

Recognising the lesbian and gay constituency in UK trade unions: moving forward in UNISON?

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Recent research on trade union democracy has drawn attention to the heterogeneity of union membership and the social processes within unions which can lead to the inclusion or exclusion of specific constituencies within union structures. This article draws on a case study of lesbian and gay self organisation in UNISON to illustrate the value of developing democratic structures to reflect this constituency and improve trade union representation and participation.

UNISON is the UK's largest trade union and the largest public service union in Europe. During the 1990s, UNISON has adopted one of the most radical attempts to democratise British trade unionism in order to encourage the participation and representation of *all* sections of its membership including a specific commitment to lesbian and gay workers and their employment and human rights. Equality was at the heart of UNISON's constitution when it was formed in 1993; the product of a merger between three main public sector unions: the National Association of Local Government Officers (NALGO), the National Union of Public Employees (NUPE) and the Confederation of Health Service Employees (COHSE). The route UNISON has chosen has been described as a radical departure from traditional, unitarist trade unionism (Mann, Ledwith and Colgan, 1987).

UNISON has not been alone in acknowledging the diversity within its membership as can be seen from recent TUC 'New Unionism' initiatives (TUC, 1997a, 1998a), and the establishment of new structures and priorities within individual unions (LRD, 1997, 1998a, 1998b). As Hyman (1994) in his discussion of changing trade union identities and strategies acknowledges, trade unions are organisations for the representation of interests which act 'on behalf of specific constituencies, with criteria of inclusion which of necessity are at the same time principles of exclusion.' Traditional 'mainstream' structures established to deliver internal democracy within trade

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unions have for the most part operated to serve the needs of a perceived homogeneous membership based on geographical constituencies (eg. regional and branch) and sectoral/occupational constituencies. Notwithstanding democratic constitutions, as Hyman (1994) points out, most unions have 'typically been biased in the composition of their officials and activists towards relatively high-status, male, native-born, full-time employees.'

As is now being recognised, trade unions are made up of other constituencies whose experience of participation and representation within UK unions may more accurately be described as one of 'exclusion' than 'inclusion.' Numerous studies since the 1980s have noted the importance of gender relations in understanding the relative under representation of women and the structural and attitudinal barriers in the way of women's participation and influence within unions (Cunnison and Stageman, 1993; Pocock, 1997). Increasingly, research has been critical of 'race-blind' unions pointing to the need to address the concerns of black trade union members and recognise their under representation within trade union structures (Phizacklea and Miles, 1993; Commission for Racial Equality, 1992). With the notable exception of the surveys done by Labour Research (1992; 1997), little research has been done on the involvement and participation of lesbian and gay members within trade unions and even less on the needs and concerns of disabled members. For those committed to the delivery of trade union democracy it is important to note that trade union 'constitutions do not on their own cause democratic behaviour . . . Constitutions have to be realised through the social processes which are going on all the time' (Ledwith et al. 1990).

Debates on trade union democracy within the 'mainstream' industrial relations literature have until fairly recently concentrated on questions of centralisation or decentralisation, representative and participative democracy and the relative importance of lay or employed officials (Kelly and Heery, 1994; Terry, 1996). Whilst important, these dominant 'union democracy' debates have had serious shortcomings in that a key challenge for unions during the 1980s was that they 'were charged, whatever their governing structures, with being fundamentally undemocratic on the grounds that they failed properly to represent the interests of a large and growing proportion of their members' (Terry, 1996). In his discussion examining key influences on the formation, structure and governance of UNISON, Terry (1996) illustrates the complexity of developing union structures and forms of governance which respond to that challenge. A key way forward for UNISON was the need to recognise union members as heterogeneous, acknowledging the different constituencies with different interests deriving from their gender, race and ethnicity, sexuality and disability *in addition* to the more traditionally acknowledged geographical and sectoral/occupational constituencies.

Cockburn (1996) has provided a useful discussion of existing mechanisms for gender democracy. She has described reserved seats for women and proportionality as systems whereby women as individuals are elected to 'mainstream' structures principally as individuals in a sex category. She considers self organisation as offering a more genuine route to democracy given that it aims to represent women (and lesbians and gay men, black and disabled members) as an 'oppressed social group' so recognising the 'group' as a legitimate constituency from which individuals are elected specifically to speak for that constituency. Cockburn (1996) and Briskin (1998) have argued that trade unions can only benefit from the implementation of both systems 'in tandem' in order to produce women as a constructive and 'vocal constituency,' within trade unions. They also consider that self organisation can provide trade unions with a democratic means to overcome the marginalisation of lesbian and gay, black and disabled constituencies within trade unions. These moves should be positive both in terms of democratic process, but also because as Dickens (1997) has observed 'issues of *internal* equality' are connected to 'issues of *external* equality.'

UNISON has acknowledged that specific groups may develop demands that unions need to take action on and it has developed 'identifiable systems of representation within the union for all these groups' (Terry, 1996). A study of UNISON can

provide valuable insight into how these systems are working and the priorities being articulated and developed by women, black, disabled and lesbian and gay union members within the union. Through these 'interim separatist' structures,¹ the priorities of these constituencies are now rendered 'visible' and it is possible to consider areas of overlap and difference amongst them. Research on women in unions is relatively well developed given that the majority of unions in the UK have developed 'interim separatist' structures to encourage and improve the participation and position of women in unions (Cunnison and Stageman, 1993; Colgan and Ledwith, 1996, 2000; Kirton and Healy, 1999). Interim separatist structures for black members also exist across a number of UK unions so making the study of black members priorities and strategies worthwhile (Leah, 1993; Virdee and Grint, 1994). Interim separatist structures are much less developed for disabled and lesbian and gay members. Thus a study of UNISON's disabled and lesbian and gay structures can provide an unique insight into the demands and concerns being raised by these two hitherto neglected constituencies.

This article focusses on lesbian and gay activism within UNISON in order to begin to address the gap on lesbian and gay issues that exists within the industrial relations literature. The sexuality of organisation and the study of sexual politics within unions is a relatively under researched area in both organisation studies and industrial relations (Burrell and Hearn, 1993; Franzway, 1997) although some studies are beginning to emerge on lesbian and gay issues within the workplace (Burke, 1993; Dunne, 1997; Hunt, 1999). This article will undertake a detailed case study of UNISON in order to examine its attempt to place gay and lesbian issues firmly on its trade union agenda. First, the article will outline the UK context within which UNISON has developed its innovative approach. Second, it will discuss the formation of UNISON, highlighting the goals and objectives it set for itself in relation to internal democracy and equity issues. Thirdly, it will focus on lesbian and gay self organisation as a political space to encourage the involvement and representation of lesbian and gay members and as a strategic means of transforming the structure and culture of the union. Finally, it will discuss the structural tensions and levels of resistance to self organisation as perceived by UNISON lesbian and gay activists.

