

in brief...

## From the Webbs to the Web: a new union form?

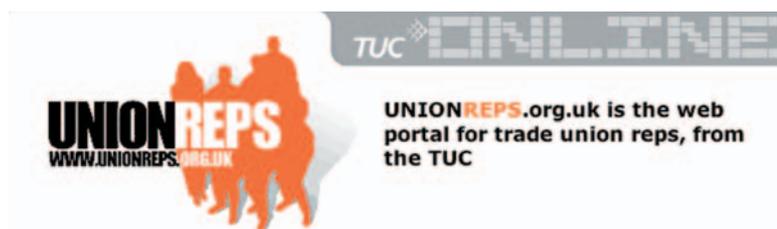
Combining online activities with  
offline activities could create  
a new form of worker power

An inappropriate pessimism dominates discussions of the future of unions. Yes, union density is falling in the private sector and union influence is falling in Britain and many other countries. And, yes, the finances of many unions are shaky. But some unions are responding to their difficulties by undertaking innovations using the internet that have the potential to improve union services and lower costs to members.

In Britain, these innovations include the website [www.unionreps.org.uk](http://www.unionreps.org.uk), on which union reps share information; the website [www.worksmart.org.uk](http://www.worksmart.org.uk), which provides information about rights at work to both union and non-union workers; and a weekly email bulletin on occupational health and safety. Nearly 70% of union reps who use the [unionreps.org](http://unionreps.org) website communicate with their members through email, creating an 'e-unionism' with great potential for rapid delivery of services to members at minimal cost.

Innovations in the United States include a massive email list – Working Families Network – that allows the AFL-CIO (the US equivalent of the Trades Union Congress) to contact millions of members and friends of labour and ask them to participate in campaigns of public interest, as well as to get volunteers for demonstrations. It also includes various experiments with 'open source' union forms, in which workers unable to gain a collective bargaining contract use a union website to connect activists.

Last summer, the AFL-CIO initiated an 'affiliate organisation', Working America ([www.workingamerica.org](http://www.workingamerica.org)), whose website offers legal advice on overtime issues as well as diverse other information. Combining the internet with face-to-face contact, by July 2005, the AFL-CIO had



signed up 900,000 workers in 10 US cities to the new organisation (though there is still uncertainty about what services it will deliver to members and how it will finance itself). Other US union organisations have also developed such open source forms, some along occupational lines, others at particular firms such as the Communication Workers of America local at IBM.

These efforts to use the internet will expand, if only because they allow unions the opportunity to reach many workers and workplaces at low cost, irrespective of the attitudes of employers. If successful, the innovations will profoundly affect union membership and the institution of the union. If unions find the right way to combine online activities with offline activities, possibly in local communities, and to use their expertise on labour issues to build loyalty to the institution, they could create a new form of worker power in place of strikes, based on their ability to generate support for workers outside any given workplace from a broader union community.

Unions in Britain, the United States and virtually every other advanced capitalist country have grown in sudden spurts, usually around a new union structure that reaches workers in a different way. With unions engaged in diverse innovations, it is possible that an open source form may find the 'killer application' that touches off a new spurt.



## The internet allows unions the opportunity to reach many workers and workplaces at low cost

'From the Webbs to the Web: The Contribution of the Internet to Reviving Union Fortunes' by Richard Freeman is a chapter in *Trade Unions: Resurgence or Demise?* (Routledge, 2005).

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