

in brief...

New opportunities for Britain's trade unions?



The Employment Relations Act has been very important in stimulating increased union organising

The passage of the 1999 Employment Relations Act arguably signified the recovery of trade unions' political influence after many years of exclusion from policy-making under the Conservatives. As a new CEP book edited by **John Kelly** and **Paul Willman** shows, the Act has been very important in stimulating increased union organising and a pragmatic accommodation to union recognition by many employers.

But it has also become clear that there are severe limits to the influence that unions can exert over the Labour government. The DTI review of the union recognition provisions was regarded by the TUC as a valuable opportunity to engage the government in dialogue over improvements to the operation of the recognition law. But the government largely ignored many of the representations and proposed few statutory amendments.

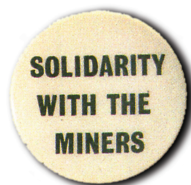
In areas beyond employment legislation, unions have also found it difficult to influence the government. Many public sector unions have opposed the private finance initiative but have failed to persuade the government to abandon, slow down or even review its planned role. In some cases, unions have been handicapped by competition among themselves. In others, ministers have exploited deep policy divisions between unions to secure a coalition of support behind contentious measures while isolating their most vocal opponents.

If the modest impact of unions on government has not been helped by problems on the union side, it is only fair to note the structural difficulties they face. Many unions remain affiliated to Labour despite growing disquiet over government policy. Even if the new generation of union leaders were to succeed in launching a more coordinated campaign inside the party, the changes in party structure, rules and funding over the past ten years have seriously eroded the potential for union influence.

Looking forward, a number of events might disturb current trends. The radicalisation of union leaderships is one. While this emerges from democratic choices made by existing union members, its role in assisting the broadening of the membership base remains to be seen. Leadership change has been particularly evident in public sector and industrial unions and may exert its greatest effect in these remaining bastions of union strength.

A second event with very different possible implications is the European directive on information and consultation. This has two likely consequences. First, the sector with no union voice is likely to shrink substantially under the impact of this statutory requirement: only the smallest firms will escape.

Second, since the directive requires representative structures, it will affect workplaces where direct communication is the dominant voice mechanism. It is difficult not to see in this measure a major opportunity for unions to assist employer compliance in ways that might increase membership and perhaps bargaining coverage.



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Union Organisation and Activity edited by John Kelly and Paul Willman (Routledge, 2004) is published in CEP's series on the future of trade unions in Britain.

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