Lessons in organising

By Professor Howard Stevenson



How can unions engage in a genuine renewal process and build union power to address union members' needs in a fast-changing political environment?

In our new book, *Lessons in Organising: What trade unionists can learn from the war on teachers*, we analyse the experience of the UK National Education Union (NEU) as it organised union members through the pandemic, working to make sure that public policy prioritised the health, safety and welfare of students, education workers and communities.

A major union victory for safe schools and communities: how did we get there?

As 2020 turned into 2021 the world remained in the grip of the global Covid-19 pandemic, with the emergence of the new Delta variant contributing to new waves of transmission.

These were difficult, and dangerous, times for those working in schools and great care was needed to avoid not only high rates of Covid-19 among staff and students, but the very real danger that infected children would carry the virus back to their homes, placing their families and communities at risk.

At the time the UK government had to decide whether schools in England should be fully open, or work in lockdown mode with only vulnerable students and the children of key workers physically in school while other students were taught online.

What is now clear is that the government was deeply divided on the issue. Its own expert advice (provided by a body set up to provide high level intelligence on managing the pandemic) recommended schools should work in lockdown mode, and it has recently emerged that the Minister responsible for Health supported this approach.

However, the Minister responsible for Education was determined that schools should remain fully open.

In this dispute between senior Ministers at the heart of managing the public health crisis then-Prime Minister Boris Johnson sided with his Education Minister and the decision was taken, against expert advice, to press ahead with full school

openings at the start of the new school term.

On Sunday 3 January Boris Johnson took to the weekend politics programmes on TV and said he had “no doubt” schools were safe, and that parents should “absolutely” send their children to school the next day.

On the same day, the NEU held an online Zoom meeting that was attended by 40,000 members and was watched live on other social media channels by a further 400,000 people.

The result was a mobilisation across the union in which members invoked their employment and health and safety rights at work to demand safe workplaces. This required immediate and well organised action on a huge scale, across 24,000 individual schools, to demand that schools only fully re-opened when it was clearly safe for them to do so.

On the evening of the 4 January, and the first day of the new school term, Boris Johnson went on a specially organised live TV broadcast to say that schools were “vectors of transmission” and that they should work in remote mode until at least the middle of February.

This was a hugely significant moment because it was the instant when a very strong government (with a large majority in parliament) was forced to u-turn on a key area of policy in the pandemic, and put the safety of communities before its own political priorities.

Our argument in the book is that the union’s achievement in that moment was not the serendipitous outcome of a particular set of unusual circumstances, and the quick judgement calls of the union’s leadership, but was rather the outcome of at least 10 years of strategic (re-)organising in which union members had been engaged in an active process of union renewal.

Renewal was necessary because it had long been apparent that successive governments in England were determined to confront, defeat and destroy the teacher unions in order to be able to press ahead with their radical plans to restructure schools along neoliberal lines (making schools perform as individual business units competing in a market).

This is what we mean by the “war on teachers” that is included in the title of the book. One of the features of this war on teachers has been the deliberate creation of a hostile environment for traditional trade union activity.

What also became clear, is that in this much transformed environment the union could not continue as though nothing had changed. A changed context required a transformed union.

In the book we analyse the renewal process in the NEU as it not only sought to challenge the neoliberal restructuring of the school system, but as it underwent its own transformation in order to build union power in a much-changed environment. We present our conclusions as three lessons in organising which we summarise here:

Lesson 1: The union is in the workplace

The first lesson is a relentless focus on building union presence, visibility and influence in the workplace.

The union can often seem remote and detached to union members in their daily working life. They see the union when an email appears in their inbox or when the general secretary appears on the TV news.

What is important is that union members see and feel the union in their place of work, where they directly experience the issues that shape their ability to do their job.

It is at the workplace where members develop a collective identity – where the union is real, and when belonging to the union is tangible and meaningful.

This does not happen in an abstract sense, and it cannot be created from afar. At its most foundational level it requires someone to act as the focal point for this visibility and to draw others into the collective.

For the NEU, this was a relentless focus on recruiting, supporting and developing union members to act as the school representative.

Such a role will look different in different unions and systems, but someone performing this key role in the workplace makes a real difference in making the union real in members’ lives.

Lesson 2: Organising must be political

The struggle over the purposes, value and values of public education is a political struggle. It is a struggle over what the future looks like and it will always be contested.

This is not about party politics but about the politics of education in a much broader sense. Organising in the workplace

around important pay and conditions issues is obviously essential, but it cannot be sufficient.

Such struggles challenge key injustices, but they rarely question the more fundamental causes of the problem.

Our second lesson highlights the need to connect immediate concerns with a wider set of questions, and to use these issues to turn the union outwards.

For example, in the pandemic the NEU obviously campaigned around health and safety issues in schools, but it connected those issues to the need for health and safety in the community.

It also linked problems of remote learning to wider questions of child poverty, with many children unable to access resources to participate in home learning.

A campaign on free school meals emphasised the links between children's success in school and the need to address poverty and structural inequality beyond schools.

There is a need to organise around ideas and an alternative vision of what public education must mean.

However, this work is not restricted to high level messaging that is crafted by communication specialists in the union's headquarters, important as this may be.

Rather it must engage with the union's membership at the base, both educating union members and encouraging union members to act as educators in their community.

Lesson 3: Leadership matters

Both lessons one and two point inexorably to our third lesson: that leadership matters, because it is people who make change happen.

However, our concern is not with leaders narrowly defined (for example, those who hold high office in the union), but all those in the union who engage in the process of helping others to understand their context, imagine alternative possibilities and to act collectively to bring about change.

Leadership is not about a position, or a role, but it is defined by the function performed. Presented in this way, leadership in the union can (and must) be performed at every level of the organisation.

Indeed, our third lesson centres on the need to focus forensically on building this type of leadership throughout the organisation and indeed to ensure that levels of the union are not discrete and disconnected, but rather they are organically integrated.

Viewed in these terms, we argue that the key quality in any leader is the ability to develop leadership in others.

Not a manual for activists, but an inspiration to action

In setting out these three lessons here we know we are distilling nuanced, and contested, developments into a format that does not easily capture complexity.

We are also presenting a case study of a single education union in a very specific national context. It will be up to others to decide how, and to what extent, these lessons may apply in very different circumstances.

In the book we are clear – the three lessons are not the only lessons, and they are certainly not a set of lessons to be followed and implemented in any simplistic way.

They are presented to encourage reflection, provoke discussion and encourage collective learning. The book does not claim to be a manual for activists, but we hope it will act as an inspiration to action for educators everywhere engaged in fighting for quality public education.

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