Green Shoots from the Grass Roots? The National Shop Stewards' Network

Introduction

This article explores the implications of the internet for rebuilding a shop stewards' movement in Britain in the context of declining union membership and organisational power at the workplace. Shop stewards as workplace organisers have represented an important source of trade union power particularly in two periods of activism, in the first decades of the twentieth century and in the 1960s and 1970s. Such power was linked to more general upsurges of militancy and embedded within a broader mobilisation of workers. As this article will argue, these particular historical examples posed questions of the relationship between shop stewards and their own unions alongside broader socialist, political arguments that remain relevant today.

However, since the 1980s, there has been a substantial decline of shop stewards/workplace union representatives in UK workplaces (Charlwood and Forth 2008) as well as a reduction in their workplace role and duties (Kersley et al. 2006). This has led to suggestions that any associations of shop stewards are, in this context, very unlikely to be able to help in the revival of the UK labour movement. Darlington (2010:129) has suggested, for example, that the long and ongoing economic crisis has accentuated an 'atrophy of organization'. Furthermore, McIlroy and Daniels (2009) argue that workplace union representatives have had their role 'decisively debilitated'. Nevertheless, Darlington and others (Cohen 2006) still suggest that there is potential for the development of workplace shop stewards' organisation as a central component in a revival in rank and file activity.

Revival cannot occur in a vacuum and earlier periods of shop steward militancy have been linked with a broader trade union revival that is not yet present today. Having said that, some social movement theorists have argued for the continuing significance of collective organisation and action (Melucci 1989) whilst others have seen evidence of revitalised organisation through their analysis of activism (McBride and Stirling 2013; Upchurch et.al. 2008). However, as Fantasia and Stepan-Norris argue (2004), the labour movement has been neglected in much analysis of social movements more generally and, while this is not our central concern here, we would concur with their argument on the importance of distinguishing between more institutional, non-social movement structures and militant and dissident actions such

as might be seen in a shop stewards' movement. Others adopting a 'social movement' approach to trade unionism that is rooted in a Marxist, collectivist framework, such as Moody (1997), also highlight the importance of rank and file activity and shop steward, workplace organisation. There remains, however, a critical distinction between a movement that engages with other social forces and a network of communications that might support and enhance such a movement. Nevertheless, there has been considerable interest in social movement theory, the labour movement and well beyond, in linking the development of social networking and the internet with social movements more generally.

Indeed, some authors have suggested that the introduction of the internet has the capability to help accelerate the process of regenerating rank and file action. Bimber (1998) refers to this as 'accelerated pluralism' arguing that the internet and its efficient *"...communication and information flow will lower the obstacles to grass-roots mobilization and organization..."* (p156). He argues that there is good reason to believe that the internet will contribute to the decentralisation of control. However, as Hogan et al (2010:30) note, *"...these new electronic possibilities for the promotion of solidarity remain under-researched".*

Certainly, there has been a proliferation of a range of new material that has focused on the potential of ICT for the reinvigoration of trade unions (for example, Diamond and Freeman 2002, Lee 1997, Robinson 2009, Wood 2009). However, much of this is directly focused on the trade unions and their traditional, bureaucratic, top down information and communication models, as opposed to a revival and reinvigoration from below, independent of existing trade union structures. Furthermore, and a key point of this article, a major focus has also been on the effect on membership 'participation' from a vertical and virtual perspective (see also Martinez Lucio et. al. 2009), as opposed to horizontal and physical membership participation. Additionally, there is little consideration of more dynamic elements such as the interaction and organising of trade union activists from different unions across different sectors and regions that was a characteristic of earlier historical periods. There is also a tendency in the literature to focus on issues of decision making, participation and internal relations that are simplistic and apolitical (Martinez Lucio 2003) and broader politics are rarely discussed in these narratives (Martinez Lucio et. al. 2009).

This article provides empirical evidence of the recent development of an independent, national network of shop stewards - The National Shop Stewards Network (NSSN) – and attempts to provide a contribution to these missing elements within the literature. The NSSN's initial aim was to rebuild a shop stewards movement akin to those organised historically and this article assesses the possibilities of this in a 'virtual world' and in relation to real world engagement. What is seen as important in the network is that it offers a space for shop stewards to make contact and communicate across different unions, localities and regions. This is something that has declined and is not facilitated in current union organisational structures with, for example, the replacement of geographical branches with workplace branches.

More importantly, the network is independent, although supported by some trade unions, and this has the potential to open up debates and allow participating shop steward members to freely articulate their views. As will become clear, however, this independence has not halted conflict with official trade union bureaucracies. The network allows for horizontal participation of the entire membership and this, together with the free articulation necessarily brings broader politics into debates as was characteristic of earlier shop stewards movements.

Our analysis raises a number of questions. At the most general level this is whether a network might also be a movement or, at least, how might a network contribute to such a movement? Our discussion of earlier shop stewards movements also suggests a number of further issues that are likely to recur in any attempt at an independent national shop steward network and these focus on the internal relationships with official trade union organisation and the external relationships with socialist political parties. Finally, the efficacy of horizontal engagement as opposed to a more traditional 'vertical' participation in trade union structures is explored empirically. With these questions in mind, the article will begin by identifying the recurring issues that might derive from an analysis of two earlier periods of heightened shop steward activity. Secondly, we will explore the literature relating to the internet, trade unions and the labour movement. After outlining the research methodology the evidence to assess the significance of rebuilding an effective and active shop stewards movement that can go beyond the virtual world and provide more than a sophisticated communications system is analysed.

