



UNISON North West & University of Liverpool  
Collaborative Research Project

# The Grassroots' perspective on UNISON International activities





# 1. Introduction

**This report presents initial findings from a PhD studentship collaboration between UNISON North West and the University of Liverpool. The aim of the PhD research is to explore grassroots membership and branch perspectives on labour internationalism and international development activity providing UNISON with a unique insight into how its members engage with trade union issues in the international context.**

In an increasingly globalising world the international role of a trade union has never been so relevant. As a union that prides itself on being grassroots member led it is integral that members are fully supportive of UNISON's international role. The primary research objectives were to collate members' perspectives on labour internationalism – are they aware of the existence of, and extent of, UNISON's internationalism? Do they support it, and if not how can support be achieved? The answers to these questions are integral if UNISON is to ensure its international policies are grassroots orientated.

This resultant document is to be used to aid discussion on current UNISON international practices and evaluate member perspectives to identify areas for potential change or review. Areas for future consideration have been framed within the context of UNISON Objectives and Priorities 2008.



## 2. UNISON International activities

UNISON International policy encompasses two main areas:

### Solidarity and International Development

Solidarity means speaking out when fellow trade unionists are under threat - in Colombia, Burma or Zimbabwe, for instance. Solidarity also means helping sister trade unions to build their organisations on their own terms. UNISON has set up the international development fund (UIDF) which aims to promote growth of trade unions abroad to enable them to promote development by improving the lives of working people and creating a more just society.

### Labour Internationalism

UNISON has links with sister unions throughout the world. Learning from other trade unionists is a vital way of strengthening our own movement. Many unions in different parts of the world face similar challenges to our own - privatisation, equality, the fight against racism. A key role of the international unit is to keep UNISON informed about international developments on these kinds of issues so that we can better look after members' interests. The Unit also handles requests from sister unions who want to learn about UK experiences.

UNISON is affiliated to several international trade union organisations, including Public Services International (PSI), Union Network International (UNI) and the European Public Service Union (EPSU). The international unit co-ordinates UNISON's work to promote the policies and interests of its members through these organisations and other international bodies.

This initial research examined members' views on labour internationalism with particular emphasis upon a case study of the UNISON & Ver.di alliance. Future research will extend upon this to examine members' views on UNISON's solidarity and international development activities.



# 3. Research Findings

The findings are presented in an order that is reflective of how focus group discussions developed:

## 1. Raising awareness

Some members were unaware of UNISON internationalism – the challenge therefore was to raise awareness and understanding of internationalism.

## 2. Recognise importance of Internationalism

Once aware of internationalism, the need was to then clarify reasons why and how each aspect of UNISON’s policy framework has an international dimension.

## 3. Providing evidence of Internationalism to increase member support and involvement

Once members were aware of the concept of internationalism and the motives for employing it within policy the final task was to provide real life examples of UNISON internationalism and the influence this has upon the daily workings of their union.

This three step process will be focused upon towards the latter part of this report in suggesting a framework to increase member support for UNISON international activities.

# Raise awareness > Recognise > Promote



## 3.1 Raise Awareness

**Focus group discussions highlighted key gaps in grassroots members' awareness of the existence of, and understanding of, UNISON international activities. It presented three different UNISON member identities all of which would need to be catered for in the promotion of labour internationalism to ensure engagement with ALL members.**

As with many UK trade unions, UNISON has a long history of engagement in labour internationalism and in campaigning on issues to do with social justice in the wider field of international development. Focus group discussions demonstrated that many grassroots members are unaware of UNISON's international role. The minority aware of the international role were unable to provide a definitive outline of UNISON's international policy content and instead readily associated it with one-way acts of solidarity, international development and aid. Participants were not aware of the existence of acts of labour internationalism i.e. an alliance or co-operation between two or more trade unions across borders for mutual benefit. This is highly problematic as members may be unable to recognise the necessity for labour internationalism and the benefits it provides. There is an integral need therefore to raise awareness on labour internationalism.

Participants were given information on UNISON international activities – solidarity & international development and labour internationalism - to ensure that each fully understood UNISON's international role. It was re-emphasised that discussions were to focus upon labour internationalism. Initial discussions highlighted three key responses to UNISON international activities resulting in the identification of three member identities:

**Passive** - this member is individualist in nature with this reflected in their expectations of union membership. Being a member of a trade union is an economic exchange. UNISON is the service provider and they are the service user. The service user pays subscription as an insurance should they need representation. They do not get involved in union activities and do not recognise the wider role of a trade union. To express support for internationalism this member will need to be able to recognise how international activities affect them as individuals and their workplace.

