Future of Trade Union Education

Comments pertinent to the education review from the BGCM 2015.

Comments assisting us in looking forward to the future of education in the GFTU have been chosen from the BGCM contributions made by various people. They provide a democratic basis for shaping up our future provision.

John Fray.

The movement has dangerously moved away from proper education in trade unions to educate the minds and knowledge base of members into a very narrow range of vocational and technical areas. This will not do for the future and the GFTU will need to transform its provisions of education quickly to meet the needs of the challenge, especially as we now have a government prepared to attack our industrial rights.

…we have to reach out to the young workers who are not union members and who my never have had a chance of any direct contact with the trade unionists. To bring young workers together will continue to be an important part of the GFTU’s work.

Our Education Review is long overdue. We have made a start, firstly, to understand the direction that our education programme is trying to achieve, followed by recognising the changes we then need to make. We need to train up the next generation of leaders while ensuring that the knowledge of our current leaders and veterans are an important part of that programme. Whatever you think about the Tories and the bankers in charge of them, they put their people through a brilliant education programme, so we must set our sights on being just as high with ours.

We know we have to innovate to attract and maintain engagement with our trainees and we need an education programme and seminars for those who want to keep learning to build on their experience and skills, a programme with a step-by-step progression built in with each affiliate knowing how their students are developing. We cannot do it all ourselves, so for the more advanced of our students Northern and Ruskin College will prove, as always, the best of partners. Our developing relationship with the progressive academics of the University of Wolverhampton will also join with us to build new leaders among our affiliates. Whether they take up positions in their union, political party or the community, the fact that the GFTU has given them that chance has to be good for us all.

Roy Rickhuss.

Likewise at the last BGCM there was a resolution to undertake a comprehensive review of our education work and we are doing this. It is complex and it is comprehensive. We’ll be engaging with an independent senior adult education inspector to help us undertake this work and we’re looking to report to a summit in November on progress and to seek further views of affiliates. Education is our largest area of expenditure. We have expended it, but it has to be cost effective and relevant and the President in his address I think made it clear that there really are some difficult new issues to address and an old style training offer may not be the answer.
Ben Marshall

In 1975 there were over 12 million trade union members in the UK. Today there are six million. In 1975 80% of all of the working people in this country were covered by one form of free collective bargaining or another. Today it’s 20%. The typical trade union member in 1975 was a bloke who was middle-aged, defiantly working class and worked in a skilled occupation or industry making things. I know that there’s no such thing and there never was, but today the typical trade union member is female, in her 40s, works in the public sector and was educated to degree level. It’s a fundamental change in the nature of trade union membership, both in terms of demography and in terms of size.

Politics - a couple of simple statements of fact, as I think they are. We now have the most fragmented political scene in the UK that we have ever had ever, ever at all. We now have a clearly multi-party political system in this country. We have distinct substantial differences between the regions and nations that go to make up the United Kingdom. Everybody bangs on about Scotland, but London is an island of its own and I think the north of England is increasingly separate from the rest of the country as well. There is a distinct possibility that we will leave the European Community. There is, in my view, a very high probability that renegotiating our membership of the European Union will result in the loss of workers’ rights. So either way it’s a hugely challenging problem for us and the future doesn’t look great in either sense. I think we are headed in my lifetime, but I wouldn’t say it would be quick, because I hope to live a little bit longer, Ronnie (Laughter) I think we are moving towards an essentially federal future for the country. I don’t think that we’re going to be one nation 15 years from now, I think that we’re going to be four, and I think that we’re going to see a growth in the power of regional politics within England itself, so I think we’re heading towards a federal future and it is not possible for political parties or probably trade unions to remain insulated from those developments.