A shop stewards 'movement'?

In order to develop a clearer conceptual understanding of the characteristics and tensions evident in our analysis of the NSSN it is useful to review analytically the significance of previous periods of trade union activity in which shop stewards have figured prominently both theoretically and in practice. In doing so focus is placed on two key periods of activity in the first two decades of the twentieth century and the 1960s and 1970s, not to provide an historical account but to highlight areas of argument that prefigure debates in relation to the NSSN. In both these periods workplace trade union representatives or shop stewards played significant roles in the organisational and political development of trade unions and, in doing so, became the focus of analysis themselves. More specifically, the interplay of relationships between workplace trade union organisation, shop stewards, national trade union leaderships and the politics of socialist and communist political parties became crucial.

Analytically, the shop steward has commonly been placed at the centre of a web of connections in relation to management, their members, their trade union hierarchy and, less commonly but significantly, in relation to external political organisations whether they be social democratic or revolutionary socialist. That series of connections and, particularly the role of articulator of workplace grievances has also led to shop stewards being regarded as potentially powerful individuals. That power being delivered by a supposed or real ability to organise strikes and close workplaces sometimes in spite of the 'official' trade union position. What follows necessarily focuses on the dynamics of the relationships between shop stewards within their unions and in their potential political relationships and a neglect of the relationship with management. However, it is important to stress the significance of that underlying point as, for arguments rooted in Marxism in particular, it is the key relationship between capital and labour expressed at the workplace which is significant in the focus on the shop steward as a potentially powerful individual. That this relationship can just as easily lead to 'moderation' as 'militancy' was expressed clearly in the first two decades of the century and repeated in the second historical

period identified in this article (for contrasting views of the latter see, for example, Blackburn & Cockburn 1967 and Wigham 1961).

The shop steward as the servant of two masters is graphically described by Hyman (1975) in his introduction to Goodrich's book The Frontier of Control (1920) and focussing on our first period:

'There are two aspects of shop steward activity. The first was to act as a safety valve for the explosive build-ups of workers' grievances ... However, it was the second, more militant aspect of the stewards' activities that caught the headlines and sustained the popular image of the steward as a source of disorder'.

The industrial relations literature of the 1960s and 1970s repeated the argument as did leading trade unionists. Hugh Scanlon of the Engineering Workers' Union (quoted in Lane, 1974) was just as clear:

'This is the shop stewards dilemma. He has the employer, who can use all sorts of undetectable victimisation that doesn't necessarily mean dismissal, and he has to satisfy the members'

Leaving this relationship to one side however, does not remove us from more theoretical and practical questions about the capitalist workplace itself. Again, both the periods identified have an encompassing common issue, what can loosely be described as 'workers' control'. In the earlier period this is associated with syndicalist arguments (see Hinton, 1973 and Holton 1976) and, as Davis (2009, p.120) argues:

'syndicalism represented the much grander project of winning, through industrial action, workers' control of the means of production as a whole, thereby consigning capitalism to the dustbin of history'.

Guild socialism as advocated by G.D.H Cole (1972 & 1973) provided an intellectual gloss to the argument for trade union reorganisation and the significance of the workshop as a locus of control as against a more bureaucratic state control of industry.

Our second period sees a re-emergence of these debates both through the Institute for Workers' Control and the advocacy of Ken Coates and Tony Topham (see 1968 for an historical overview and 1972 for the then current debate). This was followed at the end of the period by ideas of workers' plans epitomised by that at Lucas Aerospace but followed elsewhere with the support of a network of trade union resource centres (see, for example, Beynon & Wainwright, 1979 and Wainwright & Elliott, 1982).

In each of these examples from the different periods it is the shop steward that is central to the development of the political project representing, as they did, rank and file workers and also as the source of a potentially disruptive power. The final point is the internal relationship between the shop steward and the union hierarchy. Again we find arguments in both theory and practice and a particular location within a Marxist frame of reference. Hyman (1971) focuses his theoretical analysis on Michel's 'iron law of oligarchy' and the potential for the bureaucratisation of trade unions but is careful to note that the 'law' is:

'…subject to important constraints. Attempts to extend the process of incorporation ***do*** *meet significant obstacles to success. To this extent, the 'optimistic' interpretation of trade unionism cannot be rejected* ***outright***' (p.37, author's emphasis).

In the earlier of the two periods under consideration, major developments can be seen in trade union action at the workplace, and in the organisation of strikes and disputes that challenge the leadership of trade unions and led to the establishment of new organisational forms with a strongly political dimension as Murphy's (1972) review of the period shows in relation to the engineering industry and the impact of the Russian revolution. Cole (1972) picks up the more general argument from Liberal and Labour politicians on this 'revolt against trade unionism' and comments on the 'growing conflict between the leaders and the rank and file' (p.55). Alongside these internal conflicts, shop stewards sought to extend their organisation and struggles to other workplaces and build rank and file organisation that was independent of the official union leadership and, unsurprisingly, brought conflict with it. Murphy (1972),

6

for example, describes the process in engineering in Sheffield (see also Frow and Frow, 1982).

The internal conflicts of the 1960s and 1970s have been extensively documented in the literature and, most notably, in the Donovan Commission (1968) and its research reports (see McCarthy 1967 on shop stewards) and their documentation of the 'two systems' of industrial relations. Again, the 'agitator' analyses of shop stewards can be identified, both positively and negatively, and an investment in them by socialist and revolutionary political parties as agents of workplace power. What can also be perceived is the antagonism to unresponsive and right wing leaderships and their replacement by those, most notably in the Transport and Engineering unions, from a shop steward background and a power base within them.

