

Community, Youth Workers and Not for Profit Sector Organising Strategy

Introduction

The Community, Youth Workers and Not for Profit Sector has always been recognised as an area of growth for Unite. As a Sector, it has continued to make a year-on-year net growth in the number of members, representatives and recognition agreements, yet with little additional organising resource. This trend has been sustained over the last 6 years, and it is believed prior to this too.

In order to fully realise the potential for the sector, it is essential that resources are prioritised to ensure that those organisations with recognition agreements in place strive to reach their 100% density targets, whilst at the same time focusing on the huge untapped organising potential of the sector.

Over the last year we have been looking at various organising models, recognising that one style does not fit all, and held discussions with lay activists about these. We have also identified some key areas for growth.

Background

Unite represents around 60,000 members working in the Community, Youth Workers and Not for Profit Sector, an industrial sector made up of diverse organisations with many important issues in common, whilst also having niche interests. There has been an annual net increase in membership in the sector in Unite.

According to recent National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) statistics, 611,000, 2.2%, of the workforce are employed in this sector in England and Wales. In addition to these figures Housing Associations have a further 115,200 employees, and with the addition of Scotland, Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, and other specialist groups, we are talking of a potential 750,000 employees working in the sector.

Most recent statistics available show a workforce increase of 26% between 1996 and 2005. Evidence suggests that employment in the sector will continue to grow, once the economy picks up again, although the impact of the current climate is uncertain. With the two major political parties identifying the Third Sector as the key partner to help deliver reform of public services, and increasing amounts of labour being outsourced into Third Sector organisations,

we have to ensure that unionisation keeps up with this trend, in order to ensure that industrial pressure can be exerted on employers to maintain standards.

Unison, the other main union in the sector, depended largely on TUPE transfers into the sector for its penetration, whilst Unite and its predecessor unions organically grew in the sector, however this trend is changing due to the nature of services being outsourced and Unison developing a strong presence in the sector. Other unions are also gaining an interest, for instance PCS through the outsourcing of Department of Work and Pension jobs, is starting to take a keen interest in employment charities, whilst GMB has a small and traditional membership in social care and a few other charities.

In response to these developments, as well as to capitalise on the potential that the Third Sector presents, we have set out a two year organising strategy that aims to build effective and powerful union organisation in the sector. Firstly this will look at growing the number of workplace representatives and activists and then develop the membership base. It will look at both infill 100% targets and green field targets. Initial mapping together with analysis of Unite's membership shows greatest potential for organising in Housing Associations, Children's Charities and amongst Play Workers. Priority has therefore been given to 3 major sub-sectors due to this potential.

Organising Styles

Every sector brings with it its own way of relating, communicating and working. In order for organising to have an impact on recruitment, we have spent time talking to reps and members about how we can best build organisation in the Community, Youth Workers and Not for Profit Sectors.

Traditional models of organising are built on a model of conflict. Survey's within the sector continually demonstrate a high commitment of the workforce to their organisations and to the work that they do, and on the whole the workforce will put the needs of their work above themselves, even at great personal cost. The organising model therefore has to respond to the issues, in a sophisticated way, that demonstrates the added value that the union brings to enhancing both industrial and professional issues.

Issue focus

Without doubt, there is rich source of issues to focus any campaign around. With sector pay averaging 20% less than for public and private equivocal roles, with long hours, with disproportional levels of bullying and work related stress, with work intensification, with instability in funding and thus job continuity, with poor training and development, with the additional pressures that vulnerable clients bring, and with a devaluing of the professionalism of each worker, not to mention issues which are specific to each organisation, there are certainly issues through which to organise around.

The approach, however is to demonstrate how collective power can change these situations for the benefit of the worker and clients/campaigns alike, and add real benefit to the organisation concerned.

Relational focus

One of the huge strengths of the sector is its highly relational nature. It is known to be people focused and those that work in the sector will have a clear team ethos to all that they do. Pressures on organisations has eroded this, and people do yearn for community to be re-built and value to be restored.

In looking at different organising models, Unison have followed a very relational form of organising in the NHS, which would work well in this sector. It's focus is that the member/potential member will not care how much you know, until they know how much you care. It has brought in fantastic results.

Representatives are asked to go around the workforce, without any material, talking to staff, valuing them for what they do professionally, and building strong relationship with them. This is repeated on a number of occasions, so relationship is built first, people feel valued. They then talk about bringing people together to resolve a situations, and the trust is there. The staff work as a collective from the start. It is very traditional, where everyone is less concerned about their benefit of union membership, but more aware of one another's.

Communications focus

The disparate nature of the workforce continually presents difficulties for representatives to organise. Working alone or in small projects whilst working for a large charity or housing association is not uncommon. Face to face recruitment and organising cannot therefore be depended on, however the building of a strong communication strategy and virtual structures of support and interaction are essential.

Professional focus

All the research shows that a professional identity is a major factor encouraging union membership growth. Organising in the sector would benefit from the professional identities of workers being strengthened. Research also shows that where this is done, retention rates of union members is also higher.