**Interest** - this member acknowledges the wider role of a trade union in acting in collective solidarity globally. For support to be first achieved and then maintained this member needs to be kept aware of UNISON international activities through receiving regular communication to keep awareness on international activities high.

**Activist** - this member takes a keen personal interest in trade union internationalism. They may have joined to engage in actions of trade union solidarity and promote international development. One must however be aware of different forms of and levels of activism, from those willing to take a workplace activist role and occasionally distribute union leaflets to someone involved in promoting internationalism on a regular basis.

The intention in identifying different types of UNISON members is not to suggest either one is incorrect or a more positive stance. It is also acknowledged that these characteristics are generalisations. However it is used to highlight the need to produce an approach to promoting UNISON internationalism that caters for all members. In order to gain support communication must reach each of these three members through use of the previously suggested three step process:

1. **Raising awareness** of UNISON international activities and conceptualising Internationalism
2. **Recognition** and Promotion of Internationalism
3. **Provide evidence** of UNISON Internationalism and involve

## 3.2 Recognise

**Once participants had a clear understanding of UNISON international activities, the need was to produce recognition of the importance of and motives behind labour internationalism. Participants soon recognised the need for UNISON to act internationally.**

Once clarification was made on the different aspects of UNISON international activities grassroots members began to demonstrate that they recognised the importance of trade unions adapting to their external environment and acknowledged the importance of internationalism. Participants were asked to discuss how trade unions can cope in the globalised environment where multinational corporations have power and influence to pit workers off against each other. Many recognised the need for trade unions to revitalise their position as a result of declining influence and membership levels and the need to counter multinational corporations.

As discussion evolved, members agreed that UNISON policy must be developed to cope with the challenges presented by an increasingly international world as a result of globalisation (Herod, 2003) and showed support for acts of labour internationalism. Labour Internationalism is promoted by Frances O’Grady, Deputy General Secretary of the TUC<sup>1</sup>. She claims trade unions are ‘experiencing a challenging time as a consequence of the growth in global capital’. O’Grady extended upon this claiming ‘the trade union movement does not oppose globalisation, instead it must work to ‘shape’ it through establishing a new deeper internationalism to match that of global capital’.

This discussion highlights many of the current key debates within the trade union movement and academia regarding labour internationalism, such as concerns surrounding super unions and the challenges this brings to effective member representation; the idea of trade unions becoming more like MNC’s in attempts to counter them; obstacles to successful cross border co-operation due to variances in national industrial relations. However the most interesting point was that participants recognise the need for internationalism. Members recognised the need to create international links with other trade unions and the necessity for unions to adapt to the new world order and counter MNCs. In recognising cross border mergers may not be the appropriate and most effective tool available discussions evolved to discuss other options. The need therefore is to promote a stance that caters to the needs of the majority of UNISON members who work in the public sector. This stance already exists – labour internationalism. This highlights the need to raise awareness on labour internationalism and promote its motives.

Participants understood the benefits to co-operating with other unions however scepticism still exists surrounding internationalism being integrated into all policy areas. Members would be more supportive of internationalism if they understood that international activities directly affect national and regional policy making; there needs to be an understanding that these scales are not separate they work in parallel. Each scale of UNISON – be it branch, regional or national has an international dimension encapsulated through acts of labour internationalism.

It was evident during this stage of the focus groups that participants  
**i) now recognised internationalism and**  
**ii) understood its importance in relation to UNISON’s policy framework.**  
They recognised the need to counter MNC’s, but that trade union mergers are not the only option, acknowledging that strength can be achieved through collective acts of internationalism with other trade unions. The aim now was to provide evidence of effective internationalism in the everyday workings of UNISON and promote its benefits.

*<sup>1</sup>O’Grady made these comments during a speech made at Union Ideas Network Conference (17/05/07).*

### 3.3 Promote

**Once members were aware of the concept of internationalism and the motives for employing it within policy the final task was to provide real life examples of UNISON internationalism and the influence this has upon the daily workings of their union.**

Now that participants understood the relevance of the international scale and the need for UNISON to conduct acts of internationalism a case study was introduced for discussion. In analysing the UNISON & Ver.di alliance the intention was for participants to recognise how internationalism is integrated into the daily workings of the union.