Moreover, the linking of workplaces and building a national identity became important in, for example, the formation of shop steward 'combine committees' bringing together workplace union organisations across a particular company in the UK and, occasionally, beyond. The Liaison Committee for the Defence of Trade Unions (see McIlroy and Campbell 1999) established in 1967 was effectively sponsored by the Communist Party, but other organisations such as the Socialist Workers Party in particular, grew rapidly and centred their action on shop stewards and workplaces and sought to grow equivalent national infrastructures (see Cliff, 1975 pp 177-83 for a discussion of how workplace branches were to operate).

In such a brief comparison of two periods of intense shop steward activity it is not possible to analyse the detail of the economic and political environment in which trade unions found themselves and, indeed, sought to shape. It is clear that both periods saw spurts of membership growth and were characterised by high levels of militancy and industrial action. They differed in that the early period had roots in craft unionism and the engineering sector whilst such differences were overlaid by 'semi-skilled' work across a broad spectrum of industries and a growing engagement with the public sector in the second period. Nevertheless, sectionalism remained a characteristic of trade union activity and the significance of socialist politics was central in providing a class-based approach that emphasised unity and solidarity in action across such boundaries.

We can now draw together these different threads across the two examples as important for underpinning an analysis at any attempt to generate a 'new' trade unionism based on a regenerated shop steward movement. In doing so, four areas of attention are noted. Firstly, shop stewards movements have provided a basis for solidarity between potentially isolated activists. The simple experience of knowing that others face the same problems and have similar strategies for responding is the start of the development of a movement. Secondly, and building from that first shared experience, is the development of collective solidarities beyond individual workplaces. Thirdly, there is the challenge that a shop steward focussed and independent movement is likely to provide to existing trade union leaders. Fourthly, there is an inevitable engagement with socialist politics and political parties which see the workplace as reflecting the key engagement with capitalism and a powerful shop steward organisation as central to 'the struggle'.

As will become clear from the empirical data, each of these areas are central to an understanding of the issues that will occur in relation to developing the NSSN. It is also clear that there will be important differences with the earlier periods of activity. For example, the composition of the trade union movement has changed significantly with women now the majority membership and the public sector dominating trade union organisation. Ideas of workers' control, never dominant but often influential, have become more or less non-existent in an articulated way although, for example, debates about targets and their setting in the public sector are precisely concerned with that issue. Trade union consolidation has continued through mergers so that there is an even smaller cohort open for individuals to join as well as a small group dominating policy making within the TUC. Atypical and migrant workers have become important sectors of the workforce with their particular challenges for organising and a range of grievances in relation to job security and employment rights. Such differences from past experiences will set new agendas for any new shop steward network and will inevitably shape strategies and organisational forms.

Finally and most obviously, but importantly for the discussion here, the medium for communication has changed dramatically. From the earliest communication by word of mouth on through written communications, telegrams and telephones which

inevitably shaped the possibilities of earlier movements the internet and social media open a whole new dimension.

Trade unionism, the labour movement and the internet

The internet and social networking has become the focus for wide ranging debates about its significance in developing and facilitating social movement actions. Our discussion here is on the specific engagement of the labour movement in the UK with the internet and this became particularly focussed fpllowing the publication of Eric Lee's book (1997) and the launch of the Labourstart website. The rapid technological advancement in interactive social networking such as Facebook and Twitter since then has meant that the labour movement now has a vehicle of communication that provides for constant global open access that is not (supposedly) controlled by any state, employer or trade union. It potentially allows for independent voice, as well as great speed in the ability to share unlimited amounts of detailed information with others and organise campaigns and protests in a very short period of time.

Trade unions themselves have, however, been slow adapters to the web (Diamond and Freeman 2002), although they have dramatically increased their internet usage. In recent years, unions have also started to make more use of social media and social networking (Wood 2009). The TUC and individual unions have created closed communities for UK union representatives with site featuring things such as themed bulletin boards, personal profile pages and private messaging as well as "friending" system to follow other contributors. Greene et al. (2003) have argued that such technologies and sites have the potential to reduce the distance between the rank and file and union bureaucracy but suggest that the hierarchical channels of communication can reinforce existing power relationships.

Although strategies such as these can be perceived positively, this article concurs with Heery *et al.* (2000), that this can also be regarded as another form of 'managed activism' by the unions, which maintain ultimate control over the sites. Members may be cautious as to what they post and, as Martinez Lucio (2003) points out, they can also reflect the durability of existing social and political constraints which can limit areas of activity. Fitzgerald et al (2012) also discovered that some trade unions

have closed down online discussions that they felt were producing perspectives that challenged their union democracy. Therefore, the question must be raised as to how far member and worker 'participation' can go on these websites.

In contrast to this 'official' approach to the internet more informal sites grow and decline around particular disputes. It is suggested that these sites do not develop any further, not because they were controversial or weak, but due to their major focus being on single and limited actions. We would also argue that such sites are significant as they demonstrate independent worker attempts to actively organise and mobilise other workers to create solidarity. These sites represent workers who were clearly committed to tackling a particular cause of injustice that was important to them Whether the sites are official and ongoing or unofficial and short lived a critical question of active engagement and participation remains.