I know that people have made a point of saying that 63% of people who voted in the General Election a couple of weeks ago didn’t vote for the Conservatives. Well, okay, statistically that’s true, but 49% of people voted either Conservative or UKIP and that I think is a very striking and frightening fact and it is a fact. The Labour Party, upon whom the trade union movement has based many of its political hopes for 100 years, is completely at sea. I don’t want that to be reported ideally, but it’s true. It frankly is true. I think we increasingly as a trade union movement need to look for a progressive alliance and I’m not sure that we can place our eggs in a single political basket of the Labour Party any more. It’s simply not going to work in Scotland, is it? It has never worked in Northern Ireland where, by the way, four million people live, most of them should be our members, and increasingly it looks difficult outside London in England.

Our political voting system is now completely busted. It takes 35,000 voters to elect a Conservative and six million voters between them elected one Green and one UKIP MP, six million to get two Members of Parliament, about nine million to get a majority in Parliament. That is an illegitimate political system. It’s the sort of political system that gives rise, first, to the collapse of any support for the political system and, secondly, it gives rise to violence potentially, because there isn’t any other way of changing what’s happening. So there have been some huge shifts, both over the last 40 years whilst I’ve been an active trade unionist and over the last 30 since Thatcherism emerged and,
frankly, hasn’t gone away at any point in those 30 years. So there have been some huge shifts, but it’s not all bad and, by the way, it really isn’t all bad. Trade union membership has essentially stabilised since around about the year 2000. In fact, trade union membership had been going down sharply but then stopped going down and has been largely stable for quite a while now, more than a decade. That’s a remarkable achievement in many respects. In some trade unions membership is growing and I’ll give you two examples, neither of them affiliated to the GFTU, because I thought that would be fair and at opposite ends of the political spectrum within the trade union movement. RMT is growing and so is USDAW, so clearly it is possible for trade unions to grow and that isn’t a political issue.

There are some extraordinary progressive movements in the United Kingdom. The green movement has grown remarkably quickly in a remarkably short time and not just politically in terms of two million votes. We all now recycle as a matter of course, and that’s an extraordinary cultural shift in the United Kingdom compared to what was happening ten or 15 years ago. Lesbian, gay and bi and transsexual rights are now completely mainstream, completely mainstream. Bill Clinton when he became President tried to force the American military into accepting gay soldiers and bloody nearly lost his presidency over it and that was 25 years ago. Today even the right wing of the Conservative Party supports gay marriage. That is an extraordinary cultural shift. It’s up there with the abolition of hanging and the abolition of censorship during the 1960s, in my view. I’m a heterosexual remorselessly, it’s not a personal thing for me at all, I just think it’s an incredible signal of the fact that this is not fundamentally a right wing country.

There are huge concerns across the United Kingdom’s population about the rise of inequality. Even some Conservative MPs bang on about the need to address this rising inequality. There is overwhelming public support for the re-nationalisation of the railways, overwhelming. People who voted Conservative all their lives, particularly if they have to travel into London Bridge every day like me, strongly support the re-nationalisation of the railways. So actually although we lost the Election and it looks like it’s a catastrophe, there’s an enormous amount for us to play for, so we shouldn’t be downhearted. Just something that Ian Lawrence said to me last night in the bar. He said, “What we’ve got to do is get up, get on and do what we’ve always done” and I think that’s absolutely right. So there’s a great deal for us to discuss and we have a great deal as an organisation, the GFTU, to contribute to what I think is a vital debate about the future of the political system in this country and about the future of trade unions and it’s vital that we do this.

