

As the Trades Union Congress meets in Manchester in its 150th anniversary year, ICF chair Phil Jump reflects on his days as a Christian and Trade Union activist, and asks whether Unions have lost sight of their potential to be a bridge-builder.

I still remember the day I was summoned to Bill Morris's office. The Bill Morris in question was not the legendary leader of the Transport and General Workers' Union, now Lord Morris of Handsworth, but our local branch secretary of TASS, or Amalgamated Union of Engineering Workers – Technical and Supervisory Section to give it its full title. Through a series of mergers and amalgamations it was eventually swallowed up, along with many of its contemporaries, into the Unite conglomerate. Working in a shipyard in the 1980's, it was not so much a matter of whether you joined a Trade Union, but which one.

"You know how you keep saying that the problem with unions is that the moderates sit back and let the militants take over," Bill began, recalling my complaints about a decision recently made at a regional gathering, "It's time to put your money where your mouth is."

He went on to explain that as he neared retirement from work, he felt the time had come to lay down the mantle of union Branch Secretary and was intending to suggest me as his successor. Looking back from the safe distance of my mid 50's, I now that recognise this as an incredible act of faith in a fresh-faced twenty something who had far more opinions than wisdom or experience. And so began my introduction into the world of Trade Unionism.

At the time, Trade Unions, were seen as anarchic hotbeds of discontent and disruption. It was the era of the miners' strike, three-day weeks, works to rule, flying pickets and so I could go on. More than a few eyebrows were raised that a practicing evangelical Christian could be serious about becoming the branch secretary of a Trade Union. Some even questioned whether this was a sign that I had abandoned my faith. I disagreed, but nor did I see my union activism as an expression of that faith – in my eyes the two were co-incidental, and it is only as I look back that I begin to detect the resonances between them.

Growing up in an active and busy local church, I would argue that my faith not only equipped me with a set of values but also a raft of key skills. The simple truth was that through the life of a local Baptist Church, I had learned to participate in meetings, read and write minutes, speak in public and on occasion be part of diametrically opposing sides having to find a way of reaching some kind of respectful working agreement. It might be more than coincidence that the Trade Unions have in common with the Baptist Union of Great Britain, that their national leaders are called the "General Secretary".

Clearly someone, somewhere had recognised at least some of this, as a group of people, most of whom were considerably more senior to me seemed willing to trust me to represent them and be guided by my perceptions. I was reminded of those days in recent weeks when the veteran MP, Frank Field, famously resigned the Labour whip and Tory Minister for the Northern Powerhouse, Jake Berry, made a number of key photocalls at the Cammell Laird shipyard where this particular odyssey began. It's fascinating how two representatives of such different political traditions can pitch their fortunes on the endeavours of a group of shipyard workers.

I was there last time Frank's political career was in the headlines. Cammell Laird shipyard worker Lol Duffey had managed to secure the parliamentary nomination for the next election, and the Birkenhead Labour party was in conflict and disarray. Lol was one of the famous "Cammell Laird 39" who were imprisoned after arranging an illegal sit in on a gas rig that was under construction. As ever the dispute was part of a much larger fight against the inevitable decline of heavy manufacturing in the UK, in the face of overseas competition. The simple truth is that big ships, ton for ton, are the most portable heavy engineering contracts in the world – we were always going to be in the front line of that demise. But the unionists clearly felt that the politicians were not doing enough for them and battle lines were being drawn.



Banners like this one are largely seen as belonging to an age now passed, but bear striking resemblance to the "Good Shepherd" banners propped up against walls in historic Baptist church halls.



Lech Wałęsa addresses the shipyard workers of Gdansk

I saw the worst of Trade Unionism in those days, but also the best. Trade Unions have always had an international dimension, and our colleagues in the shipyards of Poland were getting notably animated about things going on in their country. Things were particularly active in the Gdansk shipyard where the endeavours of the emerging Solidarność (Solidarity) Trade Union have since been acknowledged as the first move in a campaign of protest and action that led to the eventual collapse of Communism across eastern Europe. Its leader, shipyard electrician, Lech Wałęsa after being awarded a Nobel Peace prize, went on to become Poland's first democratically elected president of the current era, leading Poland's transition to a post-communist nation. We were proud, as shipyard workers, to wear the Solidarność badge on our suits and overalls, giving financial and moral support to those who were attacked and imprisoned in the years of struggle.

It is sad that with the subsequent decline of Trade Unionism, stories like this seem to have been lost. I felt this particularly strongly in the run up to the UK's "Brexit" vote – those "Remainers" who campaigned from the left, seemed to have no recognition that the so called "influx from Eastern Europe" has its roots in the endeavours of old fashioned Trade Unionists. It is here that I stumble across another connection with my faith. If my identity as a Trade Unionist connected me with Eastern Europe's release from the grips of Communism, it was as a member of the Christian Church that a decade or so later, I found myself loading lorries and collecting just about anything I could to help turn indescribably squalid Romanian orphanages into places that were fit for human habitation.

