Innovate Or Die: The Future Of Private Sector Trade Unionism In The UK

Chair: Cameron Tait - Fabian Society  
Matthew Ball – Communications director at Community  
Stella Creasy MP  
Chuka Umunna MP  
Kay Carberry - Former Assistant General Secretary, TUC

Tait introduces the event by giving an overview of trade union membership over recent years and how it has declined, describing it as a movement preoccupied with managing decline. However he also says there has been some interesting innovation in recent years, and flags up a piece of work that the Fabian Society is doing on the topic of private sector trade unionism.

Tait opens the panel up for introductory remarks, asking whether we should accept that membership will continue to decline, and if not how it can be stopped.

Carberry says that no, we shouldn’t accept this. She explains that trade unions have embarked upon numerous pieces of research to understand the reasons for the decline and that they are analysing those results in depth. She goes on to describe the comparative working situations of people who are members of trade unions and not: those on the lower end of the wage scale are less likely to be trade union members, even though they may be the ones who are most in need of membership. Carberry says this is a big issue, and describes the pressures on trade unions such as a changing work force, types of work and the increasing number of self-employed people. She also says that many people simply don’t know what trade unions are. Then there are structural problems in terms of the changing age profile of members: members are heading towards retirement and not being replaced by younger workers. Unions have found a very low expectation of what work has to offer from young people, who are usually just pleased to have a job, and as such don’t see value from trade unionism. She also explains that there are notions of trade unions being bureaucratic, ineffective and expensive.

Carberry describes the campaigns which unions have undertaken to attract new members: she cites traditional campaigns such as court action and more innovative ones such as changing their language and using social media to communicate on a wider level, or embarking on strategies such as free membership for limited time periods.

Cameron also talks about the traditional and innovative approaches that trade unions have taken recently, and hands over to Matthew Ball.

Ball talks about the public’s perception of trade unions, and states it is one of the major issues they are up against in the private sector. He says they need to accept they have an image problem in the private sector and to ensure their offer and image matches what people need, as membership growth is vital if they are going to have continued stability. He refers to polling they had done by Yougov which showed that a very low number of respondents were likely to ask for help from trade unions. When the question was rephrased to ask whether someone ‘’would pay for independent advise relating to work’’ the number increased significantly. Ball says this shows there’s work to be done in terms of being seen as providers of advice. He explains the idea behind Community, which is to help members retrain and find new employment after factories or places of work have closed down. He says that now, many workers become self-employed, and a trade union’s traditional offer doesn’t really work in those situations. Ball explains that some unions have been mobilising self-employed workers, but that this is a changing environment that they need to adapt to. He describes how Community has started to work out a membership offer for self -employed people that he hopes will be appealing. Part of the membership package will include a factoring service which will chase up invoices from clients, and as well as bespoke legal advice. Ball says trade unionism is about collectivism, and this approach still applies even in an individual workforce. He says they are up against a big challenge to change perceptions and adapt, but it will be rewarding.

Cameron talks about the Fabian Society’s research, which shows that 65% people see unions as necessary, although less people are joining. He introduces Stella Creasy.

Creasy talks about the history of the labour movement and transforming the lives of workers. She says self-employment has exploded in Walthamstow since the recession, so organising and helping those workers is critical to the future of that community. The vast majority of self-employed people want to be self-employed, so unions need to support those workers to be successful even if not in the traditional manner. That group of people don’t fall in the same category of help as Uber employers, who are being taken advantage of. Creasy says that issues such as mortgage payments, sickness and holiday leave are all really important here. Factoring alone takes huge sums from Walthamstow constituent’s income, so helping in that respect is really important. She talks about the Taylor review and the lack of collective movement in there, saying that this shows this is really Labour’s fight and they should own it. Trade unions can be used to help tackle inequality in communities and self-employed workers are key to this.

[Questions from the floor/answers]