So in November we’ll be hosting a progressive summit. I think the term we should use is a progressive summit, because I think that’s what it will be, and I don’t think we should go into that with too many preconceptions, but wanting to build a better world that’s democratic, genuinely democratic, genuinely democratic, one where votes count for everybody who votes, fair and decent, I don’t think that’s too much to ask, and I don’t think it’s controversial either, by the way, anywhere in the United Kingdom. More equal by far. It’s been a disgrace that since 1980 this country has become less equal every year, every year since 1980. It is shocking in terms of progress through history. I’ve always believed that there’s progress through history, but it seems to have stalled and we need to reverse that. I think we look for a liberal and libertarian society, one where people have individual freedoms above all I think and one in which everybody does have a genuine stake, not a kind of bogus stake of the sort that politicians bang on about, a genuine stake in the future. So that’s what we propose, we propose to hold essentially a progressive summit and what we’re going
to be welcoming from you is ideas about the agenda, ideas now if people have them, but certainly we’ll be consulting over the next couple of months about what that agenda should be. This is quite an ambitious thing for the GFTU but I think it’s a very important thing for us and I think that it will be very welcome to affiliates and potential affiliates and I hope that it’s welcome to the movement as a whole.

Bindu Paul.

Unfortunately though, the notion of being in a union and being an activist is still pretty alien to a lot of people and not something that people can relate to and especially for young people, so I think it is really crucial for all of us to work together to really encourage the young activists by giving them the tools and the knowledge to understand their rights and to help them understand that changes to legislation and workers’ rights, even though it doesn’t seem like it affects them now, it can do. So I think we need to turn the apathetic into the enthusiastic and get the next generation motivated.

Sarah Woolley.

The next five years are going to be tough. There is no hiding a Conservative Government will make life hard for us all and, let’s face it, they have been in power less than two weeks and the attacks have already started. It is now more important than ever to educate young people about trade unions and organise them to ensure that we have a solid foundation going forward.

David Ransom.

Recent evidence shows once again that the more active trade unions are in any society, the less unequal and unjust it tends to be. Trade unions have a vital role to play in overcoming the neoliberal ideology that caused the financial crash, justifies ‘austerity’ and underpins the enduring power of the banks today. Resolving the conflict with finance means, among other things, extending democracy to the workplace.

Susan George.

First of all, we’re not in a crisis. A crisis is something that happens and is very quickly over. As in an illness, you either die or you recover, but you don’t stay in a crisis since 2007 until 2015. This is a misnomer and we should be calling it a chronic situation which Europe in particular has brought on itself. Austerity programmes prolong what has become known as the crisis, and it is a word we all use and I use it too, but it is not the proper description for what we’re all going through.

Ronnie Draper.

From its inception the European Union has been based on the principle of freedom of movement, movement in labour, services, goods and capital, four capitalist principles that have all led to the demise across the board - manufacturing industry destroyed, salaries undermined, imports rocketing, while exports fall and are revolving around money. Do you know, Thatcher’s removal of the exchange controls made capital king at the expense of our manufacturing industry. She may be gone, thank God, but her legacy lingers on in the trading deficit of this country, that of Britain being given the task of specialising now in financial services whilst the rest of Europe raped and pillaged our manufacturing industry, took over our energy industry and replaced our heavy engineering.
How can it be cheaper to import coal from Russia, steel from Poland and Spain, chickens from Thailand and ships and electricity from France and, of course, clothes from the Far East?

Resolution on TTIP.

The GFTU should now call for the TTIP negotiations to be halted and adopt a clear position of outright opposition to TTIP, and the other trade agreements currently being negotiated, including CETA and TISA whilst continuing to monitor progress and press for improvements to promote decent jobs and growth and safeguard labour, consumer, environmental and health and safety standards through lobbying, campaigning and negotiating, in alliance with Unions, the ETUC, the AFLCIO and campaigning groups such as the Campaign for Trade Union Freedom.

John Hendy.

Trade unions and collective bargaining in particular are impediments to a free labour market where the price of labour is determined by who will do it the most cheaply. That’s why this Government is intent on the destruction of the entire trade union movement, taking over where Thatcherism left off. Let’s just think what Thatcher achieved. When Thatcher came to power in 1979 – I appreciate that’s ancient history to most of you here, but I remember it – 82% of British workers had terms and conditions determined by a collective agreement, eight out of every ten. That was the European average. It’s only just above the European average today. Now we’re looking at 20%, two out of every ten British workers with a term or condition determined by collective bargaining, and they want to get rid of that 20% coverage so that there’s complete freedom of employers to determine wage rates.

