

in brief...

# Public service unions: challenges of the reform agenda

## The unions could attract public support for their distinctive vision of public service provision

The government's 'modernisation' agenda for the public services has put considerable pressure on unions in the sector, giving them the dual challenges of articulating a coherent national policy response and ensuring effective organisation and representation at workplace level. These challenges are exemplified in their responses to the private finance initiative (PFI), which is now the dominant system of procuring public infrastructure. UNISON estimates that 100,000 of its 1.3 million members have been transferred to a private contractor or not-for-profit provider in recent years.

Union responses have included campaigning against PFI, lobbying the government for enhanced staff protection to end the 'two-tier workforce', as well as engaging with PFI implementation at workplace level. And different unions have had different responses depending on the occupations and professional identities of their members and the direct impact that PFI has on their employment.

While all unions have been willing to follow their members into the private sector, this has been more straightforward – organisationally and ideologically – for those with an established presence in the private sector. UNISON has recently established a Private Contractors Unit to provide a co-ordinated approach to organising in the sector and to target selected companies. This has created tensions with activists committed to removing private contractors from the public services. Several unions have also secured national recognition agreements with big contractors like Serco and Sodexo.

In the workplace, unions have found it difficult actively to engage members as employees are often unsure of the implications of PFI prior to their transfer to a new facility. This process is made more difficult because of its technical complexity and the amount of time union reps need to commit to analysing complex business cases and attending project meetings if they are to be able to influence the procurement process.

An additional complication is the legacy of successive rounds of competitive tendering. Workers doing the same work in the same workplace can be employed under a plethora of different terms and conditions. The strain on

over-burdened union officials in servicing a fragmented membership is exacerbated by patchy local organisation. Nonetheless, pressure to extend NHS pay restructuring to contracted-out workers has brought significant benefits for ancillary workers.

With employees in a single workplace employed by several different employers, representation becomes more complex. When an employer provides facilities time to a public service union rep, it is generally not possible to use it to represent individuals employed by private contractors. But if the private contractor provides no facilities time for its own union rep, then there will be a representation gap, with the union unable to provide full services to subcontracted staff.

The PFI experience has varied widely across workplaces. There is a strong sense within the union movement that some private contractors are much more open to union involvement than others. Where staff are consulted about design and operational issues, both staff and patients comment more favourably on new buildings and services. By contrast, the absence of consultation leads to far less positive perceptions.

The experience of PFI has highlighted the degree to which public service unions operate in an environment of continuous restructuring, in which they have to contend with numerous public and private sector employers, and invest in workplace organisation to ensure a visible union presence that can deal with multiple terms and conditions of employment. At the national level, the government needs to be persuaded that the unions have a convincing vision for the future of public services. But at the same time, the unions are starting to develop their own reform principles, which could attract public support for a distinctive vision of public service provision.

'Union Responses to Public-Private Partnerships in the NHS' by Stephen Bach and Rebecca Kolins Givan is a chapter in *Trade Unions: Resurgence or Demise?* (Routledge, 2005). **Stephen Bach** is at King's College London. **Rebecca Kolins Givan** is at Cornell University.