In doing so it will draw on interviews with twenty five UNISON lesbian and gay trade union activists. It will also draw on a research programme funded by the Economic and Social Science Research Council examining union structures and equal opportunity policies and practices within UNISON.²

Lesbians and gay men: out in the union?

There has been a steady increase in trade union interest in lesbian and gay issues and lesbian and gay participation within trade union structures over the last decade. One of the major ways this has been achieved is by lesbians and gay men forming interim separatist groups inside their own unions to increase 'visibility,' raise lesbian and gay issues and exert pressure for change within the main union structures (LRD, 1992, 1997). This pressure has come during a decade where UK trade unions have seen membership figures plummet so leaving a number of them open to pressure to reconsider existing approaches to trade union recruitment and organisation in order to try and reverse membership declines (Bradley, 1993; Heery, 1997). Most unions

¹ Briskin (1993) usefully differentiates between separate organisation as a *end in itself*, and separate organisation as a *strategy*. 'Interim separatism' has been defined by Colgan and Ledwith (1996) as the strategy whereby activists organise separately in order to empower 'disadvantaged groups' whilst at the same time continuing to work within mainstream structures.

² The research was carried out by Fiona Colgan (University of North London) and Sue Ledwith (Oxford Brookes University) between 1995 and 1997, it examined trade union democracy, union structures and the strategies of women activists in UNISON and the GPMU.

have acknowledged the need to reconsider and reform their existing structures, policies and practices in order to meet new social and economic challenges (TUC, 1998a).³

Unfortunately, trade unions have been adopting a more positive stance in respect of internal and external equality initiatives during a harsh climate for trade unions and collective bargaining thus limiting the gains to be made through equality bargaining (Dickens, 1997). UNISON itself has reformed its union organisation at a time when restructuring of the public services and utilities, privatisation, market testing, compulsory and competitive tendering and the fragmentation of bargaining arrangements have created major challenges for the union (Fairbrother et al., 1996).

Discrimination and harassment of lesbians and gay men at work remains a problem (Palmer, 1993; SCPR, 1995), however, a majority of the British public now supports lesbian and gay equality including anti-discrimination laws and the recognition of same sex couples (Stonewall, 1997a). Within this changing context, there has been a developing awareness of equality issues within the trade union movement. This progress has been made in response to campaigning by women, black workers, disabled workers and lesbian and gay workers (Colgan and Ledwith, 1996; Phizacklea and Miles, 1992; TUDA, 1997). Despite campaigning, no progress has been made on gaining legislation in the UK to protect lesbians and gay men from discrimination on the grounds of sexuality. Although, such legislation would be unlikely to provide a panacea, its absence makes it vitally important that unions are willing to oppose discrimination against lesbians and gay men, and that lesbians and gay men are aware of this commitment. Research has shown that among the five major reasons lesbian and gay workers gave for being able to be openly lesbian or gay at work was their union's commitment to lesbian and gay issues (LRD, 1992).

In 1984 the TUC introduced a Charter on Equality for Lesbian and Gay Workers. The TUC Equal Rights Committee held the first Lesbian and Gay Rights at Work Seminar in 1992. By 1992 21 unions (representing 65% of TUC-affiliated membership) had a policy supporting lesbian and gay rights or a reference to equal opportunities 'regardless of sexual orientation' included in an equal opportunities policy statement or in the union's constitution. NALGO was a 'trailblazer' being the first UK union to adopt policy in this area. At its 1976 conference, NALGO adopted a resolution instructing all NALGO negotiators to attempt to add 'sexual orientation' to the non-discrimination clause in all collective agreements. NUPE passed its first resolution on lesbian and gay issues at its 1981 conference, calling for sexuality clauses to be negotiated in equal opportunities agreements (LRD, 1992).

Unions had begun to recognise the need for the representation of lesbian and gay members in union structures. NALGO was again the first union to do so (Colgan, 1999). By 1997, some unions had made huge steps forward and established interim separatist structures for their lesbian and gay members while others still had no lesbian and gay or equality structures or policies. Six unions established a national level lesbian and gay committee or group (CWU, MSF, NAPO, NATFHE, the NUT and UNISON) and 8 had held an annual national lesbian and gay member's conference. By 1998, the TUC had held four annual Lesbian and Gay *Pride at Work* seminars (arranged to coincide with the annual National Lesbian and Gay Pride march and festival in London). It had also produced a checklist of relevant workplace issues and has tried to encourage more unions to engage with these issues and develop services for lesbian and gay members (TUC, 1997b; 1998b).

Following a resolution to the 1996 TUC Women's Conference, the TUC had also undertaken a consultation with its affiliates on the future structure and format of a TUC Lesbian and Gay Conference. Twenty one of the TUC's 74 affiliates had responded to the 1996 consultation and only 19 had sent representatives to the meeting to discuss the way forward. Thus, although there was a lot of pressure from

³ The TUC's New Unionism seminars have specifically addressed the need for trade unions to consider the recruitment, organisation and participation of women, black, young and temporary or 'atypical' workers 'Organise '99!' for the first time focussed on initiatives aimed at lesbian and gay workers.

lesbian and gay delegates at both the 1996 and 1997 TUC Lesbian and Gay seminars to move from the current workshop format to an annual lesbian and gay motion based conference, the TUC argued that no consensus had emerged from the consultation about the future structure and format of the conference (TUC, 1996b; 1997b).

In a great breakthrough at the 1997 TUC conference, despite the opposition of the TUC General Council, a motion proposing a TUC lesbian and gay annual motion based policy making conference was carried (TUC, 1997d). In place of the one day seminar, the annual TUC lesbian and gay conference is now a motion-based, two day event. The success of this motion proposed by Equity and seconded by UNISON testifies both to the networking and caucusing skills of lesbian and gay activists within and across their trade unions as well as to the more supportive attitude to lesbian and gay issues which has developed within the UK trade union movement as a whole over the last decade. The first TUC Lesbian and Gay motion-based Conference was held in July, 1998 and fourteen members were elected onto the first TUC Lesbian and Gay Advisory Committee. The conference was attended by 191 delegates from 30 affiliated unions and representatives from Trades Union Councils plus over 40 visitors and exhibitors (TUC, 1998c).

One of the unions that stands out as being at the forefront of action for its lesbian and gay members during this period is UNISON. This article having outlined the context within which UNISON has been working will now turn its attention to a case study of its attempt to change its structures and culture in order to encourage the participation and representation of lesbian and gay members.