On introducing the UNISON-Ver.di alliance the majority of grassroots participants were unaware of its existence and were initially very sceptical as to its motives. This could be as a result of two issues. It may be that communication is not effectively filtered down to the grassroots level – as insinuated by a comment that members are aware these types of issues are discussed at the annual National Delegate Conference but feel that such information is not readily available or filtered down to grassroots members. It could however exemplify the idea of a trade union being a service to individualised members and unless such an issue is deemed to directly affect them, then such issues go by unnoticed. It does however outline the fact that many grassroots members are not aware of labour internationalism meaning that some members were unable to automatically recognise the motives behind the alliance and how it could benefit them.

On discussing the perceived motives behind the alliance and seemingly promoting the benefits, each participant related it to the local scale and placed it within the context of their own workplace. Participants readily identified with how they could benefit individually, as opposed to associating the alliance in terms of an opportunity to create labour solidarity across borders through labour internationalism. It must be emphasised that labour internationalism epitomises the role of a trade union – it acts internationally to build solidarity between trade unions. It works in parallel with solidarity and international development activities, hence it being cited on the International page on the UNISON website.

It can be argued that to obtain grassroots members' support for the labour internationalism UNISON needs to emphasise the issues that will have direct, beneficial impact on individuals within the workplace. These issues do exist, yet the question remains how can this be effectively communicated to grassroots members? One suggestion is to promote labour internationalism through the provision of real life examples, as evident in the effective use of focus group discussions on the Ver.di alliance. Participants were informed how the alliance aims to co-operate on exchange of information; the idea being to learn from each others' experience in success or failure. Both unions differ in terms of the industrial relations model, yet this difference allows for comparison and review resulting in potential adoption of best practice.





It can be argued Germany is now experiencing the challenges of privatisation and a crisis of union influence which the UK faced over two decades ago. It is evident therefore that this provides an area for information exchange as highlighted by a Ver.di delegate<sup>2</sup> 'You (UNISON) experienced private providers in the UK so we can learn from you'.

Each focus group participant either had direct experience of, or was aware of, issues surrounding privatisation and outsourcing. They recognised UNISON's attempts to overcome such challenges through initiatives such as 'Positively Public'<sup>3</sup>. It was acknowledged that private outsourcing companies work on an international basis and therefore so should UNISON to counter this. Therefore, participants recognise the need for unions to be international and how the international affects them in the workplace. The alliance demonstrates how labour internationalism directly impacts grassroots members.

Participants could readily identify how the UNISON-Ver.di alliance is an act of internationalism. They understood how the alliance exemplifies UNISON promoting two-way flows of support and information exchange. The opportunities for information exchange were discussed with recognition that this would be of mutual benefit as both unions can suggest examples of best practice and as such learn from each others successes and failures. Interestingly some participants understood the UNISON-Ver.di alliance in terms of a 'domestic' policy because they could identify it as having a direct impact upon the workplace. International policy is too readily linked with international development and solidarity when in fact labour internationalism encompasses all of this in providing support and information exchange whilst increasing levels of solidarity between sister unions. The challenge therefore is to promote labour internationalism, to show members that co-operation with other unions across borders is not a domestic issue, it is international!

<sup>2</sup>UNISON and Ver.di joint seminar highlighting issues of best practice in dealing with outsourcing in Local Authorities held at UNISON, Arena Point 16/07/07.  
<sup>3</sup>Positively Public is UNISON's campaign for quality in our public services and produced evidence-based critiques of policies such as the Private Finance Initiative.

## 4. Summary

**It must be emphasised that the information presented here are only initial findings. The information is to be extended upon over the next three years with a closer examination of UNISON members' perception of UNISON international activities. This document is to be used to aid discussion in debates surrounding the development of future international development policies, with the main aims being to identify the need for and motives behind UNISON internationalism and increase member support.**

Initial discussions within focus groups were at first sceptical on labour internationalism. As is evident within this report, participants' knowledge on UNISON international activities was quite low - it is hoped that the structure of the research findings has demonstrated how focus group discussion developed: raising awareness to acknowledgement of the importance of labour internationalism and an assessment and understanding to how it influences the everyday workings of UNISON. Once these three steps had been introduced into focus group discussions participants were more supportive of labour internationalism.

The challenge now is to mirror this increase in support across the entire membership. They need to be aware that internationalism is not an after thought, an add-on or secondary to the perceived 'core' roles of UNISON. Internationalism is THE core role. Every aspect of UNISON policy making and strategic planning is international in nature. Multinational corporations are international. Labour is international. Life is international. Let's promote UNISON internationalism using the following steps involving grassroots members throughout:

**Raise awareness > Recognise > Promote**



# 5. Promoting Internationalism as a UNISON Strategic Vision

**This report demonstrates that once members are made aware of the apparent benefits of internationalism being integrated into UNISON policy frameworks they are supportive.**

The next step therefore is to consider and produce a clear and decisive framework on how integrating internationalism into the everyday workings of UNISON North West can aid an effective delivery on the UNISON four key objectives. Listed below is each of the objectives alongside an example of how internationalism can be exercised. Each example is to serve as a prompt for discussion and consideration of how internationalism can be further integrated into UNISON policies.