Much of the literature views 'participation' as simply members participating in website bulletin boards or even simply accessing the union website online. Furthermore, it tends to focus only on vertical and virtual participation and there is much less on the horizontal and/or physical participation that may develop. There is also a distinct lack of any empirical data relating to union members articulating their independent views on union websites although this raises further issues. For example, as Hyman (2007) suggests, the most active participants on website message boards tend to be '*…self selected advocates of a distinctive agenda'* (p.206).

It s also the case that individuals might retreat into unreality of the virtual realm at the expense of 'real' social contact (Kraut et al. 1998). Indeed, Robinson (2009) demonstrates how trade unionists have used 'virtual spaces' in an attempt to create a place to support a range of labour activities. Yet, Bimber (1998), based on a US analysis of 'real' groups, claims that the internet is accelerating the process of issue groups formation and action. He refers to this as a model of 'accelerated pluralism' and argues that there is good reason to believe that the internet will contribute to the decentralisation of control. Ward and Lusoli (2002:2) also suggest that Information communication technologies (ICT) have '*the potential to decentralise and democratise power within traditional hierarchical union structures"* and argue that:

"...increasing use of ICTs will further undermine the role of traditional representative organisations, including trade unions in favour of more issue oriented groups' protest networks and/or individualised forms of participation.'

As our empirical research suggests, a more open network such as the NSSN does indeed return as to the issues of control, the influence of individuals (and political parties), and the relationship between the virtual and the real.

Methodology and background

At a conference sponsored by the Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT) in 2006, there was an informal call to 'rebuild the strength of the labour movement' by creating a new shop stewards movement. A steering group was established to help build local, regional and national networks of elected union representatives from different unions to be in permanent contact. A number of UK trade unions supported the development of NSSN, although all refrained from direct involvement in the network, leaving it to self develop. The NSSN was launched in 2007 with national support from six unions covering public service workers, communication workers, journalists, prison officers, bakers and food workers and what remained of the mineworkers. Support came from trades councils, union branches and individuals. Significantly the NSSN described itself as a 'network' but regularly referred to a broader conception of a shop stewards 'movement'. Equally importantly, 'membership is open to all elected trade union representatives 'who are not national full time officials' thus returning us to one of the historical issues highlighted earlier.

Independent regional networks in the North East, South West, North Wales, London, Yorkshire and Humber, North West and West Midlands were established to begin increasing local networks' membership, not only online, but also through regular physical meetings. There is also an Annual Conference where all regional networks have representation and there is a Young Members' Group which self-developed independently. Apart from individual union General Secretaries attending the Annual Conference and confirming their support to the network it operates independently with a national steering committee that was established for organising purposes only and is elected annually.

However, in spite of its own desire, endorsed at its Steering Committee that 'No one political party should dominate' ... the fear is that there are going to be 5 (political party) members running the committee, [and] that will not happen' (Minutes of NSSN Steering Committee 21.07.07). The NSSN also asserted that it would not interfere in internal trade union business, but seek to strengthen confidence, democracy and accountability at all levels of all trade unions. Again, as can be seen from historical examples, these attempts to remain independent of socialist political debate and formal trade union organisation were bound to be challenging if the network was to be a movement or at least part of one and we return to this in the empirical evidence and the conclusion.

In terms of the methodology, the NSSN was initially investigated for this research through Facebook. Initially, one of the authors became a participant observer in the group and analysed the communications distributed amongst network members. Access for research interviews was granted through the national steering committee and as key organisers were contacted this snowballed into a larger cohort of respondents. The focus then moved to examining *both* the physical and virtual networks. Overall, 15 face to face in depth semi-structured interviews with NSSN key organisers from different regions took place between 2008 and the end of 2010. Participant observation was conducted at a number of meetings including two AGMs in 2010 and 2011, a North East SSN steering group committee meeting, three North East SSN meetings, two Yorkshire and Humberside SSN meetings and ongoing online communication from, and participation with, the NSSN email list. All online email communication was analysed as documentary evidence to examine both the online and physical activities of the NSSN. Finally, as most participants of the NSSN are online users, self completion questionnaires were sent out via email. As the email user list is confidential, this required access from the email coordinator and permission was granted by the steering committee of the central NSSN in November 2010. The questionnaire site closed in January 2011 and received 188 replies from around the UK. Inevitably, those most likely to respond will be more actively engaged with the Network and, although this may introduce some over estimation of activity it was important to focus on those who might be more interested in the network as part of a broader movement. Anonymity was also assured as

participation can, as can be observed below, raise internal trade union issues and pseudonyms are used where necessary.

Beyond networking?

The NSSN has its own dedicated national website and produces weekly bulletins to all members via the email list with updates of crucial issues uploaded almost daily. The offshoot regional networks have their own websites running alongside the main site with more local information for their members. Through in depth searching of the various websites and email correspondence, it was found that much information has a 'collective' dimension and consists of information relating to various campaigns, protests and events. Membership participation is encouraged, with requests to join discussions on particular issues that are open to everyone, as well as requests for members to become physically involved in many of the advertised campaigns and regional meetings. Information on how these campaigns will be organised is extremely thorough and helpful for any isolated individual who desires to participate. Some regions have created their own banners that they now use when attending campaigns, marches or trade union events.

There is also an 'individual' dimension to the network's correspondence, particularly relating to specific workplace issues. For instance, in the open requests by individual shop stewards to others asking for advice on a problem they are experiencing at their workplace. There is also a handbook on legislation and advice before taking strike action produced for individual shop stewards entitled 'Going on Strike'. Individual members are informed of the location of picket lines for specific disputes and asked to show their support by either sending messages or attending.