UNISON, fair representation and proportionality

At its formation UNISON set itself the task of establishing 'new standards for trade unionism' in the UK and across Europe (COHSE-NALGO-NUPE, 1991). UNISON has committed itself to challenging discrimination on all fronts. The UNISON rule-book (1997a) states for example that the union exists 'to seek to ensure equality of treatment . . . for all members and to work for the elimination of discrimination on grounds of race, gender, sexuality, disability, age or creed'. This is spelt out throughout the core commitments alongside the more traditional trade union objectives of improving members' pay and conditions and promoting their interests (Moriarty, 1997).

In order, to discuss and agree arrangements for merger, a number of working parties made up of members of the three partner unions were established, including one on equal opportunities. It proposed that 'proportionality,' 'reserved seats'⁴ and 'self-organisation' should be the mechanisms used to ensure women's representation. 'Fair representation' and 'self-organisation' were to be the way forward for the representation of lesbian and gay, black and disabled members (Terry, 1996).

Proportionality

Proportionality is based on gender and seeks to ensure that the representation of women and men is in proportion to the relevant numbers of female and male members comprising the electorate (UNISON, 1997). In 1995 the first elections for the union's National Executive Committee took place in accordance with UNISON rules. As a consequence, the proportion of women on the executive (65%) is now more truly representative of UNISON's predominantly female membership (78%). Structures at all levels of UNISON are required to reach proportionality for women by the year 2000 (UNISON, 1994b).

⁴ These seats are reserved for low paid women (UNISON 1997a).

Fair representation

The aim of fair representation is to ensure 'the broad balance of representation of members of the electorate, taking into account such factors as the balance between part-time and full-time workers, manual and non-manual workers, different occupations, skills, qualifications, responsibilities, race, sexuality and disability. 'As with proportionality, the year 2000 is the target date but 'there is no cut-off point to this process.' Rather achieving fair representation is perceived to be a 'continuous process which will constantly grow and change' (UNISON, 1997c).

The principles of fair representation apply to all elections and the composition of conference delegations within the union. The difficulty with the definition is that it is by nature broad and without a fairly sophisticated form of monitoring is proving harder than proportionality to implement and monitor. Although progress has been made as far as the representation of lesbian and gay men are concerned, there remains a problem concerning the under-representation of manual workers generally and women – especially in representative positions and black workers (UNISON, 1995b). In 1996 a working group was set up to investigate and report on fair representation and as a consequence, UNISON has drawn up guidelines on fair representation (UNISON, 1997c).

Recognising the lesbian and gay constituency: self-organisation in UNISON

Self-organisation is a key ingredient in UNISON's strategy to deliver proportionality and fair representation. Four groups are recognised within UNISON and allowed to organise as self organised groups (SOGs) alongside the other 'mainstream' union structures but within the framework of the union. These groups are lesbians and gay men, women, black members and disabled members.

Any UNISON member who self identifies as a lesbian or gay man may join the lesbian and gay self-organised group. As Moriarty (1997) states, UNISON in establishing self-organisation recognises,

that lesbian and gay members require a mechanism for tackling that discrimination which is an integral part of the union's own structures . . . members who suffer discrimination have the opportunity to set the agenda for combatting prejudice, instead of the battle against bigotry being left to well-intentioned activists or those with little or no direct experience of disadvantage.

UNISON's guidelines on self organisation (1998a) state that the purpose of a SOG is to enable the members within each group to:

- meet to share concerns and aspirations and establish their own priorities
- elect their own representatives to other levels of self-organisation and to other appropriate levels of union organisation
- have adequate and agreed funding and other resources, including education and training access, publicity and communications
- work within a flexible structure to build confidence and encourage participation and provide opportunities for a fuller involvement of disadvantaged members
- work within the established policies, rules and constitutional provision of the union

Thus lesbians and gay men clearly are encouraged to have a voice within UNISON although as UNISON's Director of Equal Opportunities has suggested, 'self organisation is not equated with separatism, it is about empowerment' (1993). In return, it can be argued that UNISON by creating and resourcing lesbian and gay self-organisation 'adds lesbian and gay talent, skill and creativity to UNISON' which it might otherwise not attract (Moriarty, 1997). Certainly, a number of lesbian and gay activists were clear that this was the case as this member of the Disabled Members Caucus in a regional lesbian and gay group made clear, 'If it wasn't for self organisation I would not be a UNISON activist' (UNISON interview 2, 1997). Indeed, self

organisation was an important factor in this lesbian's decision to both come 'out' and then become active in self organisation, her branch and her service group.

I was a NUPE member for a couple of years and then 6 months after vesting day which was 1993, I was actually given a booklet on the aims and objectives of UNISON and it actually says in there that I can exist, that lesbians and gays actually exist within the union and that I was allowed to be lesbian or gay and that the support would be there for me . . . I wasn't out as a lesbian at work and this union, ie. UNISON was actually saying that not only could I exist but that they would support me, that I could actually belong to a group of lesbian and gay people (UNISON interview 3, 1997).

Self-organisation is supported and resourced at all levels in UNISON. These structures (frequently referred to by more unitarist UNISON members as the 'mainstream') aim primarily to represent members based on geographical (eg. branch, region) and or occupational/employment sectors (eg. service group⁵). Self organised groups can elect representatives to branch committee and regional council/committee meetings and send delegates to UNISON's NDC and service group conferences.⁶ However, there are no reserved seats on UNISON's NEC from any of the SOGs. It is composed of representatives from the regions and service groups (Colgan, 1999). It has been argued that the lack of SOG representation is contradictory given UNISON's commitment to fair representation and is a subject of consultation at the current time.⁷ Currently, the forum established for discussion between the SOGS and the NEC is an NEC sub-committee, the SOG Liaison Group.

The impetus to improve formal links between the SOGS and the service groups has come primarily from the National Lesbian and Gay SOG's motions to the service group conferences in 1996. Since then the NLGC (and other SOGs) have sought to establish liaison structures to link with the SOGs (see Colgan and Ledwith, 1999 for a discussion of the political and structural tensions underlying these developments). Some critics within the service groups have opposed this arguing that the union has become too preoccupied with its internal representative structures at the expense of an effective overall strategy in relation to membership mobilisation, workplace organisation and collective bargaining. However, the SOGs counter this view by arguing that it is precisely because they wish to participate in the development of this strategy that they need to clarify links with the NEC, service groups and other UNISON structures (Colgan and Ledwith, 1999).

