

# Industrial relations and social dialogue in the Web 2.0 world

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## Introduction: the IBM Second Life demonstration

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The September 27<sup>th</sup> 2007 'virtual' trade union demonstration against IBM Italy in the virtual world of Second Life was a news story that went round the world.

In France, Le Monde ran the news prominently under the headline "C'est la lutte virtuelle!" Stern magazine in Germany told the story: "Die Demonstration ist virtuell, der Arbeitskampf echt". The Spanish papers La Vanguardia and ABC ran stories, as did the press in, among other countries, Sweden, Belgium, Portugal and Switzerland. The BBC in the UK carried the news, and so did the national radio station in Canada. Globally, the story received wide coverage on Internet news websites. And naturally the Italian press also gave considerable prominence to the event: La Stampa, for example, told its readers of the birth of a new word to accompany 'telework': 'telestrike'.



The Second Life demonstration, arranged with the close involvement of UNI Global Union, was called as part of national negotiations with IBM in Italy, which had run into management obstruction. The real-life dispute ended positively for the unions, with a new contract agreed (and with the resignation of IBM's Italian general manager). The Second Life action has also been judged a great success: approaching 2000 people took part, from all parts of the (real) world.

The Second Life demonstration points up in dramatic form the potential for trade unions of new web-based tools. At the same time, however, the unusualness of the action can also be read as a criticism of unions for not engaging more speedily or actively with the changes taking place online. This report looks at some current good practice, explores some of the challenges and difficulties, and more generally considers how unions may have their ways of working fundamentally challenged by an increasingly participative online world.

## The context: Web 2.0 and “Enterprise 2.0”

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The internet has changed dramatically in the past fifteen years. The widely used moniker Web 2.0 reflects the idea that we are now well into a second generation of internet services and usage.

The old internet – the one which in the early and mid 1990s left behind its military and academic origins and burst through into mass usage – was primarily a static place, where the retrieval of information was key and where the written word dominated. This was reflected in the technology which underlay the internet’s architecture; most ordinary internet users downloaded rather than uploaded material and download connection speeds were generally much higher than upload speeds.

What has changed? The web today is a genuinely multimedia place, a home for all kinds of digitised images, sounds and words. Once dominant forms of mass media such as radio and TV are increasingly fusing with the internet world; the music business has been transformed beyond recognition by online music downloading.

The web is becoming pervasive in its reach. It is not now limited to the traditional desktop or laptop PC. It is accessible through a wide range of devices, more and more of them being mobile.

More significantly still, the old one-way flow of information has disappeared. The internet has become a participative place. We have moved, as it were, from a ‘read only’ to a ‘read/write’ web world, one where user-generated content has started to occupy a central place. Users leave their comments on everything from news stories to hotel reviews and in the process, collectively, create the new web content. This process of mass collaboration and participation is at the root of the wiki idea, most notably the collaboratively compiled encyclopaedia Wikipedia. It is also particularly reflected in those new Web 2.0 services which have achieved astonishing popularity, including social networking sites such as Facebook, user-supplied video and photo sites such as YouTube and Flickr, and participative virtual reality worlds such as Second Life.

For young people in particular social intercourse and friendships have moved online, and they naturally look to share via the web the sort of things which their parents’ generation shared with their own friends in face-to-face socialising.

An internet which is no longer top-down in its architecture and which emphasises participation and collaboration has significant implications for business. The talk has been of ‘Enterprise 2.0’, a term which (while imprecise) is being used to discuss how business will be transformed in response to this new way of operating and working.

The Butler Group in a recent report tried to summarise the idea in this way:

“Although technology certainly plays a part, Enterprise Web 2.0 represents more of a philosophical shift than it does a prescribed set of IT products or solutions. Speed, agility, mobility, reuse and innovation are the transformative drivers that are forcing organizations to push aside old technologies, models and architectures. In the consumer space, Web 2.0 is very much about ‘participation’ and ‘contribution - tenets dearly sought by most companies and

institutions - and so the challenge for senior executives is to capture this momentum and to ingrain it within the corporate culture.”<sup>ii</sup>

The Canadian consultant and author Don Tapscott argues that successful businesses will need to reform their management architecture, to reflect the critical value of knowledge. He has called for a ‘wiki’ approach to the workplace, where value is added through self-organisation and mass collaboration<sup>ii</sup>.

