

A social partnerships in the new millenium

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Social partnership is very fashionable right now. It has become the new "buzzword" in Industrial Relations. The 'new' government, the TUC and the CBI are all promoting partnership at work, every week there is another conference held somewhere in the country on the topic of partnership. There is also a huge amount being written about the issue, some Industrial Relations commentators have even hailed this as the most exciting thing to happen to UK industry in years. However, not every group completely agrees with this.

For example, some groups believe that Social Partnership has had a very negative effect on British Trade Unions. At www.labournet.org.uk a group have named a bulletin board 'Solidarity'. It is a page dedicated to 'challenging social partnership' and it's apparent corrosive effects on union power. It is very typical of the types of arguments put forward by groups that are oh so against social partnerships.

Stakeholders like the authors of solidarity believe that social partnerships tie unions to the coat tails of employers. What they want is a 'new unionism' which opposes subordination to the 'global market' and builds on the experience of the Liverpool Dockers. This group is completely opposed to any kind of privatisation and really wants more from unions than just a concern for working conditions. They want a break ".. with the narrow work place concerns of 'non-political' trade unionism" and believe that unions should fight " for the interests of the working class and oppressed as a whole". They also see a need for a repeal of all " anti-union" legislation and an end to state interference into unions, such as social partnership agreements.

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Taken from 'Solidarity', the journal that openly states it's purpose is to challenge social partnerships in trade unions, here are some 'facts' that display how social partnerships have had a harmful effect on British trade unions:

In Rover and the car industry, where the unions have identified the interests of workers with commercial success in the 'global market', they have been gravely weakened and meekly accepted massive job cuts.

USDAW has reached a 'Partnership Agreement' with Tesco which takes away the right of the union members as a whole to vote on pay deals.

The TUC has collaborated with a privatised utility in the Energy Industry and set up a company with them - Union Energy - thus effectively abandoning the fight for re-nationalisation. They are collaborating with a privatised utility which has decimated trade union members' jobs.

The unions have swallowed 'Investors in People' which identifies the interests of union members with the 'business aims' of private companies.

The TUC and most unions have accepted that the increased competition of the 'global market' means unity with 'our employers' and competing with workers in other countries.

Stakeholders like these aim to challenge social partnership by campaigning for complete independence of the unions from the employer. They reject globalisation and counterpoise to it a working class internationalism which recognises that workers have more in common with those in other countries

than they do with 'our own' bosses. It is a very Marxist standpoint . They feel that for those in the unions who support their independence from the employers and the state, a systematic struggle against 'social partnership' in all its manifestations is a central task if they are to break the unions from the employers' coat tails. They are insistent that this outlook has only been adopted by union leaders. It has though percolated down to many workplaces, reinforced by the fear of unemployment.

This far left view contrasts greatly with those unions that actually see social partnership in a very positive, if slightly unclear light. Unions like FIET, The International Federation of commercial, clerical, professional, and technical employees see social partnership as a " new and challenging area of work for the union." For unions that see the millennium as a time to accept social partnership, it will mean unions and companies learning to do things differently, rather than trying to campaign against this change.

Some unions like FIET have accepted that we now have a government committed to promoting the partnership approach, and to ensuring that it becomes a permanent feature in the workplace. Unions like this have therefore accepted that social partnership is going to be around for a long time.

I think that left wing reactions to social partnerships, like that of 'Solidarity' is very much a reactive one rather than considered. I think that those stakeholders set so strongly against this issue need to understand that the government's political commitment to partnership goes far beyond the UK. We now have a new and positive approach to Europe and this social

partnership model is at the heart of the EU's approach to all Industrial Relations.

Indeed Social Partnership does mean long term changes to the Industrial Relations scene in Europe and in Britain, all that unions need to work on is understanding what these changes will mean for their members and the companies that they work in. Looked at from this more positive, optimistic standpoint then social partnership has the potential to deliver some very real benefits:

Potentially it means that employers will be working with the trade unions to bring about improvements in the quality of work.

It means that employees, through their trade union, will be given a much greater say in how their company is run.

Social partnership should give unions the opportunity to be consulted earlier, more often and on a wider range of issues than has happened before.

Surely the growth in partnership at work can only be a welcome one, if not somewhat overdue? However, these encouraging and upbeat pointers can only be achieved if the unions get themselves involved in equal terms right from the beginning, otherwise employers could try to do things without the unions. As stakeholders like 'Solidarity' state I think that there is indeed a risk that social partnership may be used to try and undermine trade union organisation in the work place.

Employers could potentially claim that they can have a partnership directly with their staff and do not require the union's participation. If the unions are excluded in this way then not only could there be disastrous consequences for union members but social partnership will not work for employers either. Partnership can only be successful when employees as partners are properly supported and resourced through a dependable trade union.

To illustrate this point further, let us consider what may happen if the retail sector tried to introduce partnership without trade union involvement : Most employees in this sector work part-time. There are increasingly complex and unsociable working hours in retailing which in turn means that most employees may have very little contact with anyone beyond their shift. In these circumstances employees have less of an opportunity to form a collective view. Simply meeting together can be extremely difficult in such organisations, let alone having the resources and confidence to develop their own ideas and concerns.

Therefore it is clear that in most cases employees are unlikely to become equal and effective partners when they do not have the time or the means to generate their own agenda. A dependable and experienced trade union means that employees can enter into partnership properly supported and resourced. To achieve this, a real commitment is required from employers to supporting trade union membership, as the best way for their staff to be given a voice and more importantly the confidence to use it. Basically partnership needs partners.

But how will social partnership actually change things in real terms for employees and the unions? By answering this question I will hopefully be able to assess if social partnership is a viable way forward in the new millennium.

Firstly, unions need to take a positive approach, for them social partnerships should be about:

Co-operation, not confrontation.

Improving the quality of working life.

Employers listening to and respecting unions and vice versa.

Employees developing their own agenda through their trade union.

If they agree on the above terms then hopefully it will mean:

Moving away from the common practice of the union only talking to companies once a year. At the moment, even with companies with whom there exists a good relationship, unions often only talk to the organisation at the time of the annual wage negotiations. Many unions feel that the annual wage round sometimes becomes a little tired and predictable, with companies offering the lowest increase that they feel they can get away with. However, partnership is different. For the unions, it means talking to companies throughout the year. It means having a constant dialogue with employers about what is happening at all levels of the company.

It should also mean that the union is consulted on a wider range of issues. Companies are used to contacting unions when they are implementing redundancies or sell offs. Mainly because there is a legal obligation on them to do this, but unions have not in the past been consulted on the overall direction of a company or about strategic decisions that may affect employees. A Social Partnership means that the union should be consulted on a far wider range of issues than they have been used to. It means earlier and better consultation sessions, theoretically no more being told about something when it has already been implemented.