But I guess that more than anything, my time as a union Branch Secretary helped to develop my still inadequate pastoral skills. Mine was often the task of bringing together opposing parties, speaking out for those who felt unfairly treated and misrepresented. At times it would require careful navigation through a set of difficult and conflicting expectations and requirements, and at times it simply meant standing alongside someone in the midst of despair and pain. There were those times when redundancies could not be avoided, there were no battles left to fight and no amount of anger or industrial action was going to change that reality. As a moderate I needed to learn when to "fight the good fight" and when to "weep with those who weep".

My claim to fame remains that I was the first Branch Secretary to lead a strike of the management in the shipyard. For me, it was a bit like the day when the Nazi's dropped a bomb on Buckingham Palace lawn – I now had solidarity and credibility with my colleagues on the shop floor. But it also highlighted how easily union activism can be misrepresented and misunderstood. The dispute in question was one that I had worked tirelessly to avoid; yes I had organised a successful strike ballot, but I had only ever seen this as an absolute last resort and was sure it would never come to that. I happened to take a couple of days' holiday; the Personnel Director, seeing me as the perpetrator of the problems, chose that moment to bring things to a head, and I arrived back at work three days later to find my members walking out.

I was the only guy who didn't get a week off, as I spent it in endless consultations and negotiations either with the regional team at TASS or in the directors' offices at the Shipyard. We found a way through, but a lot of damage was done, and being the precocious twenty something I was, I told the Personnel Director that if he wanted to behave like an idiot again to make sure that I was around to manage the consequences. He never admitted it, but his subsequent change of attitude suggested that he got it. Some of us had become Trade Unionists because we wanted to work for good, and at their best, unions can be more of a friend than a foe to managers and directors. This of course requires that Trade Unions remain committed to serving the genuine interests of workers rather than the political ambitions of the hard left.

It was interesting how my experience as a Branch Secretary and my role as Subcontracts Manager informed one another. The simple truth was that when I wasn't negotiating with my employer on behalf of its staff, I was negotiating with other companies on behalf of my employer. The challenges and skill-set required were almost identical. My immediate boss did not see it that way: "If you want to get on, you need to get out of the Union," he told me. He was new to the company and didn't understand shipyards or scousers. If he wanted me to resign as Branch Secretary, he would



have been better telling me it was a pre-requisite of my management role. But that duality of purpose taught me the value of integrity – I remember on one occasion another director acknowledging that in a pay negotiation I had managed to get their side over a barrel and they had no choice but to give what I was asking for. I told him straight, that if he expected me to do that every other day of the week when I was acting on his behalf, he should not expect me to be any different when I was representing his employees.

But that is very much a coin with two sides, something that hit me hard when the yard had its last “big strike.” Our future was in serious jeopardy and there was increasing tension and unease. Everyone’s job depended on Cammell Laird securing the contract for at least one of the next generation of Type 23 Frigates. I was a key member of the bid team, and the simple truth was that unless I went in every day and did my job, we wouldn’t even be in the running for the contract. But not everyone saw things that way and a call for action to “save our shipyards” resulted in a mass walkout. The picket lines were set and a small cohort of us knew that the future employment of the people who confronted us, depended upon our willingness to run the gauntlet of their abuse.

But I wasn’t just another anonymous “scab” or “strike-breaker”, I was known; I was supposed to be one of them, and I guess that now I should be grateful that they at least had enough Biblical literacy to call me “Judas.” It was tough, and that daily barrage of abuse took its toll. We had been told that we must only cross the picket line with a police escort, not stop and not speak to anyone. Perhaps you couldn’t be a Trade Unionist and a decent manager after all; sooner or later one or other would have to give to the other - solidarity had been replaced by abuse and ignorance. Maybe I was right, but I am sure that someone once told those who preached “Christ crucified” that you can’t be a Messiah and an executed criminal.

One day I decided to break ranks, I walked up to one of my abusers, an older guy who was clearly surprised and troubled by my approach. I quietly explained to him that I was on his side, desperately trying to save his job, and if I didn’t go in to write the bid for the next contract we had no chance of securing the future work we all needed. For a few moments he just stood and looked at me and then . . .

“Thanks,” he said, “And thanks for stopping.” That momentary encounter has been etched on my memory ever since.

My experiences in those difficult days also fuelled my passion for the work of ICF today. The simple truth is that my local Baptist church, where though I was much loved and supported, offered me very little in the face of my experiences. I remember sitting in Sunday evening services with the growing dread in the pit of my stomach at the prospect of another week of picket-line crossing, desperate for some crumb of hope, comfort or meaning. The shipyard dispute was on the front pages of every local paper, yet no-one ever asked me how it was for me. Those heated discussions in the church youth group about pre-destination, sin and salvation had done little to prepare me for these real-life experiences.

With the advent of Jeremy Corbyn as leader of the Labour party, Trade Unions have recently enjoyed something of a renaissance. I sense though that a disproportionate number of members from the public sector, means that they have become more concerned with protecting the interests of the sector as a whole than the wellbeing of those who work within it (though I recognise that the two are deeply inter-related). At a time when the public and political life of our nations seem increasingly divisive, to what degree is this movement overlooking its potential to bring together the various stakeholders and sectors in common accord? At their best, trade unions have the capacity to be a prophetic, pastoral and restorative presence in our society’ at their worst a means of manipulation, intimidation and control. Perhaps that’s something else they have in common with religion.

Phil Jump
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