Nationally UNISON has established an Equal Opportunities Department, headed by a National Director of Equal Opportunities, assisted by a Deputy plus a national officer for each of the SOGs plus research and administrative support. In each of UNISON's 13 regions, there is a Regional Lesbian and Gay Committee/Group (RLGC) and at the grassroots of UNISON's organisation is the workplace branch where there is a developing network of UNISON branch lesbian and gay groups. Lesbian and Gay self organisation provides a political space which encourages the involvement and representation of lesbian and gay members. It also provides lesbian and gay members with a strategic means to develop their agenda, tackle homophobia

⁵ There are 7 Service Groups in UNISON. These co-ordinate pay and service conditions policy in the areas where UNISON organises; local government, health, higher education, water, gas, electricity and transport.

⁶ A rule change in 1995, enabled the SOGS to send delegates and motions to service group conferences for the first time in 1996. Following this, the Third Lesbian and Gay Conference submitted motions to each service group conference calling for the development of effective liaison with, and participation in service group structures at national and regional level (NLGC, 1996a).

⁷ In response to a 1995 motion on fair representation in the union's structures (Composite GG), the NEC consulted the SOGS on the way forward on NEC representation. The NLGC asked for observer status, with speaking rights at the NEC. Their position was based on the recognition that as it is not currently feasible to identify UNISON's lesbian and gay membership, NEC representatives could not be solely elected by a constituency of lesbian and gay members to speak for that constituency. It also reflects its concern that lesbian and gay NEC representatives elected by a predominantly heterosexual membership would not necessarily be representative or accountable to lesbian and gay members (NLGC, 1996a).

and work with allies to transform the structure and culture of the union. The following section will describe UNISON's lesbian and gay structures and consider how lesbian and gay self organisation works in practice.

Lesbian and gay self-organisation: national level

The top tier of Lesbian and Gay self-organisation is the National Lesbian and Gay Committee (NLGC) and the annual Lesbian and Gay Conference. The NLGC's main focus is to promote the interests of Lesbians and Gay men in the union and the workplace and to campaign more broadly for lesbian and gay rights. The NLGC is made up of 26 regional representatives (a lesbian and a gay man from each of UNISON's 13 regions) plus six representatives each from the disabled and black lesbian and gay caucuses.

The NLGC organises and is responsible to the annual national lesbian and gay conference. The conference has the right to send two motions and two delegates to UNISON's National Delegate Conference (NDC) as well as to each of the Service Group Conferences. In addition to sending motions to the NDC, the NLGC aims to organise a 'highly visible and organised presence' there (UNISON interview 7, 1996). It arranges fringe meetings on specific topics and daily lesbian and gay caucus meetings. It produces a daily conference newssheet and organises a stall with UNISON lesbian and gay literature, where members can get information and advice and lesbian and gay members can sign up for the lesbian and gay mailing list. These initiatives clearly establish a high profile presence at the NDC so publicising the work of the lesbian and gay SOG as a legitimate constituency within the union to all UNISON delegates and encouraging lesbian and gay activists to become involved in self organisation.

The UNISON annual lesbian and gay conference is a policy making motion-based conference with time scheduled for service group, disabled and black members' caucuses as well as regional groups to meet in order to discuss priorities, motions and network. It is one of the largest lesbian and gay events of its kind. A number of UNISON lesbian and gay activists described their first attendance at the lesbian and gay conference as being 'very liberating' and 'empowering' and a spur to becoming involved in UNISON as described by this activist,

It was a very positive experience, really mind blowing . . . I think I was really taken with the idea of the lesbian and gay people meeting in that way, and having a say in the union and then getting together . . . without heterosexual people being there . . . As the conferences have gone by I have taken the nitty gritty of it a lot more seriously and I got up and spoke at the conference last time (UNISON interview 4, 1997).

Now a co-ordinator of a regional lesbian and gay group, a branch officer and a delegate to her regional council and regional women's committee, lesbian and gay self organisation has also encouraged her to become active in UNISON's 'mainstream' structures.

The NLGC proportionality and fair representation

The lesbian and gay community in the UK is diverse and it is important that this diverse constituency itself is reflected in lesbian and gay self-organisation. Currently the NLGC addresses proportionality and fair representation by ensuring parity of representation between lesbians and gay men (at least 50% women in all positions including co-chairs, elections, delegations etc.) and allowing scheduled time within NLGC meetings for the lesbian and gay men's caucuses to meet.

Two other caucuses exist, the Black Members' Caucus (BMC) and the Disabled Members' Caucus (DMC). These caucuses hold 2 annual network days for black and disabled members and these each elect 6 members to the NLGC. The BMC and the DMC are recognised as 'an integral part of lesbian and gay self-organisation in UNISON, and caucus representatives make an essential contribution to its work, both as

the elected, accountable voice for black and disabled lesbians and gay men and as individual committee members' (NLGC, 1996b). Not surprisingly, both the BMC and the DMC caucus say they still experience difficulties raising their issues within UNISON's structures. However, they acknowledge that the NLGC is in the forefront of good practice on fair representation within the union (Colgan, 1999).

The NLGC: tackling structural tensions within UNISON

The NLGC sets out to be 'inclusive' and 'strategic' in the way it works (NLGC, 1997b). Its approach is well summarised by one NLGC committee member's view that the NLGC is,

there to ensure that lesbian and gay issues and the needs of lesbian and gay members are addressed effectively by our trade union. At the same time we are in a position within our trade union structure to make changes in the way in which the various service groups that we work within operate. And obviously as a trade union and as lesbian and gay members within a trade union we have got to influence the national political agenda which is comprehensive civil rights and law reform (UNISON interview 7, 1996).

Members of the NLGC are very aware of the climate surrounding self organisation in UNISON and of the need to counter harassment and homophobia where it arises. Mindful that lesbian and gay self organisation 'can't operate in isolation,' the NLGC has decided that it is important to work with the three other SOGS to make progress on equality issues in UNISON (UNISON interview 7, 1996). Aside from the formal meetings which take place between SOG representatives at forums such as the NEC SOG Liaison Committee, the four SOG Committee chairs maintain informal contacts to exchange information and discuss possible areas of collaboration. An example of this collaboration can be seen at the UNISON National Delegate Conference, where the SOGs may organise joint fringe meetings and try to take a common view on which motions to prioritise and support and speak to each other's motions (UNISON interview 7, 1996).

The NLGC is considered to be successful in forging links with the NEC and Service Groups and bringing bargaining, campaigning and policy issues to their attention (Colgan and Ledwith, 1999). This is important given that it is the service groups which co-ordinate pay and service conditions policy in the areas where UNISON organises. Following the merger, there has been some reluctance from the Service Groups at national and regional level to develop formal links with the SOGs. Part of the antagonism from the service groups appears to stem from a unitarist view of trade unionism and a suspicion that SOG activists are more committed to 'narrow, identity politics' rather than 'bread and butter trade unionism' (Colgan and Ledwith, 1999).

