

1911 to 2011: Everything Changes Everything Stays the Same

By Philippa Clark, UNISON

In 1911, workers in the Singer sewing machine plant in Clydebank, Glasgow, took strike action in protest at a re-organisation of their work process which meant an increase in workload and a decrease in wages. It was the birth of “Red Clydeside.” The characteristics of this dispute – both positive and negative – have echoed down the decades of the last 100 years.

According to the Glasgow Digital Library, “The initial success of the Singer strike was due largely to the solidarity of the workforce. Before this dispute, workplace divisions on Clydeside based on occupation, skill, gender and religion would have prevented such a show of worker solidarity. The Singer strike was remarkable in that both men and women, of all occupations, skills and religions, presented a united front in opposition to the dictates of management”. Meanwhile, as Glasgow was growing into the power house of the UK, the population of the Highlands fell more steeply than at any time in its history. The Hebrides, for instance, lost 28% of its population in this period.

These were two experiences that shaped the economic and cultural development of one country. Differences between the two regions still exist, both geographic and demographic. Nevertheless, the important principle that is central to trade unionism is to maximise opportunities for economic and cultural progress through mutual respect for and learning from such differences, and then moving forward in unity.

So what has this to do with union learning in the Highlands and Islands? It describes well the model, which in 2011, is offering learning opportunities to more and more workers in the region and is also recruiting workers into trade unions.

Led by Scottish Union Learning in the Highlands and Islands, there are a number of STUC Local Learning Forums convened to bring together union learning representatives from all trade unions in Caithness, Orkney, Moray and Inverness. Last year, a successful Learning Road Show throughout the Western Isles was also organised. Through this exchange of ideas and the sharing of experiences, we are enjoying the benefits of an ever-expanding network of contacts who are publicising a growing range of courses: IT, British Sign Language, Spanish, Italian, French, Digital Photography, Confident Communication at Work, Improving Literacy and Numeracy, Web Design, and a Gaelic taster session, to name just a few!

Several courses are oversubscribed – we have more people than places. Integral to this network is Marta Chaba, Learning and Organising Migrant Workers Fieldworker, and Jenny Roberts, UNISON member on the STUC Youth Committee. Marta has organised numerous courses, including An Introduction to Management, First Aid, Advanced and Intermediate IT, and English. Jenny has co-ordinated a course on IT in social networking and they are both involved in recruiting and organising for all courses.

The Migrant Worker Project is proving



(Left) Jenny Roberts, UNISON member on the STUC Youth Committee and (Right) Marta Chaba, Learning and Organising Migrant Workers Fieldworker in the Highlands and Islands.

to be very effective in raising awareness of trade unions. Some of the methods employed by Marta include cold calling employers, making links with migrant groups in the community and visiting ESOL classes. The word is spreading that trade unions are for everybody, regardless of ethnicity, and people are ringing the UNISON Highland Resource Centre, asking to become members. In the summer of 2010, we took Union Learning to a Highland music festival attended by over 12,000 people at Belladrum. With Jenny and other young UNISON members on board, it made all the difference in talking to festival goers about what trade unions have to offer young workers.

The defining characteristics of union learning in the Highlands and Islands are co-operation and inclusiveness. These should be self-evident, a given in the labour movement. However, as the demands and pressures on union representatives continue to increase, the focus is on the immediate issue, the individual department and workplace, and the union of which you are a member.

We are in danger of forgetting that we are part of a broader movement, locally in the form of the trades councils, nationally in the Scottish TUC and the TUC; in Europe as part of the ETUC; and unions often have an international counterpart; for example, UNISON is part of Public Services International.

If the events of recent times have taught us anything, it is that workers need unity across continents to deal with the challenges of the international money makers and unity across communities to challenge the ideological attack on our public services: our health and education system, the care of our elderly and vulnerable citizens. Our ability to protest against the hundreds of thousands of jobs being slashed whilst bankers pocket millions of pounds of our money in bonuses will lie in our unity. Our network of ULRs across unions will be integral to this. In the Highlands and Islands, the commitment of trade unions to serving members and communities manifests itself in the successful cross-union work on learning. UNISON is proud to play a part in this – knowledge is power!