

New Members, New Structures

Third British-German Trades Union Forum

London

21 and 22 April 2004

Summary

How to respond to the political, social and organisational changes of the late 20th and early 21st centuries was the challenge confronting German and British trade unionists at the third British–German Trade Union Forum, held in London in April 2004.

The Forum aims to develop closer ties between trade unions and trade unionists in Germany and the UK and specifically to provide the opportunity to learn from policy and practice in the two countries. Its annual discussions are unique, for it is the only transnational body that brings together European trade union activists working at different organisational levels. The Forum is a collaboration between the Anglo-German Foundation, the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung and the Hans-Böckler Stiftung.

Some 30 union activists – from leaders and senior policy-makers to workplace organisers – plus policy-makers, researchers and academics took part in the 2004 Forum. The two days of intensive debate and discussion focused on understanding why unions in both Germany and the UK are facing a potential membership and organisational crisis and how they are developing innovative policy and activity to meet this challenge. Keynote speakers included Brendan Barber, General Secretary of the Trades Union Congress, and Michael Sommer, Chair of the Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund.

The trade union movements in the two countries find themselves confronting similar threats:

- Globalisation – the ability to move both capital and labour around the world – which has led to offshoring/outsourcing. Over the past 20 years much large-scale manufacturing (especially of consumer goods) has moved outside western Europe. Now the same thing is happening in the service sector – and before long any process that can be completed down a digital stream (from air traffic control to radiography) has the potential to be carried out anywhere.

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- Economic and social change, which has severely eroded the traditional recruiting base of trade unions: white men working in manufacturing industry. Millions of manufacturing jobs have been lost. The number of jobs in the service sectors has increased, but these sectors are traditionally non-unionised, and employment is largely in small and medium-size enterprises, where again recruitment is difficult. Contract and agency work is increasing.
- Declining union membership. The number of union members, and the density of union membership, has fallen steadily in both countries. Unions are failing to widen their appeal – to women, to minority ethnic groups, to young people, to people working in non-unionised employment areas (e.g. IT). Lower membership leads to reduced political influence, both in the national arena and specifically with the SPD/Labour Party, where policy differences are exacerbating tensions.
- Unions' failure to connect with today's aspirational society, where employees' priority is to get on in the workplace rather than get even with management. Unions have lost the ability (and perhaps also the will?) to recruit and retain members.

To offset this pessimistic analysis of the state of trade unionism in the UK and Germany (which found almost universal agreement), participants put forward many positive suggestions and examples of policy and practice. In broad summary, these were:

- Get the ethos right. Like recruits like, so if everyone – however well-meaning they are – involved in a union (or just a workplace branch) is white, middle-aged and male, it will be hard to convince workers who don't fit that description that the union has their ideas and interests at heart. Other crucial factors are the language unions use and the organisational culture they project.
- Don't assume that young people are not interested in politics – but understand that their politics are based on ideas of ethics and decency, not on traditional party divides. Encourage them to become active, but don't expect them to give up their life to the union.
- At branch meetings, do not let wider political questions dominate to the detriment of industrial issues – which are the reason people come to the meeting. And keep meetings short and to the point.
- Establish a training culture. Training can be about classroom learning, but also involves learning from others' experiences – another way of bridging the age gap among activists and helping established members update their skills.
- Recognise that people are ambitious and have sophisticated aspirations. Unions should assist members to develop their careers by providing careers advice, training, job search, alongside their traditional function of supporting them in work-related issues.
- Establish dedicated projects/teams to recruit in non-unionised workplaces and in new work areas, e.g. media, IT. To be effective, people responsible for recruiting (whether union officials or volunteers) should come from the same work background.

Most important of all was the emphasis many participants placed on prioritising organising, i.e. recruiting new members and retaining existing ones. Union membership is no longer natural and automatic – new members have to be actively sought and recruited. This means employing dedicated organisers at both national and local levels, investing substantial resources in organising, and not expecting overnight growth – achieving a sustained membership increase is a long-term goal.

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Anglo-German Foundation/Deutsche-Britische Stiftung

The Anglo-German Foundation for the Study of Industrial Society (AGF) was established in 1973. The AGF is an independent bilateral body which funds comparative research and sponsors British-German events in the economic, industrial and social policy fields in both the UK and Germany.

Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES)

The Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, founded in 1925 as a political legacy of Germany's first democratically elected president, Friedrich Ebert, is a non-profit making, political public-interest institution committed to the principles and basic values of social democracy in its educational and policy-orientated work.

Hans-Böckler Stiftung

The Hans-Böckler Stiftung is the institute of the German Trade Union Federation (DGB) to promote co-determination, research and studies. In all its fields of activity it is committed to co-determination as a creative principle of democratic societies. It promotes this concept, supports mandate holders in co-determination positions and advocates the furthering of co-determination rights.