However, over time the NLGC has acted as a catalyst in developing formal links with the Service Groups. The service groups acknowledge this attributing the improved relationship partly to the experience and commitment of the activists on the NLGC and partly to the way the NLGC is structured. The NLGC 'have got a structure that means they've got specific people whose job is to liaise with us. A lot of the work they do now seems to be service/conditions focussed' (National officer, interview 3, 1997). The NLGC stress the importance of formalising these links by putting motions proposing this to the Service Group Conferences in 1996. This was viewed as 'a very, very useful process and ... I think that moved us on ... not so much what was achieved in policy terms but in the process of the contact it brought us with the National Service Group Executives (UNISON interview 9, 1996).

Improving the links with 'mainstream' UNISON structures is considered crucial in terms of delivering to members as exemplified by this NLGC member's view,

We are not a single issue group, we are about being a trade union ... It's very important that I am visible within the mainstream union, I think that's absolutely key, that we are progressing the agenda and not just ... one from the SOG perspective ... because my politics are far wider than lesbian and gay politics (UNISON interview 8, 1997).

The NLGC now works with service groups in a variety of ways. For example with the Local Government and Health Service Groups, where the relationship is most developed, liaison structures are firmly in place, with regular scheduled meetings as well as arrangements for consultation and discussion on a wide range of issues including the implications for the service groups of motions from the annual National Lesbian and Gay Conference (NLGC, 1998). Following a motion to the 1997 National Lesbian and Gay Conference, the NLGC has set about developing its relationship with the Affiliated Political Fund (APF) in order to improve lesbian and gay representation within APF Campaigns and work (NLGC, 1998).

This strategic approach aims to develop formal links, counter opposition from those seeing SOGs as 'separatist' and build positive working relationships with all parts of the union. To some extent, the strategy has developed out of adversity in a union where opposition to self organisation (and homophobia) still remains. One NLGC member explains,

We were always fighting and that certainly can bring out the best in you, it can make you have to be more political. Like we basically haven't been allowed to rest on our laurels, we had to be fighting the NEC, we had to be putting motions up, we had to be seen to be active and not for a minute let people forget we existed, otherwise we lost things. *WE* lost our voice (UNISON interview 1, 1996).

Lesbian and gay activists thought that self organisation was working successfully not only in bringing its issues to the attention of the union but in building support for its agenda within the 'mainstream' of the union. As another NLGC member stressed,

part of the underlying agenda is to empower lesbian and gay men and through that empowerment process they are able then to take up the roles that the branch and regions have ... lay activist posts throughout the structure. I think one of the reasons we are successful is precisely that is what's happening and we are able to exploit those networks when we need support (UNISON interview 7, 1996).

NLGC: recent priorities

Recent National Lesbian and Gay SOG priorities in addressing lesbian and gay issues within UNISON and within a broader political context provide an invaluable insight into UNISON lesbian and gay trade unionists priorities. These can be identified in two major ways. Firstly from the motions sent to the National Lesbian and Gay conference and from there to UNISON's National Delegate Conference (NDC) and secondly from an examination of the work of NLGC sub-committees.

In 1995, the motions sent to the NDC from the annual National Lesbian and Gay Conference sought to consolidate and ensure funding for self-organisation within UNISON following some difficulties in a period of financial constraint as the new UNISON put its 'house in order' (NLGC, 1995a). In 1996, the two motions carried at the UNISON NDC were more externally focussed seeking to encourage UNISON to build and develop links with other unions in order to 'Work with other trade unions on lesbian and gay rights' and address 'Civil rights and law reform' (NLGC, 1996a). In 1997 the two motions focussed more specifically on terms and conditions ('Equal rights for pensions') and the need to improve the levels of advice and support UNISON provides to lesbian and gay members ('Access to advice, representation and legal assistance'). In 1998, the two motions sent by the Lesbian and Gay conference to the 1998 UNISON NDC were 'TUC action on equality' and 'Building an equal society.' These recognised the NLGC's desire to build pressure for change on lesbian and gay rights 'and seek UNISON's full support, as well as participating in lesbian and gay campaigns for equality, such as the Stonewall Equality 2000 Campaign (NLGC, 1997a; Stonewall, 1997b). The two motions which were sent by the Lesbian and Gay Conference to the 1999 UNISON NDC illustrate the NLGC's desire to continue to pressure for change on lesbian and gay rights externally at the European level while also recognising the need to increase internal support for the development

of lesbian and gay self organisation and workplace organisation within UNISON (UNISON Equalities, 1998).

A number of key areas of work have been developed by the NLGC and its sub-committees since 1997. The Policy, Development and Campaigning sub-committee has been raising the profile of lesbian and gay self-organisation within and outside UNISON, particularly by developing and co-ordinating NLGC liaison with service groups and the APF and maintaining links with lesbian and gay organisations. Specific campaigns have included work with the UNISON NEC and APF and groups such as Stonewall on civil rights and law reform. A key piece of work was the drawing up and launch of a public services charter for lesbians and gay men (1997a; 1998). Those working with the APF have been using the union's APF structures and connections with the Labour Party to raise the issue of lesbian and gay equality legislation.

The NLGC international sub-committee has sought to ensure that wherever UNISON or the TUC is arguing the case for action on trade union and human rights issues, the case must include lesbian and gay rights. 'Our international work seeks to promote lesbian and gay issues within the trade union movement, and to promote trade union perspectives and UNISON policies within lesbian and gay organisations' (NLGC, 1996a). To this end, the NLGC international subcommittee has continued to work with the International Lesbian and Gay Association (ILGA), running workshops at the 1996 European Regional Conference and hosting the 1997 ILGA conference in London. UNISON is represented on the Executive Board of ILGA Europe which has recently completed a report *Equality for Lesbians and Gay Men – A Relevant Issue in the Civil and Social Dialogue*.

The UNISON NLGC has also been working with other trade unions to arrange the first ever international lesbian and gay trade union conference in the Netherlands in 1998 (UNISON, 1998). Other important international work to highlight discrimination and oppression against lesbians and gay men throughout the world has been done with organisations such as Amnesty International's UK Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Network, the National Coalition of Gay and Lesbian Equality in Southern Africa and War on Want. In conjunction with War on Want, the NLGC prepared a report called *Pride World-wide* (1996), which was submitted to the United Nations Sub-committee on the Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities in 1996. In 1998, an NLGC delegation was hosted by the South African Coalition for Gay and Lesbian Equality. This international work complements and builds on the links the NLGC is developing with other UK trade unions and lesbian and gay organisations. It demonstrates the key role the lesbian and gay self organised group is playing in helping UNISON to develop both a national and international profile as a trade union in campaigning on lesbian and gay employment and civil rights issues.