Tapscott’s ideas have been discussed by Ulrich Klotz<sup>iii</sup>, writing from a background in the German trade union movement. He sees the principles on which the web is developing as being antithetical to traditional Taylorist management methods of the industrial age and he argues that hierarchical and bureaucratic ways of working are costing business dearly – as well as having damaging effects on workers’ psychological health. Klotz also sees the shift to an Enterprise 2.0 way of working as, in the end, an inevitable progression.

Klotz finishes his assessment of the Enterprise 2.0 challenge to business by turning his attention to the trade union movement, arguing that unions too will need to make the same transformational changes to their own ways of working. Indeed, Klotz maintains that unions have further to go in this process of fundamental change than business: “To remain successful in the ‘next society’ trade unions are going to have to evolve into ‘Unions 2.0’, changing their structures and processes even more radically than most companies”.

UNI Global Union’s Christine Revkin, one of the organisers of the IBM Second Life demonstration, has also called for unions to embrace a *Unions 2.0* way of operating by respond to the cultural and social transformation represented by Web 2.0 changes: “As companies’ and employees’ behaviour is changing, unions need to adapt, take a step forward and reorganise their communication strategies. These new technologies can highly improve members’ participation, involvement and mobilisation,” she writes<sup>iv</sup>.

The first stage in this process, perhaps, is to understand exactly the tools which are available for this work. The next part of this report looks in more detail at the key developments.

## The tools

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Two useful attempts from within the context of industrial relations and trade union activity have been made to compile a list of Web 2.0 tools and services. The first is the document *Union Networking* compiled by the New Unionism network<sup>v</sup>, which assesses the relevance of different applications using a one to five stars rating system. Christine Revkin at UNI Global Union also has produced a comprehensive list of Web 2.0 applications in her paper produced for UNI.

Following their lead, we can summarise the applications under a number of different headings.

### **1. Social networking**

Social networking sites offer an online equivalent of the sort of social exchanges which take place informally in every community, the difference being that on the web the networking is global. Social networking has become a central feature of life for many millions of people, particularly for the under-30 generation.

The initial dominant social networking service was US-based MySpace, but this has been eclipsed by Facebook, once limited to students, but now open to all. (It may not be coincidental that MySpace's loss of status followed its purchase by Murdoch's News Corporation). Another similar service is Bebo, acquired by AOL. Other social networking sites include LinkedIn (primarily for business professionals), Meetup and Ning. Some social networking sites are strong in particular countries and language groups.

When you join a social network site, you enter your own personal profile, which may include a range of personal information, including your age, where you live, your interests and activities, causes you support, and photos you have taken. You share this information with your friends (or, if you wish, with all users). You extend your online friendship networks through acquiring friends of your own friends, or by linking with others with similar interests to you.

Social networking sites, although their content is effectively created by their users, are commercial operations. Facebook is based in California, with seven hundred employees; it has European offices in Paris, London and Dublin. It currently claims 120 million active users (users who have returned to the Facebook site within the last thirty days). MySpace is more coy about its present usage, but claimed over 100 million accounts in 2006.

### **2. Virtual worlds**

Second Life has already been mentioned, and is by far the most popular of the virtual reality universes, though others (such as ActiveWorlds) also operate.

You become a resident in the virtual world of your choice by creating your own virtual persona, known as your avatar. (Your avatar may or may not resemble the way you look or behave in the real world – there is plenty of scope for creativity here). Your avatar moves around the virtual world, interacting with other residents, buying and selling things, undertaking work and buying property. (Owing property requires payment of a subscription; casual use of Second Life is free). SecondLife has its own currency, convertible back into real-world money.

