

A Partnership of Skills. . .

New Strategies for Union Growth

Remarks by John Lloyd
May 29, 2001

John Lloyd is the National Education and Development Officer of Britain's big Amalgamated Engineering and Electrical Union (AEEU). He describes a new culture of labor/management relations that, he argues, is helping rebuild the British labor movement and the British economy after a disastrous era in industrial relations.

I'm excited to have the opportunity to make this presentation today, because it brings together the high politics of trade unionism and the everyday detail of what we do about workforce development. These two things are closely linked in any discussion about the trade union use of partnership ideas. These are the subjects I deal with in the presentations I make constantly to the private sector employers who deal with us.

They don't open up to us all that willingly.

But the atmosphere at the big companies in the last three or four years has changed. So it's now an optimistic, pleasant time to be involved in this business again. We've had people like Virgin Atlantic recognize our bargaining unit in the last two months. They had been keeping us at arms length. Mr. Branson can sometimes be quite a different figure from the one he presents to his adoring public. But recently--so far--it has been all for the best.

My job is to make the initial contacts with all sorts of multi-nationals. I'll give you a flavor of the sorts of things we say about our partnership agenda when make that first knock on the door. In our trade union, which is mainly in the private sector, we are constantly organizing, and we must constantly reinvent ourselves with the new employers who arrive in town.

When we get into see them some employers quickly say, "that's all very interesting--drop dead." Okay. If that's the way it is, we'll soon be out in the carpark with impertinent leaflets drawing attention to the HR director's salary. If they want it like that, they can have it like that. It's sterile, and not always successful. But we know how to deal with that.

But what we have proved time and time again to our own activists is that the partnership method, such as it is, works better than those impertinent leaflets in the carpark. We try to encourage employers to be partnership employers, not creatures from the black lagoon. We try to take the high road not simply because it's oh, so nice, but because it works in terms of providing higher standards of living for our members.

Principles of Partnership

The first thing we do with a new employer is run through what we think are the principles of partnership. I explain to all the audiences that the very same ideas are given to our shop stewards at our training courses and at recognition presentations to the mighty representatives of international capitalism. If our union is saying something different to our active members and our potential members from what we are

saying to their employers, we will get caught out at some stage for having different sets of rhetoric for different meetings. That would betray our capacity to speak to both groups, because neither would trust us.

When I have outlined our partnership approach, then I listen. I judge everything a Human Resources (HR) manager says to me against the following principles.

First of all, what are communications like? Do they tell us what's going on? It's the quality of communications that matters, of course, not the amount of it. God knows we are all barraged to death with nice four-color brochures. In the end, they just leave us brain dead. It is the quality of communications that counts.

We give and we expect joint consultations about all major problems—on both sides. This comes as a surprise in some traditional trade unions. But we want honest give-and-take because we prefer companies that can survive. Nothing is more depressing, as all of you well know, than redundancy negotiations.

We want companies to encourage a flexible workforce through prioritizing employment security. It's employment security, not job security. If our people are comfortable about the general prospects of employment, they will take on new skills. And very skilled people will take on even more skills. Skilled people like seeing how things work. They love new machinery, if it does what they want to do better than the previous gadgets did. They will play with it and then start working with it well before they've worked out what the bonus pay system is going to be. They do this out of sheer pleasure at the ingenuity of the stuff they are using.

So, we will support a company getting qualified people, and moving them from task to task. But do expect us, the following morning, to be on the phone about the payment for such people and about that commitment to employment security for everyone, and not just the HR directors.

The next principle is about respecting each other's institutions, cultures and reputations. One big thing that we've done in the last five years that is demonstrably different at home is to rebuild pride in the union again. In some countries—the U.S., Australia, you even walk around with badges and t-shirts: "proud to be union." Well, we are English and a little more self-effacing than that. But it's coming. We are all wearing baseball hats now, so, I suppose we'll get around to having "proud to be union" t-shirts. But this is terribly important: our contribution must be seen and measured and reported. This is almost more important to us as an institution than anything else, which is why we send people out to all sorts of public events and we get seen around the town.

That brings me to our last principle: the importance of a focus on a partnership on the outside. We want to be seen with our employers to be making a difference. This is why we do a lot of lifelong special learning programs for kids in the community. We've got our own four million pound charity, which makes grants to inner-city people who've missed out before. We are doing literacy programs for the millions of English people still actually can't read. And so forth.

So, we do everything from the community level up to the top. We explain all this to employers to give them a sense of what we do for them. We want a pluralist approach, not a purely unionist approach. There's a great English academic, Allen Fox, who described the two systems. There is the unitary system, where we all gather behind an infallible management. Then there is the slightly more down-to-earth, grubby, understanding that there are sometimes separate interests and they are best served under a pluralist system. We are pluralists, and not worshipers of successful managers.