## **Objective One:**

### **Recruiting, organising, representing and retaining members**

- One of the most widely debated international issues of our times is that of economic migration. In promoting unionisation of migrant workers, UNISON would aid to reduce the vulnerability of migrant workers to gangmasters based in the North West region. Migrant workers contribute massively to the UK economy and in some cases act to support family members in the home country. What better way to promote internationalism in the workplace than through establishing worker solidarity through union membership.
- Through coalition building with various actors within the UK (i.e. voluntary sector, community and faith organisations, social movements), UNISON will not only increase its influence within these sectors but also provide opportunities to act as one for the greater good against acts of social injustice.
- A key argument here is for an increase in the number of representatives interested in raising awareness and promoting internationalism within the workplace. Representatives would be able to provide examples of how UNISON internationalism directly impacts upon their individual workplace and promote information exchange and solidarity between workers who have experienced or are experiencing similar issues.
- Internationalism can be promoted as a recruitment tool. Many workers are unaware of UNISON's international activities. By promoting this to non members it may increase recruitment levels.
- Raising awareness of UNISON's international activities in schools and further/higher education institutions would result in children and young people having more of an understanding of trade union purpose. They are also the workers of the future and therefore potential UNISON members.

## **Objective Two:**

### **Negotiating and bargaining on behalf of members and promoting equality**

- The UNISON-Ver.di alliance can be used to exemplify how internationalism can be employed to ensure that trade union members receive the most effective and appropriate representation and support when experiencing issues of reorganisation, restructuring or the privatisation of services. Through international co-operation UNISON and Ver.di are able to exchange information on best practice on how to deal with such issues. By combining their strength at the international level trade unions can attempt to influence multinational companies' strategic decisions to the benefit of their members.

- By joining forces with other public sector workers internationally, UNISON members could act in solidarity to ensure the improvement of public services and highlight the failures of PFI, privatisation and the marketisation of public services. This would act as information exchange for trade unions enabling them to learn from the successes and failures of others in how best to implement best practice. This is evident in the UNISON and Ver.di discussion document 'The Future of Public Services in Europe'.
- Providing stewards with education on internationalism would increase their negotiation and bargaining power by providing evidence of best practise and failings employed in other countries. It would provide a wider perspective on other workers' experiences and the conduct of employers in public sectors worldwide.

### **Objective Three:**

#### **Campaigning and promoting UNISON on behalf of members**

- Acting internationally enables UNISON to 'link solidarity abroad with action at home in combating racism, nationalism, and discrimination of all kinds, locally' (Waterman, 1998). UNISON already takes an assertive stance on any form of discrimination both within and external to the workplace. The 'Kick Racism out of Football' initiative is just one example of a campaign that could be extended across borders. There is great potential here for combined initiatives to combat racism and discrimination in pursuit of equality. Combined union strength would influence the combat of far right political influences and promote community cohesion.
- Internationalism would maximise UNISON's political influence both domestically and internationally due to combined union strength on a global scale. Such influence could lead to an extension of collective rights in line with ILO conventions.

### **Objective Four:**

#### **Developing an efficient and effective union**

- Internationalism through co-operation with other trade unions and the building of coalitions with social movement groups can aid an enhancement of the financial, staff and organisational processes through exchange of information on best practice.
- Trade unions can benefit enormously from intelligent use of new technology – UNISON should adopt new technology that adheres to the trade union movement's traditional strengths and introduces innovative information and communications technology (ICT) to aid union revitalisation (Schostak, 2007).
- Effective use of ICT can improve research on recruitment and membership data allowing for information on which to base international campaigns.
- Although the financing of ICT improvements may be queried, the benefits outweigh any costs as it has the potential to engage with new and current members whilst also acting as a recruitment tool.
- The use of ICT serves to promote UNISON's Green agenda by limiting the use of raw materials and resources thus acting as an aid to international development promotion.
- ICT provides numerous communication opportunities in building trade union solidarity across borders –it could be the basis of communication for grassroots members to contact other trade union member internationally or enable international officers to communicate on events/issues occurring in their country that may affect or be of interest to trade unions elsewhere in the world.