How should unions react? Unions have got to place the restoration of collective bargaining at the top of their industrial and their political agenda and I’ll just give you in four sentences the reason why collective bargaining is so important. Of course, as trade unionists, it is instinctive, it’s what trade unions do, but there’s more to it than that. On analysis collective bargaining is essential to restore the purchasing power of working people in the economy. That’s how we got out of the slump in the 1930s, not just in Britain but in the United States of America and Canada, Australia, France, Germany until fascism took over, Italy until Mussolini took over, in Belgium, in Sweden, in Norway, in Holland and Denmark. They did it by institutionalising sectorial collective bargaining; that’s collective bargaining on an industry wide basis. That’s the first argument, the economic argument. The second argument is about equality. Why has inequality risen? Inequality has risen because collective bargaining strength has diminished and if you look there are now correlations done by economists demonstrating that wherever you’ve got union strength and collective bargaining inequality is smaller than those states where it doesn’t exist.

Frances O’Grady.

In terms of kind of emotional connections and the image of the trade union movement, I think we need to talk more about our values, we need to put it in plain language and then, here’s the difficult bit, we have to live it. I was in Manchester yesterday. Again, somebody from a northern town was saying they never say Labour politicians or trade union people in the pub where they go, nobody is ever involved in the conversation. Each and every one of us I think needs to think hard about are we living the values that we all espouse, how do we live our lives? Are we connected with people?
Are we really listening to what’s top of their list, what they’re really worried about? How do we make that connection between what I think is absolutely right, and I think Ed Miliband should make no apologies for it, the big challenge for us which is to tackle the root causes of inequality. That is the big challenge facing this country. But how do we make that real to people in their families, their working lives, their communities? How does it feel like something each and every one of us can connect with on a personal level, an emotional level too and some of that is about us maybe coming out of the offices, out from behind the desks, the committee rooms, the conference halls where we talk to each other and getting out there a bit more back into the community, which is where we come from.

Marie Taylor.

Play is crucial in the development of us all. It is crucial for social, cognitive and physical development. It’s how we learn to become who we are, how we develop our ideas, our emotions, our social connections, our passions and our interests. Play captures something essential in the human condition, the flight of imagination and creativity and a sense of exploration. Every child should have the right to play.

Oshor Williams.

In terms of raising aspiration, education certainly has a role to play and there’s evidence in studies that were based around London that schools sometimes display kind of lower expectations for certain ethnicities, particularly young Afro Caribbean boys particularly. That makes underachievement a self-fulfilling prophecy and it’s something that we really need to address. When attainment results are presented in terms of ethnicity, I know that some of the teaching unions get nervous, because it’s seen as some kind of criticism of their members’ endeavours out in the field. I would say embrace the research and then collaborate to actually do something about it, to address it in a cooperative and collaborative way.

Doug Nicholls.

The Coalition Government was deaf to the voice of the people. Of course, the people didn’t vote for a coalition. That is a produce of our peculiar system. No matter how many strikes, demonstrations and protest actions, they ignored us. There was a lot going on, but not much happened as a result. The previous sensitivity of Parliament to popular opinion has disappeared and equally dangerous on our side is endless protest and endless opposition. We have, as Frances said, to be much smarter and more strategic than ever before and move from continually saying no to things to saying yes, to having a vision of the world and British society that we want to create. We should learn that the old ways of campaigning don’t work against their new ways of ruling over us.

