

To: The Editor, *Quorum* (NUJ Manchester Branch Newsletter)

***Political factions and member apathy – do they both threaten the union's democracy?***

The revelation during the autumn election for a new editor of the *Journalist* that a group calling itself *NUJ Left* was fielding its candidate in this election coupled with an allegation that this group has been busy for several years getting its candidates elected to key offices within the union certainly enlivened what members might have otherwise anticipated as a rather dull campaign. However the protagonists in this election have served the membership well by highlighting the issue and raising a debate about the democratic health of the union.

It has been argued, mostly by members who are located in and near London and therefore well 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."

From my perspective as a NUJ member for more than 40 years this particular development alarms me. Political pressure groups within a trade union have come to be seen as entirely normal, but any movement with aims that include promoting the election to office of the members of their particular group, at the expense of individual candidates who have no such political organisation to support them, I see as being an entirely different matter. There has long been a particular sensitivity over outside political influence on the union's affairs because the majority shun active engagement in political activity for the sound professional reason that their position as impartial observers and reporters on public affairs requires them to maintain their independence. But members' natural inclination towards a position of independence and neutrality is one that also makes the union more vulnerable than most to takeover by a well-organised elite, whether from left, right or centre of the political spectrum.

Why does this matter? The aims of *NUJ Left* or any other politically-motivated faction are not the same as the aims of the NUJ as a whole, and their activities could easily lead to the alienation of the majority, if unchecked. Unfortunately there is a growing feeling among the ordinary members with whom I have contact that the union is now controlled by such an elite. The impartiality of the union's committees that make judgements on members' individual rights and affairs is also being questioned as never before...and, I have to ask, is this the result of members' disenchantment with the existing 'democratic' structures, which have not changed very much in the more than 100 years since the union was founded?

As a fairly regular attendee at my own branch meetings it worries me that only around 10 members regularly turn up to its meetings; yet with a branch membership of around 1,000 this means that only one per cent of this membership is actually represented at these meetings. As the delegates for each ADM are then selected from this small group of activists and regular attendees, this must undermine the representative credentials of those selected for ADM, the union's main policy-making forum. However this is in no way an adverse reflection on those who do attend their branch meetings regularly because they are obviously committed to serving members' interests in the best way that they can. But how to gauge and reflect the mood of the membership as a whole is difficult when there is such a low level of participation at this 'grass roots' level.

So what are the answers to the problems of disengagement by ordinary members in the union's routine activities and that of the growing influence of political interest groups and factions?

Well, the first answer to this dilemma is that more members need to attend their branch and chapel meetings. A further option is to re-examine the traditional democratic structures and processes of the union. These were conceived at a time when the union's membership was much smaller than it is today and also in an era when individual commitment to attendance at public meetings was far greater. But are these traditional structures still viable in the modern era? Something certainly needs to be done because, as was demonstrated by the woefully low level of polling in the recent election for the job of *Journalist* editor, less than 18% of eligible members actually cast their vote in this, a postal ballot of the membership.

An alternative way forward on this might be to adopt online voting and referenda on all issues that affect the membership. Would embracing such methods of direct democracy lead to more participation in union affairs and a greater sense of inclusion by the rank-and-file members?

Such an approach would certainly help lay to rest the suspicion that the union's decision-making is now controlled by a factional minority who know how to 'work the system' and have both the time and inclination to spend long hours in union meetings, whereas it is very evident that the majority do not find such methods of participation either attractive or compatible with their busy lifestyles.

As ever, the direction of change will be decided by the people who engage in the process – but will it be the silent majority or the vocal minority who decide the union's future? The choice is yours.

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