk of building a *new* union a genuine ideal or mere rhetoric to ease the passage of the merger through the old unions? How did the Leadership envisage the new union if it wasn't to be like any of the old unions? What measures did they adopt to prevent old [bad] habits and practices surfacing in UNISON and was it intended to monitor and review what was happening?

If the simpler option of concentrating solely on local branch evidence had been adopted an incomplete and potentially lop-sided version of events would have been the likely outcome. Similarly, ignoring the branch evidence could have possibly portrayed the formal corporate view rather than reality in the round. Indeed, the everyday experiences of employees members rarely match the corporate ethos and policy espoused by 'informed' decision makers and strategists. This doesn't mean that either camp's version of matters is untrue, but it does make for incomplete and partial analysis. There can never be just one true account of the merger for people and groups will view matters from their own perspective. The task of the researcher

is to un-muddy these waters and present all the facts with a valid interpretation that favours no particular lobby.

### **The use of case studies**

Some of the field work evidence has been obtained through the use of two case studies. The first revolves around the national perspective of the merger and addresses the merger negotiations, the immediate aftermath following the vesting day of UNISON, and inevitably the situation at the time of the research. In itself, it represents a longitudinal, albeit foreshortened, view of events - from 1987 to 1999. The second involves the six branches and deals with events since the merger of the formerly independent branches of the partner unions. It is therefore, a much more recent and live account of UNISON. The contributors in the branch case study dealt mainly with the here and now. In sharp contrast, their national colleagues were asked to recount much earlier occasions and assess current phenomena set against this earlier background.

The wide spectrum of the research constituency - local through to national - highlighted the need to choose a method of investigation suited to both these groups' desire [via their co-operation with the research] to give voice to their own particular perspectives of UNISON. It also provided me as the researcher with an intimacy of understanding that only came about through an extended relationship with the research subject. Interviews [randomly selected or only tenuously linked to the key questions] by themselves would have not have provided sufficient 'independent' corroboration of circumstances for the research to have demonstrated insight, understanding and veracity of the findings. The case study by its exploratory nature allows the researcher to probe beneath the veneer of the initial 'facts' and develop a more 'holistic' approach to analysis.<sup>26</sup> As a qualitative approach it represents a rich and deep account of union life that would be difficult to portray through other methods. It gives participants the opportunity to give accounts of their concepts and experiences in their own language. Constructing an account from all of this evidence with the benefit of theoretical insight helped to give clarity to seemingly paradoxical histories.<sup>27</sup> Case studies sometimes attract criticism on the

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<sup>26</sup>Bresnen. 1988. p36.

<sup>27</sup>Burgess. op cit. p79

grounds that the possibility of generalising from them is minimal, but the aims of the research and how it is constructed are as important as the research itself.<sup>28</sup> This research and its recommendations are based on the knowledge acquired through the limited, but rigorous investigation of sections of UNISON, which if true, has implications for the union generally.

These case studies were carried out by a mixture of non-participant observation, the examination of diaries, papers and reports, and semi-structured interviews of an average of 1.5 to 2 hours duration. The interviews were not audio recorded as it was felt that this may have been an impediment to open recounting, particularly as some of the contributors at national level were employed in sensitive and sometimes inferior positions to those about whom they were talking. Others in very senior positions were acutely aware of the difficulties that their comments could cause if taken out of context or revealed to subordinates. The matter was further complicated in the national interviews in that my [employed] role as regional officer was in many instances subject to the line of managerial authority of many of the interviewees.

At branch level, it was necessary to establish my independence from the union's regional management systems to avoid being seen as 'a spy', and to demonstrate complete confidentiality from other members of the branch. Endorsement for this strategy is shown by interviewees' comments on several occasions such as, "don't attribute this to me," or, "this isn't going any further is it?" Note taking allowed interviewees freedom of comment and the opportunity for later denial if need be.

