

In two minds

Trade unions need to think hard if they are to survive in the age of austerity.



THE past few months have produced so many examples of corporate incompetence—think of BP or Goldman Sachs or Toyota—that it almost comes as a relief to discover incompetence on the other side of the class struggle. Unite, the British union representing British Airways' cabin crew, is providing a textbook example of how not to handle an industrial dispute.

The crew's protracted series of strikes has been doomed from the start. BA has plenty of cash on hand and the support of the only employees who can instantly bring an airline to its knees, the pilots. The cabin crew, in contrast, are easily replaced. But the union is responding to growing setbacks by raising the stakes: complaining bitterly about "scabs" and, having already disrupted holiday after holiday, planning to organise another set of strikes over the summer.

With luck other union bosses will at least learn something from this dismal saga. They will come under intense pressure to mount the barricades in the coming months. Discontent is already rife throughout the rich world. It will become rife still as governments cut jobs in the heavily unionised public sector. But unions need to ask themselves some serious questions before they give in to their instincts. How should they respond to the straitened circumstances of most Western countries? Can they protect their members without inflicting intolerable harm on the public, and thereby undermining their cause in the long run? Above all, how should they adapt their organisations to a world in which the majority of workers are not unionised?

The unions need to start by taking a cool look at their prospects. These are not quite as grim as is widely assumed. It is true that union membership has fallen precipitously across the rich world, from a third of America's workforce in 1950 to just over a tenth today, for example. But such figures conceal some strengths. The proportion of unionised workers is edging up in the swollen American public sector. Schools and railways are not going to disappear in the way that mines and steelworks have. Many European countries accord unions a prominent, formal role in the regulation of working life. Barack Obama is America's most pro-union president since Jimmy Carter.

However, the public has no appetite for a public-sector intifada. Most public-sector workers have done well over the past decade. Some have done ridiculously well: Californian police officers can retire at 50 on 90% of their salaries. Governments have no choice but to cut public-sector debt, which is ballooning across the rich world. Mighty private-sector unions were destroyed when they tried to take on elected governments in the 1980s. The same thing could happen to the survivors if they overplay their hands.

The unions need to work harder at presenting themselves as champions of public services rather than simply as defenders of their own members. This requires more than lofty words. It

involves trying to improve the quality of schooling or policing, say, rather than being endlessly obsessed with “wages and conditions”. It also means making an effort to communicate with people outside the unionised ghetto. Talk of “fighting” may appeal to professional activists, but it offends those who are more interested in getting on than getting even. Generating fresh ideas in conjunction with policy wonks and NGOs would help make unions look like a constructive force, rather than sullen revanchists.

Two American trade unionists—one dead and one living—provide examples of how this might be done. The dead one is Al Shanker, the president of the American Federation of Teachers from 1974 to 1997. He was such a fierce negotiator that Woody Allen based a film, “Sleeper”, on the conceit that civilisation had been destroyed when “a man by the name of Al Shanker got hold of a nuclear warhead”. But he also saw that blind resistance to reform would destroy America’s schools. He made no secret of his belief that many teachers were incompetent, arguing in favour of testing them as well as pupils and of linking pay to performance.

The living one is Andy Stern. Mr Stern has dramatically increased the membership of his union, the SEIU, at a time when others are contracting. He has purged corrupt chapters and eliminated lavish perks for the top brass. Mr Stern has also been a frequent visitor to the Oval Office since Mr Obama moved in. He worries that a bunker mentality will consign the unions to irrelevance. He has argued that unions need to be more sensitive “to what employers are dealing with in their own industries” and made overtures to big thinkers on the right such as Newt Gingrich. During the health-care debate he tried to recruit America’s bosses to his campaign to replace the country’s system of employer-based health care.

Friends in need

Such radical thinking about how unions can best look after their members is rare. Many offer training for workers who are in danger of losing their jobs and advice on new careers. But unions may well discover that their future lies in rediscovering their old role as “friendly societies”, providing their members with the support they need to confront inevitable changes rather than trying to defend jobs for life.

Unions, in short, should be willing to reinvent themselves as dramatically as companies have in recent decades. In particular, they need to get serious about good management. The deck may always have been stacked against Unite in its battle with British Airways. But the union has not been helped by comically bad management. It has lumbered itself with two bosses, Derek Simpson and Tony Woodley, who are not on the best of terms. Mr Simpson provoked ire, from both BA’s management and fellow unionists, when he spent a tense meeting sending out messages on Twitter. The cabin crew fighting a losing and dispiriting battle deserve better.

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