All of this work is underpinned by the work the NLGC is doing within UNISON to develop lesbian and gay self organisation and develop and influence internal union policy and strategy. It has prioritised developing effective liaison with the service groups. It has also been working with the Legal Services Committee to improve legal advice and assistance (1996c). The NLGC Organisation and Development Sub-committee has been setting up courses nationally for lesbian and gay trade unionists on 'Race equality and disability awareness' and 'Regional development.' They have also surveyed regional education officers to establish and build on the existing training available to UNISON activists at regional level. Since 1997 it has been running training events for Regional Lesbian and Gay SOG Convenors and it is preparing a handbook for regional self organisation. A key priority for the NLGC in 1998/99 is regional development as it seeks to work with the NEC to encourage and support the development of a vibrant network of regional and branch lesbian and gay groups (NLGC, 1997a; 1998).

Lesbian and gay self-organisation: regional level

The regional lesbian and gay groups are often the first and major point of contact for UNISON members. Regional groups exist to promote the active involvement and

empowerment of lesbians and gay members at all levels of UNISON and to support lesbian and gay members including those who are not 'out' at work. Most arrange quarterly meetings for lesbians and gay men in the region. They can provide information to lesbian and gay members through a regular regional mailing list, regional handbook, organise training and network events. They can make links and affiliate to local and national lesbian and gay organisations and work with other trade unions to raise lesbian and gay issues in their region. They also provide a forum for supporting individuals in the group who are being treated in a homophobic way as well as an opportunity to network with other lesbian and gay members (UNISON Regional Lesbian and Gay Groups, South East, 1997; Northern, 1996; Yorkshire and Humber-side, 1997).

Encouraging lesbians and gay men to become active in UNISON

The regional groups try to strike a balance between getting the work done and being a friendly and supportive group for new activists to join. Most of the regional groups rotate the location of the meetings around their region to try and encourage people to participate. The regional groups are tackling the issues of proportionality and fair representation in different ways. In order to achieve proportionality, one region is trying to change the style of the meetings and arrange a 'lesbian caucus at regional meetings' (UNISON interview 12, 1997). The BMC and the DMC have sought to encourage work at regional level to ensure both black and disabled lesbians and gay men feel encouraged and able to get involved in regional lesbian and gay groups. As one black lesbian active in lesbian and gay self organisation acknowledged 'It is hard sometimes, the chances are I am the only Afro-Caribbean there' (UNISON interview 13, 1997).

Representing the lesbian and gay constituency in regional structures

Regional groups provide a route for lesbian and gay members to get involved in UNISON through the lesbian and gay SOG and through UNISON's regional 'mainstream' structures. In each UNISON region, the lesbian and gay group has pushed for the right to have representatives and to build working relationships within the regional structures (NLGC, 1996d). Although, some lesbian and gay activists felt positive about their region's attitudes to lesbian and gay self-organisation and felt that progress was being achieved, others felt that they were working in an anti-SOG and homophobic climate. One lesbian described her experience of being a delegate from the regional lesbian and gay group to her regional council by saying:

I have spoken but I found it a very difficult experience and also the attitudes there, there were a lot of anti-SOG people there, but the Regional Secretary I found pretty encouraging, he's always been fine and the deputy regional secretary as well. (UNISON interview 10, 1997).

Another made it clear that working within 'mainstream' union structures such as a regional publicity committee can be hard:

because you don't know who your allies are . . . to be fair nobody's been overtly anything but sometimes you can't help feeling like - you say something about it like you ask for money for Pride . . . you'd just feel people were saying 'yes' because they daren't say politically 'no'. You don't feel there's that much active support . . . you can't help but feel you're a side issue, when you bring things up (UNISON interview 1, 1996).

The majority of the activists interviewed thought it was important for lesbian and gay activists to be active in UNISON's self organised and 'mainstream' structures. This would ensure fair representation within UNISON's structures and ensure that 'mainstream' activists could not claim that lesbian and gay self organisation was 'separatist'.

Making alliances to progress the equality agenda

In order to counter an anti-SOG and anti-equal opportunities climate, the SOGS at regional level often work closely together to agree priorities and strategies through informal links or via formal collaborative meetings such as SOG strategy meetings or network meetings/training days. This means that they can support each others' motions at regional meetings and propose and elect candidates to regional positions and committees who are supportive of self-organisation and culture change within the union (UNISON interview 19, 1996). In more than one region, trade unionists who have become active through self-organisation are now standing for and being elected to senior regional lay member positions as well as positions on key regional subcommittees such as education and training, recruitment and organisation, finance and international. Increasingly, these candidates also find support from branches which take a positive view of self-organisation and wish to see proportionality and fair representation being implemented at regional level (UNISON interview 19, 1998).

Achieving structural and attitudinal change at regional level

The work the lesbian and gay groups do is crucially important in introducing issues, changing the union culture and reminding the union that lesbian and gay issues need to be a core part of the union agenda. Regions are responding (if at times reluctantly) to the issues raised:

I think we irritate them dreadfully and I'm always having meetings with my Regional Secretary at which he tells me I am expecting too much and I say I am expecting my rights, within UNISON, but they do say 'oh you have done some really good work, you have brought a lot of things to our attention' (UNISON interview 12, 1997).

Research has shown that this cultural change is taking place slowly and unevenly (Fairbrother et al. 1996; Colgan and Ledwith, 1999;). Some of those active in lesbian and gay self organisation (and the other SOGs) reported their irritation at criticisms from some UNISON 'mainstream' activists that self organisation 'was not real trade union work' (UNISON interview 13, 1997). This was galling for the majority of lesbian and gay activists who were active in both self organised and 'mainstream' structures, some as delegates from their branch.

A very real problem for lesbian and gay trade unionists active in self organisation is time off to attend union meetings in working time because they may not wish to be 'out' to their employer and because of the increasing reluctance of employers to agree to paid time off for trade union duties. This is a problem affecting all areas of lay member activity in the union. However, SOG representatives face particular difficulties because many employers refuse to recognise SOG activities as trade union duties (NLGC, 1997a).

Lesbian and gay self organisation: branch groups

The primary unit of UNISON is the local branch where members are organised together for negotiations, services, advice and information. At branch level, there is a developing network of lesbian and gay groups which meet to discuss local service conditions, build a support network for members facing problems at work, maintain confidential mailing lists, provide a forum to debate lesbian and gay issues and help members gain the confidence to get involved in other parts of the union (UNISON, 1998a). The development of these branch groups should assist UNISON in its aim to develop and strengthen effective workplace organisation (Fairbrother et al, 1996; UNISON, 1997b).

