



CONGRESS 2015 PRESIDENT'S ADDRESS

Address by the Congress President
Leslie Manasseh
Sunday 13 September



**GREAT
JOBS
FOR EVERYONE**

I had hoped to give a different kind of speech – one that would welcome a change of government and more hope for working people. But that was not to be.

It's traditional to be upbeat – to talk about successes over the year. It's also traditional to highlight the flaws of the government – and that's a long and ignoble list.

But just to do that would be to ignore the pressing realities of our situation. So I'm not going to go for the easy option, but the much less comfortable one of reflecting on where we are as a movement and asking some hard questions about how we move forward.

Because trade unions are at critical point – how we manage our affairs over the next few years is vital to our future.

Of course we need to remember and celebrate our achievements. And of course we need to remember that trade unions were born in struggle and have always faced attacks from the state and powerful vested interests. And that we are resilient.

But our aim is not to survive but to thrive and make a difference.

So just now I think there is a greater need for honest debate and taking stock.

And facing up to some difficult facts.

Because the world of work has changed dramatically – the nature of jobs, workplaces and employment patterns are very different from just a few years ago. The evidence is that we are not keeping pace with these changes and that collective bargaining which was once the



norm – in 1979 80 per cent of wages were set by collective bargaining – has now become the exception.

In parallel we've suffered a long term membership decline.

In 1979 we had over 13 million members – some 55 per cent of all workers.

Today we have 5.8 million – around 20 per cent of all workers – whose average age is way above the average for the workforce.

This is very worrying arithmetic.

We're also increasingly a public sector movement where we have high density amongst certain groups of workers, but in far too many private sector workplaces we are simply not visible.

We've all analysed the causes of this decline. I doubt there is much disagreement that they lie in the decline of manufacturing, privatisation, the growth of a fragmented private service sector, employer hostility and the success of right wing ideologues in portraying trade unions as inimical to the national interest.

I sometimes fear we spend too much time refining this analysis.

The point as someone famous once said is not to interpret the world but to change it.

I've always had a simple approach.

Unless we grow in numbers we cannot grow in strength and influence. Unless we grow in numbers we will not be able to reverse the decline in collective bargaining. And unless we



grow in numbers we cannot renew and refresh our activist base.

If the world of work has changed, so has the political landscape.

The general election made a difficult situation worse as progressive values did not carry the day across the UK.

Plenty of ordinary workers and union members voted Tory. To pretend otherwise is to ignore the facts. They didn't abstain - that might have been explicable - they willingly put a cross in the box. The challenge is to understand why they voted for a party that takes every opportunity to attack unions and which proudly commits itself to the damaging politics and economics of austerity - and what lessons that has for us.

To understand why truths that seem so self-evident here failed to convince enough of the electorate. Because being right is not enough. We also have to be persuasive. And it seems we weren't persuasive enough.

And the answer isn't just to shout louder.

Let's be clear we have some difficult years ahead.

Tories want to privatise and shrink the state.

To constrain and marginalise trade unions.

To attack our legitimacy and ability to function.

To create a world of work where all the power lies with employers and where workers are compliant and available while their share of national wealth continues to decline.



It's clear we have a major battle ahead. So a vital question is how battle-ready are we?

By that I mean: where we are organised? How strong is our membership base? How good our reps structure? How willing our members to support us? How good is our information on these vital questions?

If we're honest - in too many cases, the answers should give us all reason to pause.

It's not enough to have strong arguments. We must also have strong organisation.

I believe we're facing a watershed and so we cannot adopt a business as usual approach.

But let's be honest, we find it hard to change.

We cling onto arcane processes, procedures and structures - our own special nooks and crannies - and I'm not sure we always test them against the need to build membership.

And we can sometimes believe our own propaganda - understating the reach and strength of our opponents and overstating our own.

In the search for answers to some very difficult questions, we should not resort simply to blaming each other.

It isn't enough either to blame the media, the government and employers.

There's lots of truth in that of course - we have a hostile media, a hostile government and some pretty hostile employers. There is certainly a large and powerful grouping wanting a union-free world.



But we won't change anything by shouting or even analysing from the sidelines.

We can change things only from within – by what we do to shift the balance of power in our society.

And for us that starts with what happens in the workplace.

We will be taking some vital decisions over the next few days.

But the truth is that without the trade union organisation on the ground capable of delivering them and bringing our policies to life – they will count for less and help fewer workers.