There is, therefore, a plethora of information that is communicated across the network that many shop stewards may not ordinarily have access to even if they do not have the time or resources to attend any of these events. However, they will not be entirely excluded due to this, for minutes of meetings from different regional networks are communicated and shared with the whole community. Further, after specific events or strike action, individual blogs are regularly posted online describing the outcomes, attendance and shared stories. From the email

correspondence and NSSN websites there is much evidence of organising and mobilising horizontally between network members, both virtually *and* physically. A quantitative assessment is not possible given the range and scope of opportunities for participation but it is clear that the NSSN has gone well beyond an online communication network. In assessing why that is the case we need now to turn to the data from the questionnaire returns and begin with the reasons that individuals might engage with the NSSN.

Members' perceptions of the NSSN

It is clear that a number of levels of engagement can be developed which we use to classify three types of network member. Firstly, the 'passive user' who rarely if ever, posts information but rather uses the network as a resource for information and ideas – in a 'surveillance society' such users might even be hostile to the aims of the network or at least unconvinced of the arguments pursued. Secondly, is the 'active engager' who also uses the Network as a resource but may also engage further through sending notices of support, following up on petitions and links or even attending meetings and demonstrations identified in network communications. Thirdly, the 'active user' is identified who posts information, is engaged in organising network events and seeks to influence and engage directly with others in 'the real world'. Inevitably, this last category is the smallest but it is essential for the continuance and growth of the network and is the catalyst for any engagement between the network and the development of a wider movement. We would also argue that, as the historical analysis suggested, socialist political parties are almost certain to be 'active users' of the network as it provides the opportunity for engagement with activists and the chance to add a political direction to discussions and posts. This is clearly challenging to the networks aim of being non-sectarian and independent. Within this classificatory context the research began with identifying characteristics of NSSN members.

Members were asked how they had initially discovered the network. 44% claimed from 'other members', 16% by a pamphlet or flyer and 5% by an internet search. Only 3% claimed they had found out about the network through work colleagues or their union convenor. However, 26% did say that they had discovered NSSN from

information from their own trade union despite the network being independent of official structures. Network members were also asked why they joined the NSSN and 89% (from 139 responses) stated that they joined *'to share information with other shop stewards about workplace issues'* and 38% declared that they *'wanted to become more active as a shop steward'*. Other opinions were offered in the 'other reasons' box such as

'*to build a movement of shop stewards nationally capable of putting pressure on unions and TUC to struggle on behalf of workers' rights and interests'*

'*to work with ACTIVE members of the trade union movement without interference from paid officials'.*

The respondents were also asked to indicate how 'active' they were in the network.

There were 157 responses to this question and 50% stated that they 'always' read the networked emails, 34% 'frequently' and 11% 'sometimes'. Thus, the virtual participation in the network appears to be high, although it is acknowledged that this amounts to simply 'reading' the correspondence or being a 'passive user'. There are much lower numbers of respondents who are 'active engagers' and 'write emails to other network members online' or 'contribute to debates and questions online', with the former having 68% of members claiming 'rarely or 'never' and the latter 60% of members.   It appears that less members are inclined, or willing, to contribute 'actively' online but, as suggested with the 'active engager' category, there was a more encouraging percentage of members who claimed they attended meetings, with 58% 'sometimes' attending regional meetings, and 18% 'always'. In terms of physically attending campaigns promoted by the NSSN, 87% stated that they 'sometimes' attended, 45% 'frequently' and 15% 'always'. Whilst the sample is, as acknowledged, more likely to represent active users, this is a significant finding that is at least suggestive of an engagement beyond the virtual. It also demonstrates the potential for the emergence of independent trade union structures that could develop alongside official structures and perhaps provide a challenge to them.

The spread of attendance and diversity of activities tends to differ from region to region with some less organised than others,

'I was a shop steward in North Wales and involved with the founding of the NSSN group there but moved back to Yorkshire where the NSSN is less well organised'.

Certainly, from examining the sites daily, the South West and North East networks are the most communicative and organised online. However, there were some members who claimed that NSSN meetings were not organised in their region or that they were too busy to get physically involved. During fieldwork participation, it was noted that some regions experienced a flurry of intense activity with very well organised and attended regional 'workshop days' held on weekends. These workshops allowed for network members to meet one another physically and share experiences, problems and interests. The different dynamics in different regions may be due to Hyman's (2007) 'self selected advocates' in certain areas who appear to be the key 'organisers' in coordinating online communication.

A further question asked what the members viewed as the most important purpose of the network? The questionnaire allowed for both a choice of activities for the respondents to choose from and an 'open comments' option.

The overwhelming majority of responses (95%) stated that the main purpose of the network was to have *'a forum for shop stewards from any workplace to organise together'* and thus highlighting the importance of the horizontal dimension of the network:

> *The chance to link up with shop stewards on a local, regional and national basis.*

> *The NSSN (and RSSN specifically) gives me the opportunity to network and contact the activists in the other trade unions, and offers us a space to work together to form organisations and campaigns that have a real impact on ordinary workers lives.*

For others it was information itself that was important,

Grass roots information from across the movement that I wouldn't normally see.

Information that is hidden from the mass of the population, especially across unions.

Beyond these straightforward 'networking points' can be viewed the emergence of active engagers and active users and the raising of those issues once again from the historical examples. Firstly, the implicit challenges to official union hierarchies:

It gives stewards the opportunity to organise across unions and industries. It does what the trade unions should be doing but they mainly prevent activists communicating, even in the same union.