Establishing branch groups

Despite UNISON's *Code of Good Branch Practice* (1995a) and its guidelines on self organisation (1998a), UNISON is aware that some branches are failing to implement

the Code and support the establishment of branch self organised groups (Colgan and Ledwith, 1999). As a consequence, the NEC SOG Liaison Committee aims to ensure that self organisation is a central part of the union's work to develop branches in 1999 (NLGC, 1998a)

Lesbians and gay men have been involved in setting up branch groups for a number of reasons, one gay man did so because,

I figured there must be a lot of people around out there and I wanted their support. I was coming out at work in a visible way and I wanted to know where my supports were . . . It started off as a support, but then very quickly we recognised that there were jobs that needed to be done from the branch . . . particularly looking at some of the local authority policies' (UNISON interview 14, 1997).

His branch now had a vibrant lesbian and gay branch group of 15 people most of whom had not previously been active in UNISON. A lesbian who had taken on the post of branch equality officer was trying to set up an equal opportunities committee in the branch. As part of this initiative she was keen to ensure the SOGs worked together to develop an equalities agenda in the branch,

I'm organising meetings for all SOGs separately, and trying to get each group to elect two representatives for the branch committee so that they can then go there and have voting rights . . . basically I think we will be a stronger lobby if we stick together (UNISON interview 4, 1997).

She also hoped these branch representatives would defuse some of the factional politics in the branch. In some cases the branch had been quite positive to the establishment of a lesbian and gay branch group,

My branch have been very supportive about self organisation because they want to be seen to do the right thing . . . they have always been incredibly open to all the suggestions I have made like recruiting leaflets for self organisation in all new members' packs and including it on the stewards training (UNISON interviewee 12, March 1997).

Branch hostility to self organisation

However in other branches, the establishment of lesbian and gay self organised groups had been more of an uphill struggle, 'you are made to feel a bit of a pain . . . I also worry about being kind of used as a badge, if you are the only lesbian and gay person being asked along' (UNISON interview 10, 1997).

Not all lesbians and gay men were in favour of setting up a lesbian and gay group in the branch at the current time. One gay man expressed the view that although he was happy to be active in the regional lesbian and gay group, a branch group would be too 'close to home' given that he did not feel able to be 'out' at work or in his union (UNISON interview 15, 1996). Certainly, there were reports of how difficult it could be to be 'out' and active in lesbian and gay self organisation in the branch. Branch opposition meant that branches could opt to provide minimal budgets, block information to lesbian and gay representatives and claim the branch could not afford to send delegates to self organised conferences and training events. They could also make raising issues and life in the branch difficult for lesbian and gay representatives on the branch committee as this activist found,

The last national lesbian and gay conference I attended, I was funded by the branch therefore I was reporting back to the branch committee about the conference, the issues which took place, the motions and so on and you could 'hear' the inner fear of people, homophobia that sort of thing (UNISON interview 16, 1997).

Branch self organisation in action

Nevertheless, establishing a lesbian and gay group was seen by the majority of those interviewed as an important step in 'becoming visible' and achieving fair representation in UNISON branches. Where lesbian and gay branch self-organised groups

have been established they can play a key role in recruitment and ensuring that bargaining and consultation with management at workplace level takes account of the needs of lesbian and gay members.

UNISON branch lesbian and gay groups have sought to ensure the inclusion of sexuality within all organisation equal opportunities policies and statements; the development and extension of harassment policies to include the harassment and homophobia experienced by lesbians and gay men; an entitlement to carer's leave for lesbians and gay men plus guidelines for branches dealing with a range of issues including HIV/AIDS (UNISON, 1995c; UNISON 1997d). In one London local government branch for example, a lesbian and gay equality strategy statement and a strategy group on lesbian and gay employment and service delivery rights had been agreed between the UNISON branch and the management based largely on the work of an active lesbian and gay branch group (UNISON interview 18, 1997). Branch lesbian and gay groups are important sources of information and support. As one activist who had been a victim of harassment said:

If a similar situation happened tomorrow then I would take it all the way because I'm more aware of the system and what my rights are and that comes from being in UNISON (UNISON interview 17, 1997).

Despite UNISON's rule book commitments to proportionality, fair representation and self organisation, challenging the union's 'mainstream' culture and structures is clearly an ongoing project for lesbians and gay men active in self organisation.

Transforming unions: lesbian and gay self organisation and the 'mainstream'

All of the lesbian and gay activists interviewed perceived structural tensions and a lack of support within the union for proportionality, fair representation and self organisation. This was partly seen as inevitable following a merger between three unions with different approaches to equal opportunities. This was particularly the view of ex-NALGO activists:

In NALGO, we had reached quite a good level of involvement in the union. UNISON came along and we got the ex NUPE and COHSE staff-people who hadn't heard of self-organisation, they certainly hadn't any lesbian and gay self-organisation and it seemed to give those people in ex-NALGO, who had bigoted and homophobic ideas, a lift rather than the opposite ... a bit of a backlash almost' (UNISON interview 1, 1996).

It was acknowledged that a substantial 'minority' of senior officers and senior activists at NEC and NSGE as well as at regional and branch level were either antagonistic to or at best only offered 'qualified support' to self organisation within the union (see Colgan and Ledwith, 1999 for further discussion). Despite this, the majority of lesbian and gay activists were optimistic, taking the view that as the transition into UNISON took place and UNISON members became acquainted with the democratic rationale for proportionality, fair representation and self organisation levels of support across the union would increase. They felt it was incumbent on the lesbian and gay self organised group and other SOGs to build self organisation at branch and regional level and win the debate concerning its place in the union based on demonstrable benefits to the union as well as democratic and equality grounds.

At the 1996 UNISON National Lesbian and Gay Conference in Manchester, Rodney Bickerstaffe, the UNISON General Secretary, addressed the conference stating his commitment to lesbian and gay equality within society and the trade union movement. He acknowledged that within UNISON, despite its policies and commitment, the union was not free from bigotry and prejudice. He also stressed the need for equality to remain at the heart of UNISON's bargaining and campaign agenda so that fair representation would become a reality for all members (UNISON Equalities, 1996). This positive statement of support was important following his recent election to the position of General Secretary. The candidate who had come second in the poll

Table 1: UNISON members' views on special measures to ensure the representation of women, black, lesbian and gay and disabled members

	There should be special measures to help women to get elected to leadership positions in the union		There should be special measures to ensure representation of black, disabled, lesbian and gay members in leadership positions in the union	
	Agree	Disagree	Agree	Disagree
UNISON women activists (1995 survey)	203 (56%)	157 (44%)	209 (58%)	150 (42%)
UNISON women branch activists (1997 survey)	83 (59%)	59 (41%)	87 (61%)	55 (39%)
UNISON men branch activists (1997 survey)	43 (40%)	65 (60%)	44 (41%)	64 (59%)

Source: Colgan, F. and Ledwith, S. (forthcoming 1999) *Women in UNISON Report*

for the position had stood on a platform critical of self organisation which he described as a 'drain on resources.' He was virulently opposed to lesbian and gay self organisation and called for all SOGS to be disbanded (UNISON, 1995d). Activists were sobered by his popularity, concluding in the words of one member of the NLGC, that this very conservative member had been, 'able to exploit people's perceptions of self organisation as separatist . . . we need to dispel these notions' by demonstrating the importance to UNISON of members and activists recruited and developed through the SOGS as well as those via the more 'traditional' branch and service group routes' (UNISON interview 7, 1996).

