

Women and unions

Are Tory trade union laws helping women gain a more equitable share of power at the top of Britain's trade unions?

To float the notion of Tory legislation in any way advancing the cause of women's equality may seem bizarre against a backdrop of government inspired measures which threaten to worsen the lot of women workers: reform of the wages councils, the Fowler review and the thrust towards labour market flexibility.

However, the 1984 Trade Union Act stipulation that all voting members on union executives must be chosen through secret, individual membership ballots appears, from evidence so far, to be helping redress the imbalance of years of ingrained male domination.

Changes in election procedures have been foisted on unions which previously adopted a mode other than secret ballots to elect their executives, under threat of legal sanction.

A cursory analysis of recent elections in four unions which have changed their rules to comply with the Act reveals a swing towards increased representation by women.

* The 77,000 strong National Union of Tailor and Garment Workers now has 11 women members on its 14 strong executive. Turnout at the poll - in a union with around 90% female membership - averaged 75%, far higher than in previous elections.

• Seven out of 27 seats on the Inland Revenue Staff Federation (IRSF) executive are now held by women. 70% of the 55,000 membership are women. Out of 68 candidates standing for election, only 11 were women, seven of whom were elected.

* Women's representation on the 16-strong APEX executive has been boosted from three to five. Women candidates topped the poll in every seat contested. Nearly 55% of the union's 90,000 members are female.

* A woman has recently been elected to one of two national seats on the ASTMS executive - confounding insider pundits.

Whether this cluster of results proves to be an aberrant quirk rather than the harbinger of a trend will become clearer when more unions put their newly adopted procedures to the test.

All four elections cited took place after

successful ballots on retention (or establishment in the IRSFs case) of union political funds. The ballot requirement - another measure imposed by the government - is now widely acknowledged as spurring union leaderships to attempt to revitalise union structures and improve communication with members. The link between high election turnouts and the political fund campaigns is not hard to trace.

Secret ballots could well be providing a mechanism for change. But the work of women activists-who have pushed for more representative structures and urged unions to get their houses in order - has prepared the ground. Women, who make up roughly a third of Britain's 9.5m trade unionists, are grossly under-represented in all strata of trade union hierarchies - from the TUC general council to the workplace branch.

Within trade unions, the reality of advancing the role of women still lags lamentably behind the rhetoric. The TUC's 10-point charter aimed at progressing the drive towards women's equality inside unions was published seven years ago. It included an exhortation for unions to look to their structures to see if they hampered women from reaching decision-making bodies and championed the need for union meetings to be held in working time wherever possible, with childcare provisions on hand.

Progress has been made - NUPE's campaigns for meetings in work time are notable. Many unions have appointed women's officers and set up women's committees at national and regional level.

But the gap between policy and practice remains and unions still appear detached and irrelevant to many women members - and potential recruits. A recent MORI survey on attitudes at work found that only 19% of female trade unionists, against 41% of their male counterparts, had voted in a union election. Two per cent had served as union officials compared to 9% of men polled, and 25% of women against 45% of men had been to a union meeting.

If the secret ballot mechanism does prove to help change the complexion of union executives to give women a fairer slice of power it will be a galling irony for existing leaderships: a measure forced on them by a hostile government.

Unions should now make a renewed drive to translate rostrum resolutions into reality. The recruitment of more women full-time officials- current estimates number them at a shaming five per cent - would be a start.

Helen Hague