The second thing is to appreciate how political trade unions are and how important they are, not just in reducing inequality, but in creating democracy. Politics has now become too important to leave to the politicians. Politics properly speaking means the active engagement of citizens in running the country and politicians are but elected representatives of the citizens. Politics has been put in a dangerous reversal. Career politicians promise this and that on the basis of a sectarian manifesto, whereas in fact they should do only what we tell them to do, like shop stewards in unions.
... we must address trade union education. The Tories and the ruling elites have long been clear about this. They send their children to prep school at six years of age and then on to private schools and then on to Oxford and Cambridge. They teach them mainly one thing, arrogance, and the To the Manor Born confidence of rulers and they teach this through main subjects – philosophy, politics and economics. They teach ideas and how to make lies seem natural and economics seem complicated. By comparison and in response, in recent decades the Labour Movement has done little. Trade union education has turned into a form of low level training and functional skills to survive immediate circumstances. Much of it has been state funded and the politics, philosophy and economics that we used to debate in the movement has been taken out. So bad has the education level become that you even hear some Labour leadership hopefuls saying that we are all capitalists now and that the trouble with the Labour Party is that it didn’t appeal to the middle class and middle England. Who is the middle class? Trade unionised doctors and nurses who want a free National Health Service? Teachers who opposed the misnamed free schools? Where is middle England and will it have its own Parliament for the Watford Gap service station?

Who knows? The Tories will probably end trade union education funding. They might attack our remaining adult education colleges like Ruskin and Northern. We in the GFTU are ready for the worst, but we’re not committing fully to our 2016 programme until at least after our November summit which Ben will talk about when all of the unions can be engaged. Education liberates the mind, challenges injustices, teaches you to think critically and to act collectively. It unlocks mysteries and enables you to question the lies of the powerful and to propose alternatives. It enables you to ultimately govern and control your own destiny and challenge the hidden hand of the market. It stops you from being a slave and a victim of circumstances and to be a creator of our own social destinies.

I have fought all my life for liberating education that empowers young people and workers. When I was President of the GFTU I signed off the two biggest education programmes we’ve ever had and over the last three years I’ve supported two of our largest programmes, doing more more imaginatively at less cost. But the way ahead now means some radical change. Can we really invest £600 or more per weekend per student to learn how to lock the stable door after the horse has bolted or to be good stewards when their factory has closed or, even worse, to come to our courses, as a few still do, for a nice social time? We can’t afford this. Learning is serious business.

We have much to discuss about how we’re going to take our education forward and deepen the curriculum to make not just organised trade union officers, but active citizens capable of seizing back power and, of course, to campaign in a new way. We need a better sense of strategy for education, a more advanced curriculum taught in a more imaginative way. Too many trade union tutors are still little more than givers of information rather than inspirers of a thirst for change and enquiry. Perhaps we should create a mobile education resource and take arts and culture and education and union recruitment materials around the country. Perhaps we should invest heavily in one or two individuals and pay their student tuition fees to go to Ruskin or Wolverhampton to become future leaders. Perhaps we should create a distance learning degree in workers’ economics. Perhaps we should set up reading groups around key books and ideas. We simply can’t avoid the big discussions in our education work and our meetings. Britain doesn’t have a written constitution and, unlike other countries who have, we’ve been unable to prevent and criminalise the theft of public and natural resources and assets. We have to enter this debate.
We will use our relationships with Ruskin College and Northern and now Wolverhampton to develop this work and we will also create a huge set of relationships with hundreds of academics who now want to work with the trade unions and with the GFTU to assist affiliates with research and education and advice and ideas. The gap between progressive academics and trade unions is far too wide and we’ve trying to break this down and want unions to benefit more from the work of key academics to help their struggles.

We’re well placed to revitalise and rebuild political education in the movement alongside the traditional skills training. We’re well placed as a GFTU to involve more leading academics and high quality teachers in our work. We’re well placed to widen the appreciation of trade unions’ contribution to democracy and we’re well placed too over the next five years to focus on the remaining priority in the movement, the engagement of young leaders and I will challenge any trade unionist or affiliate that is not seriously developing the youth manifesto that we’ve created through our recent youth conferences and anyone who is blocking the rise of young members in our ranks.