How about starting up a new real general workers union? Most of the trades unions are a waste of space and are gravy trains for their leaders who don't give a fig about their members.

Secondly, the potential links between a network and a movement:

It offers the potential to begin mapping and making the Network a real tangible structure - offering horizontal communications between branches

Thus, the physical engagements take on a particular importance:

NSSN events are uplifting because you get to share lessons and ideas with other rank and file trade unionists. Exchanging information on what works and what doesn't. As a grouping of rank and file trade unionists, the NSSN is often quicker to respond in offering solidarity and supporting campaigns and disputes.

The least important factor relates to the political dimension that was identified historically. The least important response was to 'form a new political party' (26%). Indeed, the open responses to this were clear,

>   *'I am completely opposed to the NSSN promoting the idea of a new political body'.*

>   *NSSN priority should be to build rank and file organisation. This needs to be done outside of sectarian far left politics in order to appeal to the organised working class.*

Others reflected the bases of some left wing political parties and this was raised as a concern by some individuals.

>   *It offers me a forum of activists but is often spoilt by sectarianism*

Indeed, such answers reflected a range of tensions that were being experienced between the NSSN and one political party and one trade union in particular.

The NSSN and Tensions with Trade Unions and political parties

Many of the interview respondents explained independently that there had been some tensions between one large trade union and the NSSN. While we cannot identify the particular union given our assurances to respondents (and refer to it as ATU) the broader point is the invariable rise of conflict and tensions between official union organisations and rank and file activity such as NSSN represents.

>   *…there is one union at the moment that we have a big problem with in terms of being quite antagonistic to us.*

Other interview respondents from different regions gave the same views concerning this union. A Northern based interviewee stated

> *They (ATU) can't control it [NSSN]. They're just control freaks –that's why they're expelling people from [A Trade Union], you don't expel people unless you're worried about them do you? If they're no threat to you, let them get on with it.*

One of the respondents was personally experiencing such problems from ATU,

> *Basically I've been accused of talking about ATU's business outside – but it's not a secret society, I don't see why they think it is. The national union, applied for a resolution at the regional committee saying that the NESSN and being involved with them was incompatible with [ATU] democracy guidelines.*

They then explained that they were being threatened with disciplinary action,

> *They're having an investigation and I suspect that a disciplinary hearing will come out of it. But ... they're saying 'if you drop your involvement with the SSN', they're implying that they won't do anything to me, but I don't see why I should do that because they're actually taking my wellbeing away from me, my rights, so they're actually wanting me to act as though I'm a paid employee of theirs and I'm a volunteer in the union so I don't see what control they should have over me?*

This respondent was later disciplined by the union and sacked from their workplace positions. This is reminiscent of the way in which stewards in earlier movements were *"...brought within the scope of their union rule books in order to control them"* (Goodman and Whittingham 1969:38) and 'recalcitrant members' were expelled from trade unions.

What is also similar to historical movements is political party involvement and, again, the point is an illustrative one and so we continue to maintain individual confidentiality by referring to it as PP.

> *The (PP) seems to have its finger in the pie… I would imagine that they have got other reasons for being involved. They see it as a potential recruitment area.*

A year after this quote, the NSSN and PP had a dispute over membership of the steering committee which left the existence of the network open to question. The

whole argument was presented online for all network members to view and an intense email debate ensued. After a few days, the original initiators of the NSSN and the General Secretary of one large trade union urged a halt to the unconstructive email communication. An email later stated that they had met two of the PP members of the committee and misunderstandings had been clarified. Nonetheless, this dispute led to the resignation of the majority of NSSN officers who were not in the PP and there was a real concern as to the future of the NSSN. However, many members simply accepted the argument and were not too concerned that this would threaten the NSSN,

I've grown up with that so I'm not shocked by it, but I accept it because that's what happens on the left. You have all the different groups pedalling their own line. They haven't been as sectarian as they could be.

I think it's the recognition that it's much easier to destroy an organisation than to build one. If we manage to screw it up we really could blow something here (NSSN) and it would make it difficult to live with (PP member).

Overall, the evidence suggests that despite these political power struggles, the determination of those who still want a thriving and independent shop stewards' network remains strong. Intriguingly, after this dispute, the sites have simply continued as though no dispute had ever occurred. They continue to operate, mobilise and campaign and as one member claimed:

We have nothing we cannot get over.

Conclusion

The decline of trade union membership and workplace organisation has been widely documented (Charlwood & Forth 2008, Kersley et. al. 2006) but alongside this there has been an engagement with social movement debates (Moody 1997) and more positive suggestions for a reinvigoration of trade unionism within which shop

stewards have a critical role to play (Cohen 2006, Darlington 2010). As we have argued, this analysis is prefigured by earlier debates in relation to previous historical periods which have also focussed on the centrality of rank and file activity; the interaction between 'official' and 'unofficial' union engagements and vertical and horizontal organisational structures. Some authors (Diamond and Freeman 2002) have suggested that the internet has a critical role to play in regenerating trade union activity from below although we have also suggested that internet activity can just as easily be 'top-down' and controlling and lead to attempts to discourage or exclude union members from engaging with rank and file sites. In particular, they have the potential to pose alternatives to official policies and open up political debates influenced by socialist and communist groups.