If companies accept this they will soon realize that trade union members actually don't like class war. They find it embarrassing and unpleasant, unless they are backed against the wall. They prefer working

for decent companies. They really don't want to come to my meetings—they would rather take pleasure in doing their work. Of course, this is difficult for me to understand, but it happens to be the truth.

What we are looking for is to win the employers respect. Our employers know how damaging bad industrial relations can be. They've seen it. So, we say, just deal with us nicely. And often enough, employers stroke their collective beards and say, "These people might just have something. I know this will get me in the trouble at the Rotary Club, but these people might just have something." And we say, we've got modern competencies that can help any employer implement his agenda better with us in the building than with us on the outside.

Let me tell you about how we can help an employer. Safety. Lifelong learning. Literacy programs. We can even help members get MBA's in our system. We have expertise in pensions and payment systems. We offer a whole basket of services. Sometimes it gets confusing.

We went to do some recruitment in the Sharp television factory in the Northwest. We even had a special new leaflet: "get yourself a free will." This is one of the union's legal services: free wills for everybody. Great. Well, the average age of the production workforce at Sharp is 21. So when we called together the joint shop stewards' committee, they were all young people. We said, "Hey, what do you think about our union?" The senior steward said, "One small thing, I have in my car about four boxes of leaflets about how wonderful it is to have a free will. Take them back." So we sometimes have to be sensitive about when we go banging on about being competent.

Union-Based Productivity

Our union is seriously engaged with productivity issues. I know this word is a difficult one for many trade unionists to deal with. Productivity is so often used against us. But we are trying to open up to it. We now have public-accredited labor competency for dealing with waste management issues. We've made this a shop steward's competence. Our shop stewards approach managers to ask if they want help with waste management issues. There are a lot of carbon taxes in Britain now. Employers in the big process industries are really worried about all this, and they can't deal with it by themselves.

Our people do it well. Perkins Engines--which is, of course, an American company--actually got our two shop stewards medals from the Queen under the British Honor System. This system is one we sometimes laugh about, but when our chaps went to The Palace to get an MBE for their work in waste management we splashed it all over our leaflets. Our message: if you want competence in these things, count on the union. We don't charge, because it's reducing costs. But we do want some credit for our members on the employment security account.

A big union can be one of your best management consultants, because there is not a factory in Britain where we don't know what is going on. Companies pay tens of thousands of pounds a day to idiots who haven't got as much experience as a lot of our shop stewards do.

Our employers are terrified of industrial injury law. Well, we've got three of the fastest, slickest labor law firms in Britain who are desperate for our personal injury work. And the quid pro quo is, in return for our personal injury work they appear (when they have brushed their teeth clean) anytime we or our companies want advice on any aspect of industrial law, whether it is coming from Europe, the U.S. or whatever. This works very well because legal advice in any industrial community these days is stupidly expensive.

So we offer an employer a contract. We promise and pledge and write down and sign off and make legal all the things that we, as a union, must do. We have a rapid response unit to call on when partnership breaks down. I am allowed to hire anybody in the country, literally, to help us out.

A New Labor Culture

I'll conclude. It's not an easy road.

We unions, can we end the adversary culture? Can we really enjoy a firm's success? Have we got enough administrative and practical capacity to meet our end of the bargain? Have we got the courage and the independence amongst ourselves as trade union officials to deal with people who say, "Yeah, but they're all bastards?" Can we resist the accusations of sellout, or people like General Motors, who closed a plant in the dark of night even though we had a partnership agreement there?

It's not an easy road for managers, either. Can they understand that this is not a quick fix, it's a long-term relationship? Do they really like us? Can an agreement survive charismatic managers who leave and are replaced by dreary time-servers? Are we all willing to spend time at meetings like those we are having today?

I have to try to finish with a rhetorical flourish. What is different is that we are creating an equivalence. We are ending the parent/child work-based relationship, the master/servant relationship. That's the pitch we make.

Dr John Lloyd is the National Education and Development Officer of the Amalgamated Engineering and Electrical Union (AEEU) in the UK where he works closely with general secretary, Sir Ken Jackson. His main areas of responsibility are issues surrounding trade union mergers, partnership with employers, lifelong learning and the development of the union's full time officer corps. Dr. Lloyd was appointed by the Labour government to be a non-executive director of the British Post Office and a member of London East Learning and Skills Council. He also has a regular column with 'Personnel Today.' Previously, Dr. Lloyd was a research officer, education officer and press officer for the electricians union EETPU, and then the head of the general secretary's office in the AEEU until he went to Cranfield School of Management in 1993. At Cranfield, he organized many research and teaching programs for UK and European Unions which were all linked by the theme of improving trade union management and leadership through borrowing Cranfield's management expertise and 'translating' it into the union environment. Dr. Lloyd received his PhD from the University of Cambridge and his early career was spent at the Seamen's Union and the Industrial Relations Research Unit at Warwick University.