Judith Jackson.

A few years ago you may remember we took the decision to break away from the ever-depressing cycle of public funding for education. I think this has proved to be one of the best decisions that the GFTU have ever made, because we can deliver what we want to deliver, when we want to deliver it, to who we want to deliver it to and that has made a real difference. All the time we were taking public funding we were letting the funder shape the course and that’s not what we’re about. We want to be in a position where we can be radical, where we can be political and where we can give real value to our trade union reps. The new rules on funding are draconian in the extreme and it is going to make it very difficult for unions generally to be able to deliver the kind of programmes that they want in the fundable world and Chris will bear me out on this. The new funding rules, Level 3 qualifications will no longer be funded unless they are loan funded. Funded qualifications will only be at Levels 1 and 2. I think Levels 1 and 2 are a gross undervaluation of the knowledge and skills required by trade union representatives and members to function in the workplace. Level 1 is sub O level and that is not the level that our reps deserve and are capable of. So because we don’t take public funding, all our programmes are delivered up to Level 3, a number are delivered up to Level 4 and I think that this will help us in the future, because whilst there is such a funding shambles in FE generally, it will lead to a number of potential opportunities for the GFTU and a number of potential opportunities for us to develop. Because, like I say, we don’t get the public money to support our courses, we can deliver up to Level 4 across the board. This truly values the level of knowledge and skills required to be an effective union rep and, given the nature of this new Government, trade unions are already under attack and when unions are under attack, there is always high demand, always high demand for skills-based training, to give the reps the skills to regroup, to fight back and to be effective in the workplace. We will be developing our training offers to both increase the knowledge and skills, but also to politicise our reps, to make sure that they understand the context in which they’re working and why the situations are that they’re working in. It’s good, people should be able to represent their members effectively, but they need to know why they’re in the mess they’re in in the first place, so we aim to do that and develop more around that over the next period.
We can provide for our unions a fully blended approach to reps training. We have a very skilled panel of tutors. We can use the learning pool option as an additional method and we can develop accreditation for our unions based on what they want and not what other funders say we can have. We can award credit at its proper level and not a watered down alternative and we can deliver the only real progressive trade union education alternative and we can deliver it to those who need it most. Those unions who already use our bespoke services know we offer high quality and great value for money. These challenges that we’re facing now and will face over the next five years can only make us improve and develop what we do. Reps need to have the practical skills as well as the personal skills and understanding political contexts to lead in the workplace to fight back against the employer, to fight back against the Government. We will work with our unions to ensure that our reps are amongst the best trained in the country.


Let me just say a little bit about my background, strikingly similar to John’s actually. I worked as an engineer for the Post Office as a very young man and I became active in what is now the CWU, but then was called the Post Office Engineering Union, and that union encouraged me by sending me on various quite lengthy courses and then gave me a scholarship to go to the London School of Economics to do a one year course there, very similar to the Ruskin College course, and then I stayed at the LSE and did a degree in mathematical economics, of all things. I left school with four A levels and then got a 2:1 in mathematical economics, I still don’t know quite how, but I did. (Laughter) I’m very typical of my and John’s generation of trade union officials and officers and that’s where typically trade union officials of my generation came from. I was enormously assisted by the Post Office Engineering Union and by the TUC in fact with small grants, but overwhelmingly I was assisted by the fact that there were no fees and I got a full mature students grant and I went back to my old job in the Post Office during the university holidays which meant that I was marginally better off as a student than I was as an engineer working for the Post Office. That was a very different time. It meant that, frankly, it was really quite straightforward and easy for a married bloke with two very small children, which is what I was at the time, to just depart the world of work for four years and go to university. That today is utterly impossible, utterly impossible, and yet that was the source of our leadership for the trade union movement then and we no longer have that source and that is something that we need to give some really careful thought to.