We would concur with those authors above in arguing for the significance of workplace organisation and activism as being central to a reactivated trade unionism and agree that such a renewal cannot be wished into place in isolation from broader economic and social changes. We also see the internet as having an important role to play in any trade union regeneration but our analysis of the NSSN also suggests that the internet is not a neutral space to be occupied but a location of conflict and control. The NSSN illustrates this dynamic as the research has shown partial 'official' union support but also active intervention to control membership participation. It has illustrated the continuing significance of horizontal union organising which challenges traditional modes of vertical union organisation and it has illustrated the importance of activism by individuals and the potential support mechanism that a network can provide.

In this context the internet has a potentially crucial role to play. Firstly, it offers the means for speedy communication horizontally across unions and outside traditional vertical trade union structures. Secondly, as well as simply communicating information it can offer a forum for debate and a mechanism for exchanging ideas. Thirdly, it can provide a support mechanism for shop stewards who may be isolated in their workplace, not getting the help they are looking for from within official union structures or are seeking additional support for their own campaigns or disputes. Finally, and this is a critical point here, there is the relationship between the 'virtual' and 'real' worlds if the NSSN is to be anything other than simply another information

exchange for trade unionists. In this context the medium must be more than simply the message.

We would argue that five critical points have emerged from the discussion and empirical evidence reviewed here. We also argue that each of these points raise important questions and challenges for the NSSN and that they reflect, in some cases, just those challenges that previous efforts at shop steward organisation have encountered.

Firstly, there is the significance of the NSSN's independence. As with past periods this is an important factor in establishing the credibility of shop steward organisation but also raises questions as to the nature of the relationship with official trade unions. Clearly the NSSN has to engage and it is significant that it has emerged from a nationally recognised union, the RMT, and has national level support from others with General Secretaries and other officials attending conferences and meetings. On the other hand it has found itself, or at least some of its members, in dispute with a leading national union that has provoked some hostility and might dissuade some shop stewards from joining the network.

Secondly, NSSN is a support network. The importance of this is not to be diminished as shop stewards become isolated and continue to face hostile managements. Particularly, where stewards become engaged in disputes, a support mechanism is not only helpful at a personal level but also in invigorating members: 'we are not alone'. For a genuinely social movement unionism (and shop steward movement) to grow, then support between individuals is essential and the internet has a critical role to play.

Thirdly, movements must be horizontal and cross existing barriers. The two historical movements discussed earlier clearly demonstrated this as workers organised between workplaces and grew from local to national organisations. Again, this is a significant feature of the NSSN that the internet facilitates and is clearly evident through the postings on the site. Furthermore, the regionally based networks offer opportunities for links that don't remain 'virtual' but extend to meetings and events that will also add substance to the second point above. However, it is acknowledged that 'horizontal' communications and engagements are challenging to traditional

22

trade union modes of vertical organising, however, a network cannot be part of a movement without only this activity.

Fourthly, shop stewards movements inevitably engage politically and with socialist political parties, as can be seen historically, and an open network offers such an opportunity. NSSN clearly does not want to avoid political argument and could hardly do so. With public sector unionisation dominating the broader membership, the focus of many disputes is with governments and organising and action is critical within this sector. Beyond that, the NSSN seeks to separate itself from sectarian party politics but, given its workplace base and the central importance of that in socialist politics it is, as we have seen, extremely likely that political groups and parties will seek to be influential within it. Political fissures have undermined past shop steward movements and the strength of left-of-Labour parties is extremely limited but any upsurge in militancy is likely to see the re-emergence of party based politics in the NSSN and it will be interesting to see if it can maintain a non-sectarian political independence.

Finally and bluntly, there is the relationship between the virtual world and the real world if a network is to be part of a movement. In this respect, there is some sense of engagement from our respondents, albeit they are likely to be among the most active NSSN members. It is clear that regional groups have emerged with different levels of activity but have become a focus for meetings and interactions between members. Banners on marches and demonstrations also provide focal points as does the simple act of travelling together. Physical acts of solidarity deriving from online connections are also an important part of the NSSN's activity and offer further opportunity for real world engagement.

We would argue that the emergence of the NSSN has the potential to play an important part if a new shop stewards movement is to develop. As historical experience shows, it will be faced with significant challenges from within the trade union movement and from political engagement. Nevertheless NSSN has a presence beyond its virtual world networking and is surviving its current challenges. Perhaps, most straightforwardly, because it is meeting a need and it is a need that is not going away.

References

Beynon, H. & Wainwright, H. (1979) The Workers' Report on Vickers. Pluto Press, London.

Bimber, B. (1998) The Internet and Political Transformation: Populism, Community and Accelerated Pluralism. Polity, Vol 31, 1, 133-160

Blackburn, R. and Cockburn, A. (1967) The Incompatibles: trade Union Militancy and the Consensus. Penguin, Harmondsworth.

Charlwood,A. and Forth, J. (2008) Workplace employee representation:1980-2004. National Institute of Economic and Social Research discussion paper, available at www.niesr.ac.uk

Cliff, T. (1975) The Crisis: Social Contract or Socialism. Pluto Press, 1975.

Coates, K. & Topham, A. (1968) Industrial Democracy in Great Britain. MacGibbon & Kee, London.

Coates, K. & Topham, T. (1974) The New Unionism. The Case for Workers' Control. Pelican, London.

Cohen, S. (2006) Ramparts of Resistance: Why workers lost their power and how to get it back. Pluto Press.

Cole, G.D.H. (1972) Self – Government in Industry. Hutchinson, London.

Cole, G.D.H (1973) Workshop Organisation. Hutchinson, London.