Priorities

Housing Associations

There are currently around 1,700 Not for Profit housing organisations in the UK and according to the National Housing Federation, housing associations will be employing up to 40% more staff within a ten year period. There has been rapid change in Housing Associations in the last few years, in part a response to an earlier drive of central government to reduce the number of housing providers and merge them to form housing groups, part as a drive from housing associations having to spread their risk in merging general with supported housing to cross subsidise and share the risk, and part due to the transference of stock from the public to the not for profit sector. Housing has also participated in the welfare reform agenda in providing wider services for tenants, for instance employability support and training.

The changes in the sector have provided Unite with many challenges as well as opportunities. From a mapping exercise carried out from amongst all organisations, it is apparent that there is still a very low level of unionisation (13% in England). As a result of this, there are many green field sites that need to be approached. We have mapped the penetration of union membership in organisations where we have recognition (47%). In organisations where we have recognition in one housing association, these have generally merged with others into a housing group with 4 or 5 non-unionised housing associations. The group, rather than the section where the recognition is, frequently sets up a "staff forum" which determines the policy for the group, thus undermining the recognition arrangements. Like all organisations, restructuring is a common management feature. The auditing process also drives restructuring.

There are many workplace issues that Unite can organise around. Dignity at Work, recent research from the University of Glamorgan has demonstrated that not for profit organisations disproportionately have a bullying culture, compared to both private and public sectors. The lack of learning and development opportunities is a massive issue, and one that we are seeking to

address through the sector skills council, Asset Skills. The workforce has identified workplace stress as a key issue, especially as many are exposed to risks due to the vulnerable nature of tenants that they work with. Low pay and stability of employment also form a threat to workers in the sector.

Unite continues to sign and extend recognition agreements in the sector, which demonstrates that there is continual interest in the unionisation. There is one last thing that is worth noting. A number of people from the labour movement are now involved in housing associations at board level, from workplace reps to chairs of boards including Charlie Falconer, Hilary Armstrong and Bill Morris.

Where we have recognition, Unite will run 100% organising training for all representatives to ensure that they focus on infill recruitment and in building up their activists structures.

Where housing associations are part of a group, where some of the housing organisations in the group are non-unionised, there will be a prime focus on extending membership and organisation to these areas. Representatives will need to put a plan in place as to how they will achieve this, and work with organisers to ensure that these develop in line with them.

All other housing organisations will be mapped to see if we have sufficient membership to start an organising committee in each.

A strong industrial campaign will run along side this which will focus on valuing workers, funding, safety and training.

Children's Charities

The merger to form Unite has strengthened the union's presence amongst the children's workforce. With Youth Workers and Children's Charities coming together, there is a real opportunity to grow this sector.

Out of the top five Children' Charities, Unite has recognition in Action for Children (jointly with Unison, although we are the lead union), The Children's Society, Save the Children, NSPCC (with recognition for the Childline workforce, and a small membership across the organisation, where Community also has a niche interest). Unison is recognised in Barnardos. We also have membership of many other Children's Charities from the National Children's Bureaux to the Fostering Network. Other major Children's Charities are yet to be organised, and those that are need to focus their resources to develop a 100% campaign strategy.

All representatives in the Children's Charities sub-sector would need 100% organising training, tailored to the workforce, and then would need close monitoring to ensure that activity is sustained in each workplace.

To accompany this, all non-unionised workplaces, will need mapping where we have union members, and then a strategy for growth put in place which will focus on the professional and industrial needs of the workforce. Major targets for organising will also be identified, like Spurgeon's the next largest non-unionised workplace.

Play Workers

The Union is strongly positioned to undertake a major organising drive amongst the nation's non-unionised 113,000 play workers. Over the past years the former CYWU, now part of the Community, Youth Workers and Not for Profit Sector assisted the play work profession in establishing an identity, a professional qualification framework, a section of the union for play workers, a new strategy plan and funding for the service. The union worked with the sector skills council to produce a substantial report that has been used widely on the benefits of play work. The CYWU Section has a place on its national committee for a play work convenor.

This work is widely recognised and several of the leading play work organisations advocate that workers should join Unite. Some of the main publications are keen to promote the work of Unite also. The union is represented on the main professional bodies supporting play work.

The development of the profession and the service and training infrastructure now leave one glaring gap, nationally bargained terms and conditions. Low pay is recognised as the final problem facing the sector. The sector skills council has identified this and dedicated an officer, who works with the union to address this issue.

Play workers work in small teams, but do meet together in regional and national conferences. They do view certain key websites and journals and their support structures and communication systems are regionalised and effective.

An organising campaign which focuses on pay and standards and secure funding and is regionally based working with play work units and community and youth workers branches is needed.

This would require organising commitments in each region with a national co-ordinating function for at least a year. It would require regional conferences and systematic advertising and editorials in the professional press. There would need to be a national launch of the campaign. There would need to be attendance at the main national and regional play work conferences over a two year period. A target of 100 new play work members in each region within the first three months of this work would be realistic and would increase incrementally from there as new activists were trained and involved in branch development.

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