So this is partly, for us, about generating a new generation of leaders for the trade union movement, but it’s also about generating our next layer of activists, so it’s not just an elite leadership issue that we’re looking at, although I wouldn’t probably describe myself exactly as elite, but I’m sure you know what I mean. It’s also about generating generation after generation of shop stewards and unless we do that the movement will just die.

We also need, clearly, in the GFTU’s view, to diversify the group of people that we train. It has become very fashionable and we have become quite successful at generating support among very young people, but there is a very old layer of trade union officials and I say that because I’m very much part of it, and we may be missing a chunk of people between broadly 35 and 50 in terms of our activist base in the union movement. People are enormously experienced in the world of work and who are increasingly not active in their trade unions, so we need to diversify beyond what we understand we need to do to generate support among very young people, among BAME people, we
also need to look at the generation between the young and the very old like myself and that’s something that I think the review needs to look at.

We are going to be looking at technology. Judith has already spoken quite eloquently about the use to which we put technology now in training terms. The internet (and the people I represent work primarily in the telecommunications and computing industries, so I understand the internet quite well) changes everything, an obvious statement to make, but, my goodness, it’s true, particularly around education. TED Talks. You can watch a 15 minute lecture on any academic subject ever invented by using your computer and YouTube. Just Google TED Talks. You can undertake an entire undergraduate or Master’s degree virtually for free on the internet. There are entire university syllabuses available to you on web. Wikipedia and similar blogs are an immense source of information and knowledge. Some of it is a bit questionable, but it’s there. The fact is that there is a mass of educational information available to us and there are some real wood for the trees issues, but it’s there, and the internet changes everything about education delivery. We need to look at that very carefully.

We also need to think about new and different and sometimes quite challenging ways of delivering what is essentially a training message. A couple of examples. Townsend Productions’ brilliant plays, essentially aimed at children, available often for free in an educational format is an interesting and innovative way of training people, of educating people, interesting, entertaining and much more likely to be attractive to the people we need to attract as a movement. We need to embrace this kind of method. We’ve also got this really rather good GFTU CD, I think Doug certainly still has some available, although it has actually sold quite well, staggeringly, but it has! The point is that these are new media that we need to embrace as part of our training methodology.

Judith said some stuff in her report on context. I think for the last 20 years the trade union movement has been extremely adept and extremely good at training for skills. We’ve got really good case handlers. We’re really quite good at teaching the rudiments and even some quite advanced stuff around negotiating techniques, and these are vital skills for a trade union official, but context for me is everything. We have to, as Judith said, give particularly our newer activists a clear impression of why we do what we do, not just how we do it. I remember that when I was setting out on what turned out to be a career as a trade union activist most of the training that I undertook was in terms of context, it was about the history of the movement, about the place of trade unions in society, about the nature of society itself. Effectively, I did a one week introductory course at an appalling old people’s home in Margate in February (which was really only occupiable during the summer, let me tell you, it was so cold and cheerless) where the union, the Post Office Engineering Union, sought to teach very young male shop stewards, because that’s what we all were, about society. There was a little bit of training, but it was mostly training us about society and this was a form of education that was unknown and new to all of the people on the course, none of us had been through anything like this, and it worked. Almost everybody that went on that course with me went on to be lifelong activists in the Post Office Engineering Union and some of them are my friends to this day and people I still work with.

I think we’ve somewhat lost that and we’ve lost it for a good reason. Facility time is not as available as it used to be, people are busy, they are not prepared to commit an entire week to a freezing semi-hotel in Margate during February and, by the way, I don’t blame them. They are just not. So it has
been difficult for us for the last 20 years to concentrate on context, but we’ve got, in my view, to get back to that. Skills are obviously critical. Our affiliates want us to train their shop stewards and reps with skills and we obviously will have to go on doing that, but we’ve got to give them context. For me, context first, but absolutely in parallel if we can’t do it first.

