

Political Factions and Member Apathy:

Well, now I do think they threaten the NUJ's democracy.

The controversy generated by allegations made during the autumn election for a new editor of the NUJ's Journalist magazine that a group calling itself *NUJ Left* has been organising to seize control of the union certainly enlivened what the union's members might have anticipated as another dull campaign. [[Editor Election](#)] [[NUJ Left](#)]

It has been argued, mostly by members of my acquaintance who are located in London and so better placed to observe the activities of this London-based splinter group, that there are only around 400 NUJ members -- approximately one per cent of the NUJ's whole membership -- active within *NUJ Left*. But it is also claimed by one former member of this faction that it has succeeded in ensuring that its candidates "have won every high profile election for many years".

When I first heard these suggestions I was sceptical, thinking that such a hard-edged concept as extreme left-wing ideologues taking control of the warm and cuddly trade union that I'd known from my days as a cub reporter was as remote a possibility as me taking a flight to the far side of planet Neptune in my lifetime.

But then my whole perspective on this changed when I tentatively suggested to my union branch in December that it might be a good idea to have a debate on this subject at a future meeting. Oh my goodness, what a tempest I then unleashed by this mere suggestion! Immediately bombarded with accusations that I was involved in some sort of conspiracy with someone called Mark Watts (who's he?), that the latter had "brought the union into disrepute" (err, how?), I was left with the sense of someone who'd just committed a terrible faux pas when attending auntie's funeral. There was a distinct sense of paranoia about as branch officers struggled uncomfortably with the concept of discussing something that was not exactly part of their agenda for future meetings.

Events took on a more sinister turn as I was told, incorrectly as it turned out, that the January branch meeting would be cancelled because so many members had called in to offer apologies for absence. When I turned up at the next meeting, I discovered this was not so, and the January meeting had indeed gone ahead as planned, albeit with little more than the branch committee in attendance!

When I tried to get a letter published in the February edition of my branch's newsletter I was told by the editor that it couldn't be published without a "counterblast" from someone with a countervailing opinion - presumably this would involve publishing my letter to *NUJ Left* before it was first published in any of my union's journals. When I protested against this proposal, the editor then took his own initiative of publishing my letter to a few members of his choosing. I can only think this was a ploy to garner support for his viewpoint, but it put me in the position whereby I had no alternative but to publish my letter to as many of my branch members as I could contact before it was more widely circulated by others.

One can only speculate as to how the editor intended to contact *NUJ Left* to provide a "counterblast" if he did not already have contacts with a group that has no recognised place within the NUJ structure. But the episode prompted questions about the possible affiliations of the editor and his branch committee colleagues with NUJ Left . . . questions that remain unanswered at this time.

Events took an even more interesting turn when I attended the February branch meeting last week. In a departure from all known practice, there was no agenda circulated ahead of the meeting. Instead, the branch Chair, who is also the newsletter editor, started with the usual reports from treasurer, secretary, etc. But no sooner had the secretary opened her report than the chairman launched himself into a decidedly hostile attack on yours truly, castigating me for having the temerity to publish my views to other members of my branch.

At one stage it became quite scary . . . it seemed to me that the chairman might do himself an injury, so great was his apoplexy over the effrontery of a member actually writing to his fellow branch members! Of course, proceedings would not have been complete without the chairman then instituting his own Star Chamber inquisition, in which he and other members of his committee chipped in with some nebulous questioning over how I had, he assumed, managed to circulate my letter to other members of my branch.

Well, the answer to this one is simple - I've been a NUJ member for more than 41 years and in that time I've met a lot of my fellow members and made contacts. I've also got friends in the union who are willing to help the process of communicating ideas to their fellow members. Is this so surprising?

When I proposed the idea of a debate on the desirability or otherwise of having any organisation such as *NUJ Left* organise within or without the union I had expected that such a debate could be conducted in a sensible and reasoned way. But now I'm not so sure. There seem to be so many people around who have a vested interest in riding their personal political hobby horses no matter what the cost to the union or its members' reputations.

Still, I live in hope that the union's sensible mainstream members will ride to the rescue - but that means they must first turn up in numbers to their next branch meeting, and the one after that, and so on.

[Ken Harrison](#)

Life Member

NUJ Manchester Branch

Harrison is a qualified journalist with more than 40 years' experience as a reporter, writer, editor and PR executive/consultant. After several years working on UK provincial and regional newspapers, he finished this phase of his career working as a sub editor on the then award-winning Oxford Mail. From the mid-1970s onwards, he's specialised in covering the energy and related business and technology sectors. His background includes several years spent as the Editor of two international energy magazines, one of which was published by the UK's then leading Chartered institution for professionals engaged in the sector. He has also helped to write

and edit three award-winning newspapers and magazines. A Mancunian born and bred, he is much travelled in his career and spent more than 20 years working and living in London and the South East of England. But now he's re-settled in his native north west of England and currently lives in Cheshire.

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To NUJ Manchester Branch Members:

By now you will have received your notice of the next meeting of your branch - due next Monday, 8th March, at the union's Northern region office, Arthur House, Chorlton Street, Manchester, starting at 7.30 pm.

No doubt you will have seen item 5 of the meeting's agenda - Debate on NUJ Left. In an attempt to give this debate a clear purpose, I prepared the motion attached to this message and submitted it last Monday to the branch secretary/executive committee for circulation to members together with their notice of the meeting. I was then told that it is not possible to do this.

In order that you are fully prepared for this debate, I herewith append a copy of my motion (which has already received an offer of secondment from another branch member). I have also linked a copy of a statement issued last November by another NUJ member, David Hoffman. I intend citing this in support of my motion because it illustrates the dilemma faced by NUJ members when it comes to their active participation in politically-aligned groups and the conflicts of interest that are likely to result from this. [\[Hoffman\]](#)

I hope you will agree with me that this issue is one that affects the future direction of all NUJ policy as well as public perceptions of the impartiality and professionalism of the union's members. For this reason it is important for all members to express their opinions on this topic, and so I urge you to attend Monday's branch meeting to join in the debate.

I look forward to seeing you at the meeting.

Ken Harrison
NUJ Life Member,
Manchester Branch

NUJ Manchester Branch

Notice of motion for debate at a branch meeting on 8 March 2010.

Whereas:

The activities of political interest groups such as the British National Party (BNP) and NUJ Left have the capability to compromise the independence of all NUJ members, to undermine public confidence in the objectivity of their reporting, and to undermine the fair operation of the recognised democratic processes of the union.

Be it resolved that NUJ Manchester Branch:

1. Rejects the concept of any political organisation being established as an entity within the union.
2. Rejects the use of the term NUJ within the title of any political group that establishes itself outside the union's recognised organisational structure.
3. Calls upon the union's NEC to declare that the NUJ disassociates itself from the actions of any members who use the union's name or resources to promote or assist independent political interest groups, and to discipline any member who undertakes activity that undermines the political independence and impartiality of the union.
4. Calls upon the NEC to require candidates for any elected office within the union to declare any political affiliations or political offices that they hold in their pre-election statement to members.

Proposer: Ken Harrison (NUJ Life Member, Manchester Branch)

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