I've dealt with many employers over the years. They're usually prepared to listen to me. But I know they listen a lot more carefully when most of their workers are union members.

So we have to rebuild trade unionism to recover the ground we have lost.

And that means we have to go out and talk to non-members. Which takes time, effort and resource. But it's the only way to guarantee that there are positive conversations about trade unions where it matters most – at work.

And let's not pretend this is easy. I'm sure everyone in this hall knows that. But it's too easy to spend time with others who agree with us – too easy to retreat to the comfort zone of our activist base – rather than face up to the fact that millions of workers have yet to be persuaded and do not automatically want to join the club.

Some of my most difficult conversations over the last 35 years have been with non-members while I've been walking round workplaces. Not always



comfortable – and much less enjoyable and much harder say than addressing the Tolpuddle rally – but those experiences have kept me grounded and convinced me that we have to put in the graft.

Because there is no easy route to growth – no silver bullet to hand. Of course, we must give workers good reasons to join; provide confident and credible leadership; and give hope of a better future by campaigning for change.

But we still have to put in the work on the ground; to make real connections with workers who are not union members.

Even where we've made major policy gains – the minimum wage and rights for agency workers for example – these have not magically led to growing membership in the sectors most affected. We've had to work for that.

So it seems to me the only guaranteed option is to step up that work. And if that means we have to rebalance priorities, resources and tasks, so be it. If we have to spend less time in meetings – very often with each other – so be it. Because there's nothing more important just now than increasing membership and extending collective bargaining.

The good news is that we have plenty of opportunities.

Trade union values are popular – indeed much more popular than trade unions. Why is this? Why do notions of fairness, equality and justice at work have more appeal than the organisations that stand for them? Why is it, if we have such a popular message that we are failing to convince enough people to join our movement?

I think the answer is this – we are not getting out there as much as we should to make the case to new generations of workers in a way that chimes with their concerns.

We have to close the gap between our values and our reach – to convert support for workplace justice into trade union membership.

And we need to test what we do by whether it helps close that gap.

We cannot afford to spend too much time in a closed loop preaching to the converted, when we need to be reaching out to the unconverted.

We have a very good story to tell. But unless we actually go out and tell it, too few will know. We can't rely on others to tell it for us – quite the reverse.

And when we put our mind to it we succeed.

If we look under the surface and behind the headlines, we can see the seeds of our regeneration.

One of the real privileges of being president is that I see all the nominations for the organising awards. And there are some really inspiring stories.

Examples of successful organising by ordinary workers in all kinds of sectors and workplaces.

Cases where often one individual has through sheer will and effort organised a workplace, run a campaign, engaged a community and won for workers.

Where workers have put their heads above the parapet and fought against dictatorial employers.



Where against the odds individuals have built collective organisation that has improved the lives of all their colleagues.

These are the largely unsung heroes and heroines of our movement - and I think there are plenty more out there keen to fight for justice in the workplace.

So we need to spend more time finding, supporting and working with them.

And celebrating and thanking them.

Membership decline is not inevitable - indeed a few unions have increased their private sector membership and I pay tribute to them and the efforts they are making.

And perhaps we need a new settlement amongst ourselves - with fair give and take - rather than fantasy turf wars where we end up arguing over which union owns which group of non-members.

The prize of growth and renewal is within our reach - we owe it to those who fought for and built trade unionism and to future generations - to make sure we grasp it.

I hope you understand why I have departed from tradition and focused on the challenges facing us rather than our achievements.

Because in order to speak truth to power, we must first speak truth to ourselves.

But while we may not have that much to celebrate in 2015 we have a great deal to be proud of.

I am very proud to be the president of a movement with a proud history, which protects the weak against the strong which speaks up for justice



and dignity but which also is about building successful workplaces, successful employers and a successful economy. We make the world a better place. Look no further than the work of those unions who brought to light the scandal of restaurant chains keeping some or all of their workers' tips. Trade unionism at its very best – speaking up collectively for workers against the power of employers.

It's been an immense privilege to work so closely with the TUC and many colleagues from across the movement over the past year.

It gives me enormous confidence and hope about the future.

I know – as you do – that we face many challenges and problems.

I know our opponents want to silence dissent; marginalise progressive values; contain and criminalise protest; and create a docile workforce.

But I also know that if we are united and determined we will not let them.

Thank you for listening and have a good Congress.





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