Two surveys of UNISON activists⁸ provide some evidence to support the Lesbian and Gay SOGs' strategy. Trade unionists who were critical of proportionality, fair representation and self organisation as a way forward tended to deny the need for these measures on the grounds that 'all UNISON members are equal.' They felt that all members' needs could be met through the 'mainstream' structures and tended to defend this view by offering a traditional unitarist view of trade unionism, as in this example:

The dictionary states that 'union' is a 'joining together; the state of being united.' In my opinion, having SOGs is a contradiction of these terms. I am a member of a 'union' and wish to stay that way, not be fragmented by small groups (UNISON survey, 1995).

However, those supporting self organisation held views more akin to this:

I feel that UNISON still reflects the divisions within society – this includes the gender hierarchy. I do however, feel that at least UNISON creates the space for groups which are marginalised within society to organise and speak out against their/our oppression (UNISON survey, 1995).

It was recognised by the majority of respondents that the union did need to adopt special measures to ensure all members were able to participate, raise issues and feel confident that their views would be represented. It was acknowledged that women and minority groups were constituencies which deserved to be represented and listened to within the union.

Table 1 presents the survey results indicating the level of support within UNISON

⁸ During the ESRC research programme a survey of women trade unionists active in SOG and 'mainstream' structures was carried out in 1995. A survey of branch activists from 13 branches in 3 of UNISON's regions was carried out in 1997.

for special measures to assist women to get elected to leadership positions in the union (eg. proportionality and self organisation). It also shows the level of support for special measures to ensure representation of black, lesbian and gay members in leadership positions in the union (eg. fair representation and self organisation). It is clear that more women respondents are in favour of these measures than their male counterparts.

This gender difference was less dramatic but in the same direction when branch activists were asked their views on self organisation (see Table 2). More than half of the women were in favour, but only 43 per cent of the men. It is interesting to note that a third of both male and female branch activists hadn't yet decided if they were in favour of self organisation or not. It is to be hoped that as more branches establish self organised groups, more grassroots branch activists will have a direct and positive experience of working alongside activists representing self organisation. This will assist UNISON in drawing on representatives from across a number of constituencies so allowing it to achieve fair representation.

Conclusions

This article has described UNISON's attempts to change and democratise its structures in order to ensure the participation and representation of all sections of its membership *including* lesbians and gay men. Building on the work of the three partner unions, UNISON set itself the task of achieving proportionality and fair representation by the year 2000. Five years into UNISON, notwithstanding a fairly hostile industrial relations climate and an unsupportive environment for lesbian and gay rights in the UK, some considerable progress has been made.

The research has illustrated that lesbian and gay self organisation is working well in UNISON. The strategy of self organisation appears to be effective in that it is able to bypass union bureaucracy and overcome some of the blockages created by homophobia within organisations. The NLGC, Regional Lesbian and Gay Groups and the developing branch groups have sought to clarify their links and develop working relationships with the 'mainstream' and now play an active and visible role within the union. This has had immediate implications for the work of the union in terms of internal organisation, external links, the development of policy, education and collective bargaining initiatives.

The process is necessarily developmental. During the early years of UNISON much of the work has had to focus on the development of lesbian and gay self organisation and the establishment of links with other union structures (within UNISON and with other trade unions). Alongside this, lesbian and gay activists have sought to work through lesbian and gay SOG and 'mainstream' structures to overcome opposition and to ensure that all UNISON policies incorporate lesbian and gay concerns. Specific training courses aimed at lesbian and gay activists coming through self-organisation as well as the incorporation of lesbian and gay issues into all standard national and regional training courses has also been part of the union agenda. Much current work now needs to focus on establishing and developing branch lesbian and gay groups and gaining time off rights for those active in self-organisation. This should assist in

Table 2: *Are you in favour of self organisation in UNISON?*

	Yes	No	Don't know
Men	47 (43.9%)	24 (22.4%)	36 (33.6%)
Women	75 (53.6%)	14 (10.0%)	51 (36.4%)
Total	122 (49.4%)	38 (15.4%)	87 (35.2%)

Source: Colgan, F. and Ledwith, S. (forthcoming 1999) *Women in UNISON Report*

improving the advice, representation and legal assistance offered to lesbians and gay members. In addition, UNISON needs to pursue national and local bargaining with employers to ensure its equality policies are put into practice. Finally, in order to continue the progress being made on lesbian and gay rights through union representation and collective bargaining, the union needs to continue its campaign for legislation on lesbian and gay rights at national and European level.

Unsurprisingly, given the challenges posed to existing 'mainstream' structures and power systems, proportionality, fair representation and self organisation remain contested (and sometimes misunderstood) initiatives in some parts of the union. As one NLGC member reflected, 'in terms of self organisation we are not just fighting for our corner, it's the whole notion of self organisation.' She acknowledged that there was some 'willingness in terms of the mainstream structures to actually take our issues on board and there are some people who see self organisation as being quite valuable' however she said 'there are also other people that think its a luxury, well actually they think it's a complete waste of time.' (UNISON interview 8, 1997).

Perhaps inevitably as the SOGS push for change there will be opposition from those groups who feel they have something to lose from UNISON's ambitious attempt to democratise its structures by recognising and representing the SOG constituencies. Rather than being afraid of provoking a backlash, it is perhaps important to acknowledge as this activist did, that change doesn't always come without a fight and that opposition is occurring when 'you begin to reach the parts where you haven't had the argument yet.' In her view, real progress will have occurred in UNISON when the SOGS are seen to be 'having a positive contribution to make to sort of improve things' rather than as 'causing trouble, throwing up obstacles' (UNISON interview 9, 1997). Despite some opposition, there is beginning to be evidence in some branches, regions and service groups that this very positive structural and cultural change is starting to be achieved (Colgan and Ledwith, 1999). Six years after the formation of UNISON it is important for the union to demonstrate that it can use its democratic structures in order to be effective in increasing its membership, representing *all* its members and developing its influence over workplace and wider political and social issues.

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