

## Responses to track ten

What has been gratifying about this week's responses has been how they have built on my thoughts about the unions, driving further into their potential as builders of a human rights culture. But at the same time, you have not allowed me to drift into some kind of romantic nostalgia for a long lost unionised 'Golden Age.'

## GLOBAL SOLUTIONS

Richard Buck was first off with the push for multinational unions as a response to the fact (as he so eloquently expressed it) that 'the most precious asset in the world economy, people, seems to have the least value.'

Richard is right to revive that wonderful old slogan 'Workers of the World Unite!' These days we need a truly universal human rights movement to make this possible – as long as we are determined to see 'human rights' as a term that absolutely necessitates recognition of the right of workers to organise. It's amazing how many human rights people have a blind spot on this – a part of their liberal (selective) mind set I suppose. But Lee in his post on South America in general and Columbia in particular reminds us, if we needed reminding, of simply how much has to be done here.

So:

- 'hats off' to the wonderful [International Labour Organisation](#) which as Alice Donald reminds us is already doing valuable work on extending union rights and which has long been in the forefront of innovation in the rights' field
- Congrats too to those interest groups fighting deunionisation around the world: we need to recognise these as front line human rights workers (and fighting bad faith unions as well, as Duygu reminds us is often necessary as well)
- And [Bob Crow](#) is right too when he points *Guardian* readers to the [International Transport Workers' Federation](#) as his industry's way of fighting management shifts to cheaper, more vulnerable labour.

Christina reminds us of the difficulty of all this – 'the minute you have effective unions the rules are changed'. Sure the struggle is hard, and there is no guarantee of success. But one thing human rights activists need is gleefully to re-engage with the idealism of the past.... And this 'visionary ideal for the role of unions' (Duygu) is something I think we should fight hard for.

Duygu's 'attractive and alluring' past and Christina's 'long time ago' can also be tomorrow!

## WINNING BACK TRUST

Paul Bernal asks a key question: 'how can the image of trade unions be rehabilitated in the eyes of the public?' Craig Valters shares this concern as well, as do others of

you to varying degrees. (Lee: 'It is seen as one greed (shareholders) against another greed (workers)'.)

Let's not deny there is a massive issue here. The trade unions have been rightly sectional; it is not their job to govern (as [track](#) made clear). But maybe this sectionalism has in the past gone too far – or become too threatening to power. Either way – whatever the reason – the unions have a job to do in re-engaging the public.

What is against them is rampant deunionisation and casualisation. In this rush to the bottom, travellers resent those not forced to join the same escalator down into penury and exploitation – instead of saying to unionised labour 'we want to be like you' (strong; powerful, prosperous) they say 'why can't you be more like us' (weak, vulnerable, insecure). I talked about this feeling in my [common track on asylum and foundations](#) and it applies equally here. A society that does not respect its own people will never make social progress.

So how to counter this problem:

- fight hard to subvert the way in which we have become used to the market as a kind of entrenched common sense. Say and say again that profit and exploitation are not as normal as breathing: Craig is very good on this. I'll come back to it when I get on to religion. (Its because faith leaders like [Archbishop Rowan Williams](#) and [Pope Benedict XVI](#) so unequivocally refuse to accept this common sense that I have such a lot of time for them.)
- rediscover the virtues of solidarity, both within and also across industries. And solidarity too between the worker and the consumer, at least to the extent of engaging with the consequences for non-strikers of actions taken -- there is something to what Lee says when he castigates the unions for making so little effort to reach out beyond 'the converted'.
- challenge media ownership rules fighting to ensure fair play. Big business has too often been able to rely on free speech rights to protect from public view their calculated anti-union actions, both within their own industry ([Wapping](#) and all that) and outside.
- Work hard on the 'smaller day-to-day work of assistance' (Lee) building the trust that will make the large scale action not seem 'less fundamental and more opportunistic' (Lee again).
- And finally, deserving of its own headline,

## USE NEW TECHNOLOGY CREATIVELY

Plenty from you of great interest here. Paul is a fan and a proponent of imaginative deployment of these new resources, working to ensure that 'freedom of association and assembly ... [are] .... translated into the UK internet context'. Richard recalls the successful use of new media techniques by Barack Obama and (before him) Howard Dean.

Yes, Craig is right to warn us against the risks of transience, of the sheer fluidity of the web.

We all agree, I think, that it has to be part – a big part – of any reforging of union identity – as do old-fashioned physical engagement (Alice) and also connections ‘with social movements and other civil society formations’ (Alice again).

This is where the big point about human rights comes in, indeed where the whole rationale of this [project](#) comes back into play. What other narrative thread can bind such disparate progressive elements of our culture together? Give them solidarity, a sense of mutual respect, a broad message?

Not religion, for sure.

Not even traditional social democracy these days, much less socialism.

Its because I think human rights properly understood as [progressive politics](#) and shorn of its addiction to [law](#) is best placed to pull this off that I have become an advocate of this (particular) (progressive) (I say authentic) human rights story.

AND BOB CROW?

Well maybe we need more not fewer Bob Crow’s, causing chaos on the way to a fairer future, one in which the common sense of today (casualisation; exploitation; insecurity) are viewed as quixotically barbaric as the child labour and slavery of old.

‘WHAT A WEEK!’

That’s how Christina put it and how right she was: not only the Irish case, but Wikileaks, the students and much else besides. I start this week’s track with the Irish case ([LINK](#)) and ’ll need to come back to Wikileaks. Also if you haven’t yet read [Johann Hari's scary story](#) it’s a reminder of how strongly the state can resist protest when it threatens to be effective.

*Human rights are rarely out of the news; in this project we are all working together to try to make overarching sense of them.*