I think we also need as a GFTU to develop more of what I would describe as a consultancy approach. We need to be able to talk to our affiliates and others, using Albion, about what their training and educational needs are and we need to be willing to design bespoke programmes for them. We’re doing quite a bit of this, but I think that we’re going to need to do a great deal more of it over the next few years. I think that we need to take a leaf out of the opposition’s books. When I was a very young official in the union that I work for now, one of my responsibilities was management training, because the people we were representing were managers, and I got to know a guy who was the head of management training in BT quite well. He worked at Bletchley Park, the place that used to be the Enigma place, which BT owned for a while and it was their management training centre. This guy was called Colin Price. He was extraordinarily bright, something of a high flyer, and went on to become the UK Managing Partner of McKinsey. He flies his own aeroplane! I’ve got to know him again more recently as he headed towards retirement after running a major programme on organisational health within BT. God knows what BT paid for this, but it would have been in eight figures, I would think. It was a phenomenally extensive programme. Colin Price retired very recently from McKinsey and now runs something called Co Company. If you Google Co Company and have a look at their website, you’ll see what a modern consultancy does and looks like. This guy might fly his own aeroplane, he might be a high flying UK Managing Partner for McKinsey, not exactly the world’s most left wing organisation, but, say it quietly, he’s a lifelong member of the Labour Party, so not everything is necessarily bad in this corporate world. But they do actually hold out some really rather impressive examples that I think we are completely capable of following and that’s the sort of thing that I think we need to embark on doing. That is a big ask for us, we don’t have quite the resources that McKinsey have, not quite, but we do have the intellectual ability and wherewithal I think to do something of that nature and I think it’s really important that we do.

I think we need also to raise the bar. Judith was talking about Level 3 and Level 4 and absolutely that’s the level that we need to be pitching our work at. As Doug was saying yesterday, the Tories, that lot, are incredibly good at educating their new elites. They’ve got it down to a T – Eton, Sandhurst, Oxbridge, Ashridge Management College, McKinsey itself. They’re brilliant at this, brilliant, and this is like a kind of super-intellectual freemasonry and actually we can and need to do the same and we are completely capable, in my view, of doing the same. We need to create a new generation of activists with the same level of education, with the same understanding of society, but from our point of view, not theirs. There are younger people in this Conference here today who are completely capable of matching anything that people who go through the Eton and Oxbridge channels can match. We can match that and, my goodness, we need to. It would be completely wrong to name who they are, but I think that most of us in this room would recognise them. We need to pitch at least some of our education and training at that kind of level, in my view, and if we do then I think that we can succeed and that’s why I’m so grateful that we’ve managed to make some really great partnerships with Ruskin, with Northern, with Wolverhampton and I hope that we’ll see much of that.
I’ve gone on for far too long. It’s not normal for me to speak for a lengthy time, but just to sum up, much of what we do already is really very good and we will no doubt keep that, although we are not going to decide on the 2016 training budget until we’ve conducted quite a bit of this review at the very least, but we need to do some new stuff as well. We need to embrace even more new technology, we need to look at new methods of delivery and I really want the GFTU to embark on partnerships with performing artists, because I think that can play an incredibly important part of our delivery programme and be enormous fun, by the way, but fun with a purpose. We need to raise the bar, genuinely raise the bar. We need to lift our sights. We should be looking at a postgraduate level of training for our new generation of leaders in the movement and we need to create context. We need all of our reps to understand why we do what we do, not just understand how to do it. If the review concentrates on those things, I think we can grow a new generation of activists for the movement.

Shelley Maxfield.

As another youth worker and with a slightly different message, which is as swathes of us are made redundant up and down the country with skills around political education, empowering young people, developing their skills and bringing them on, really, to be short and sweet, if our Government doesn’t want us and doesn’t want to utilise our skills, then maybe it’s about time the trade union movement does and employs us to do what we’re expertly qualified to do and that is to bring on young people. So, trade unionists, please start employing us youth workers because we haven’t got another job to go to.