Darlington, R. (2010) The State of workplace union reps' organization in Britain today. Capital and Class, 34, 1, 126-135

Davis, M. (2009) Comrade or Brother? A History of the British Labour Movement. Pluto Press. London.

Diamond, W.J. and Freeman, R.B. (2002) Will Unionism Prosper in Cyberspace? The Promise of the Internet for Employee Organisation. British Journal of Industrial Relations. 40, 3, 569-596

Donovan Commission (1968) Royal commission on Trade Unions and Employers Associations 1965-1968. HMSO, London.

Fantasia, R. and Stepan-Norris, J. (2004) The Labor Movement in Motion. In Snow, D. A., Soule, S. A. & Kriesi, H. (Eds) The Blackwell Companion to Social Movements. Blackwell, Oxford. pp. 555-575.

Fitzgerald, I, Hardy, J. and Martinez Lucio, M. (2012) The internet, employment and Polish migration workers: communication, activism and competition in the new organisational spaces. New Technology, Work and Employment, 27:2, pp 93 – 105.

Frow, E. and Frow, R. (1982) Engineering Struggles: Episodes in the story of the shop stewards' movement. Working Class Movement Library, Manchester.

Goodman, J.F.B. and Whittingham, T.G. (1969) Shop Stewards. Pan Management Series

Goodrich, C.L. (1975) The Frontier of Control. Pluto Press, London.

Greene, A.M., Hogan, J. and Greico, M. (2003) Commentary E-collectivism and Distributed Discourse: new opportunities for trade union democracy. Industrial Relations Journal, 34:4, pp 282-289

Heery, E., Simms, M., Delbridge, R., Salmon, J. and Simpson, D. (2000), 'The TUC's Organising Academy: An Assessment', Industrial Relations Journal, 31, 3, 400–415.

Hinton, J. (1973) The First Shop Stewards' Movement. Allen and Unwin.

Hogan, J. and A. M. Greene (2002), 'E-collectivism: On-line Action and On-line Mobilisation' in L. Holmes and M. Grieco (eds) *Organising in the Information Age: Distributed Technology,Distributed Action, Distributed Identity, Distributed Discourse* (Ashgate, Gower).

Hogan, J., Nolan, P. and Grieco, M. (2010) 'Unions, technologies of coordination, and the changing contours of globally distributed power', *Labor History,* 51, 1: 29-40.

Holton, R. J. (1976) British Syndicalism 1900-1914: Myths and Realities. Pluto Press, London.

Hyman, R. (1971) Marxism and the Sociology of Trade Unionism. Pluto Press, London .

Hyman, R. (1975) Foreword to the 1975 edition of C. L. Goodrich: The Frontier of Control. Pluto Press, London.

Hyman, R. (2007) How can trade unions act strategically? Transfer: European Review of Labour and Research, 13 (2) pp 193-210

Kersley B, Alpin C, Forth J, Bryson A, Bewley H, Dix G, Oxenbridge S (2006) *Inside the Workplace:Findings from the 2004 Workplace Employment Relations Survey*. London: Routledge.

Lane, T. The Union Makes Us Strong. Arrow Books, London.

Lee, E. (1997) The labour movement and the internet:The New Internationalism. Pluto Press.

McBride, J. & Stirling, J. (2013) Worker Activism and Agency: An Exploratory Review of Worker Activists' Biographies from the North East of England. Paper presented to International Labour Process Conference, Rutgers University, New Jersey, New York.

McCarthy, W.E.J. (1967) The Role of Shop Stewards in British Industrial Relations. HMSO, London.

McIlroy, J and Campbell, A. (1999) Organizing the Militants: the Liaison Committee for the Defence of Trade Unions, 1966-1979. British Journal of Industrial Relations, 37:1, 1-31

McIlroy, J. and Daniels, G. (2009) An anatomy of British trade unionism since 1997: Organisation, structure and factionalism. In Daniels, G. McIlroy, J. (eds) Trade Unions in a Neo-liberal World: British Trade Unions under New Labour. London:Routledge. 127-64

Martinez Lucio, M. (2003) New communication systems and trade union politics: a case study of Spanish trade unions and the role of the internet. Industrial Relations Journal, 34:4, pp 334-347

Martinez Lucio, M., Walker, S. and Trevorrow, P. (2009) Making networks and (re) making trade union bureaucracy: a European wide case study of trade union engagement with the Internet and networking. New Technology, Work and Employment, 24:2, pp 115-130

Melucci, A. (1989) Nomads of the Present. Hutchinson Radius, London.

Moody, K. (1997) Workers in a Lean World. Verso, London.

Robinson, B. (2009) *Virtual strikes, virtual places, virtual spaces: some implications for trade unionists and labour geography.* Paper presented at DTALG, Liverpool.

Upchurch, M., Flynn, M. & Croucher, R. (2008) the Activist as Subject: Profiles of Attitudes and Orientations of the PCS Activist. International Labour Process Conference, Dublin.

Wainwright, H & Elliott, D. (1982) The Lucas Plan: A New Trade Unionism in the making? Allison & Busby, London.

Ward, S. And Lusoli, W.   (2002) Dinosaurs in Cyberspace? British Trade Unions and the Internet.   Paper presented at Political Studies Association Annual Conference, University of Aberdeen, 4-7 April

Wigham, E. (1961) What's Wrong with the Unions? penguin, Harmondsworth.

Wood, J.   (2009)   Connecting Activists: Unions and Social Networking: A Report from the UK. Working USA: The Journal of Labor and Society, Vol 12, pp 629-639