### **Organisational Culture and Other Models of Analysis**

Initially, when I began to consider how to analyse the empirical data it seemed that the use of organisational culture as an analytical tool would help to explain why the partner unions acted in specific ways. However, it became clear that this model of analysis had draw backs when applied to trade unions who differed considerably from say, a hospital community, a bank, or a multi-national employer on whom

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<sup>28</sup>Dunkerley. 1988.p 91.

much of the study of organisational culture had been conducted. I therefore needed to find a more suitable alternative model of analysis and then test to see if it could be used to enhance our understanding of trade union behaviour and patterns of organisation. This was done through the use of *Union Form and Union Character*. The rationale and justification for the preference of this as a model of analysis in relation to the case study aspects of this thesis, is explained in chapter 6.

### **Other Considerations**

Throughout the thesis, relevant extracts of interviews have been used to highlight aspects of UNISON that the key questions have generated. Whilst not a tape recorded version they do represent an accurate account of related events. In qualitative research, there is always a problem of what evidence to include, and which evidence to exclude from the analysis of the data. It has not been possible to report on all of the data, particularly in a thesis whose length is formally limited. The use of extracts from the interviews of participants could be contentious if they either distorted the context in which they were presented to the interviewer, or were employed without the rigour and balance required of academic enquiry. This has been avoided through seeking to answer the key questions of the thesis rather than reporting on topical but perhaps erroneous issues. The selected evidence was not taken at face value and was contrasted where appropriate with the testimony of other contributors and in conjunction with the other methods deployed in the data collection and analysis.<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, there remains the possibility that useful, or more appropriate evidence may have been left out lessening the understanding of the data. However, it is important to remember that the data is not claimed to be representative of the whole of UNISON, rather that it is indicative of various perspectives that may have implications generally for the union and its members.

At times, the research has been conducted in a politically charged environment where interviewees have understandably sought to establish the legitimacy of their opinions and actions. Occasionally, I felt that I was being given an 'official' view or being shown the formal 'public face' of the union. At other times, some

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<sup>29</sup>Becker. [2] op Cit. p29



interviewees gave the impression of 'protecting their own back'.<sup>30</sup> Many of the issues under focus were 'live' or had possible ramifications elsewhere within the union and were relayed to me in confidence. To protect all parties, names, office and sometimes gender, have been changed to respect the confidentiality of the interviewee's wishes and maintain the integrity of the interview.

The formal literature has been consistently and regularly visited to maintain an informed view which has guided the empirical research.

### **Conclusions**

This chapter noted the complexity of the merger which made it necessary to examine UNISON at national, regional and branch levels and external areas of informed interest. This has enabled the links between them to be explored via the concepts arranged in the formal literature. In particular, the key questions surrounding the merger informed the structure of the thesis and dictated what lines of enquiry were followed. A diverse span of methodology was adopted to address the range of issues generated from the theoretical considerations and key questions to ensure that data was verifiable and accurate. These methods included: interviews with key participants in the merger negotiations, an assessment of an academic archive on those negotiations and two case studies, one at national level and the other involving six branches. In addition to this primary data, evidence from secondary sources was used to cross check and verify results and analysis.

Particular account was taken of my role as the 'insider' conducting the research and the methodological considerations necessary to conduct an empirically balanced and justifiable academic investigation. To do this, it was necessary to be aware of those circumstances that could have imported bias into the research, in particular, this was why I did not study the north west region where I still work. Overall, the chapter has demonstrated that researching as an insider can have considerable advantages if the research, researcher and the researched remain credible.

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<sup>30</sup>Becker. [2] op Cit. p47

It was also noted that whilst 'rich and deep', as a qualitative study the thesis did not claim to be representative of UNISON at large, but held indicative importance that warrants further study. A survey of UNISON members was conducted but has not been used in the thesis because there was insufficient space to include it.

It is often the case in research, that the 'final' picture [if there can ever be a final version of events] is not at all like that which we imagined at the start of the enquiry into the 'problem'. What was at the start of the research a complex web of obfuscation, obscurity, confusion and [now] most importantly, whole sets of circumstances and information that did not seem to be linked, has taken on a clarity and degree of understanding previously not discernible.

As Bryman puts it,

*Now as always in retrospect the ill-structured problem of what to do looks clear-cut: events look more ordered with the benefit of hindsight. If what we did now seems trivial, this is in part because a fairly well-structured problem has been retrospectively defined.*<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup>Bryman and Burgess. 1994. p208.

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