## 6. Key Areas for Discussion

- **Review techniques employed to communicate UNISON internationalism – examine whether current communication caters for all types of UNISON member.**

Communication practices may be efficient however the current approach does not appear to effectively target members who are not activist in nature. Need to find an approach which stimulates the interests of all members.

- **Increase recognition that the world is internationalised, as is their workplace and thus UNISON must also be focused upon the international.**

Members must acknowledge the globalised world in which we live – events elsewhere have a direct impact upon the economy and labour market here in the UK. It is therefore essential that UNISON is involved in international activities in order for information exchange and global union combined strength.

- **Create a clearer understanding of UNISON international policies.**

Confusion arose surrounding the nature of UNISON international activities. A distinction is needed between acts of solidarity, international development and labour internationalism. Although it can be argued these acts are intertwined members only supported activities once they understood the motives behind them. i.e. international development acts received a less than positive response due to it being an act of one-way solidarity, whereas acts of labour internationalism such as the UNISON Ver.di alliance received a positive response as it was evident to members how this could affected their workplace.

- **Identify ways to raise awareness of and promote international development activities.**

UNISON has a long history of engaging in international development activities however participants were often unaware of, or particularly negative towards, this activity especially when discussed alongside labour internationalism which received a more positive response.

- **Development of International Officer role.**

Identify ways in which this role can be made more effective in engaging with grassroots members. Political education and resources are vital here to ensure that members are receiving a standardised account of UNISON's stance on international issues and events. This can be produced by the creation of a UNISON international booklet used to educate officers and act as a resource for promoting activities to other members. The organisation of this ongoing process could be adopted by an international co-ordinator who ensures all members have access to the same international information. There is also the potential for new communication outlets such as an International forum where international officers meet to decide which issues/events should be focused upon – although it is acknowledged such a role has a degree of personal interpretation between each officer and the needs or interests of each branch it is also acknowledged that all UNISON members should have access to a certain amount of standardised information that presents UNISON's stance on certain international issues.

- **Necessity to promote an understanding that internationalism is integrated into all policy areas not additional to 'core' policies.**

It must be understood by members that every UNISON action has an international dimension. This can be achieved by removing the notion of UNISON scale (i.e. branch, regional, national, international) by demonstrating how each scale is inextricably linked through internationalism.

- **Inform members how internationalism benefits their workplace and increases UNISON representation effectiveness.**

This can be achieved through education on the benefits of internationalism. The need is to demonstrate how trade union information exchange on experience, best practise, employer or sector based knowledge can impact upon members in their workplace.

- **Identify ways in which internationalism can engage with UNISON grassroots members.**

It is vital that grassroots members engage with internationalism and have an understanding of its relevance. This can be produced through education with the potential for internationalism to become grassroots led. One example of this is an international themed event – a social event for members based upon a country which UNISON has associations with or has taken action i.e. Cuba night: Cuban food, music, guest speaker discussing issues Cubans' face, UNISON's relations with Cuba and an outline of UNISON's stance.

- **Reduce divisions/distance between workers across borders.**

Increase feelings of worker solidarity by creating initiatives that close the divide between workers globally, for instance twinning arrangements, communication opportunities. Create magazine using real life case studies that detail the lives of workers/union members in similar industries/sectors to highlight areas of commonality and create solidarity. Focus group analysis suggests members are more likely to be supportive and feel a sense of solidarity if they can associate with other workers. This can also be established through an extension of the current twinning of towns initiative. If workers were to understand they all want the same rights they may feel solidarity towards each other.

- **Identify areas for co-operation with other social actors.**

Individuals associated with social movements, community organisations, faith groups etc, may not be aware of the role trade unions have internationally. There exists therefore the potential to recruit new members through such co-operation and also create combined strength at community level against social injustice.

- **Examination of UNISON international activities and their impact upon supranational organisations.**

What kind of impact does UNISON's international policy have upon trade union organisations such as ETUC, EPSU, PSI? Does it undermine their role or enhance it?

- **How can UNISON maximise the use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT)?**

ICT can be employed to promote UNISON internationalism not only for the purposes of recruitment, but also to engage with existing members. ICT based research can assist in international based research by requesting member feedback or suggestions on current/potential UNISON activities. It also provides opportunities for fast, effective communication with other unions to provide messages of support or advice during crises.

# 7. Guide to Further Reading

A complete copy of the findings from this research will be placed on the UNISON North West website entitled '**The Changing Nature of Labour Internationalism: An Investigation of UNISON Grassroots Members' Perspective**', Rebecca Ryland University of Liverpool, 2007.

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