Businesses have seen the benefits of establishing a presence in Second Life, and many global companies have their own virtual presence there, a valuable way of reinforcing real-world brand awareness. Some companies are exploring ways in which real-world work can be undertaken in Second Life (for example, by bringing employees' avatars together for meetings).

Second Life currently claims a total of 16 millions users, of whom about 600,000 typically log on every week and one million at least once a month.

### **3. User-generated sharing**

YouTube, acquired by Google in 2006, is a vast repository of video clips uploaded by users. YouTube says that hundreds of thousands of new videos are placed on its website every day. Some, such as those produced during the US presidential campaign by Barack Obama receive millions of viewings; other videos languish, viewed just by a handful of friends of the video maker.

Increasingly, mainstream television, film and media companies are using YouTube, as an alternative distribution channel for their material. Advertisers, too, have been quick to see the opportunities of placing their advertisements online at YouTube.

A similar concept lies behind the photo sharing website Flickr (owned by Yahoo), which claims that three thousand new images are uploaded each minute. Photos on Flickr can be shared with groups and networks of friends; viewing photos on Flickr can be done by anyone, and limited uploading is also available free to all, though keen users will need to take out a subscription. Flickr also accepts videos. A number of other photo sharing websites also operate.

Sites such as Flickr have responded to the growing popularity of mobile devices equipped with cameras. It is now straightforward to take a photograph or video with a mobile phone, and upload the end product immediately to the web, for anyone to see.

### **4. Collaborative projects**

A *wiki* is a piece of software which enables anyone who is looking at a web page to be able to contribute to or modify the content on that page. The best known example is the online encyclopaedia Wikipedia, where the current entries are the result of the cumulative efforts of many contributors, each of whom has the opportunity to edit or reedit the text. However the wiki concept can also be applied in many other ways to create collaborative websites, or to work on joint projects. Business use includes company intranets and knowledge management systems.

As the wiki website itself puts it, "like many simple concepts, 'open editing' has some profound and subtle effects... Allowing everyday users to create and edit any page in a web site is exciting in that it encourages democratic use of the Web and promotes content composition by nontechnical users"<sup>vi</sup>.



### **5. Blogs and social bookmarking**

Weblogs (blogs) are online diaries, designed to share the blogger's ideas and thoughts with other web users, or to communicate news, information and web resources. Blogs allow anyone to express themselves online (the value of particular blogs varies enormously therefore!)

A somewhat similar idea – that of sharing with others those websites and web features which you find relevant or useful – lies behind the social bookmarking concept. One example is Digg, which allows its members to submit articles, images or videos which they have discovered and find interesting; others can then endorse ('digg') those submissions they also like. Popular features are identified on Digg's website pages. Digg claims to be 'democratising digital media': "As a user you participate in determining all site content by discovering, selecting, sharing and discussing the news and videos that appeal to you".

Delicious operates somewhat similarly, by allowing users to make public their own selected bookmarked websites, so that others can see what is being recommended.

There are other widely used social bookmarking services, including StumbleUpon (which claims over six million members) and Reddit.

### **6. Other web applications and tools**

Both the New Unionism network and Christine Revkin remind their trade union audiences of the value of Skype, which permits free or very low-cost telephone calls (including video and conferencing calls) using the Internet rather than traditional telecommunications networks. Skype to Skype telephone calls are free, and Skype can also be used at low cost to call non-Skype users with traditional telephone numbers.

RSS (Really Simple Syndication) feeds permit frequently updated content from a web publisher to be pushed automatically to other websites or to individual web users who have subscribed to receive the feeds. RSS is typically used to receive news, or to get content from several separate websites consolidated on one website.

The New Unionism network also recommends the iGoogle website facility, which can be used to create a personalised webpage, using chosen RSS feeds and other tools such as calendars, address books and to-do lists. Despite the name, New Unionism points out that iGoogle can be used as a shared environment, either password protected or completely public.

## Web 2.0 in use: some good practice from trade unions worldwide

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It would be fair to say that, generally speaking, trade unions have not been in the first wave of web innovation. It could be argued that one reason why the world's press fell so eagerly on the story of the 2007 Second Life virtual demonstration against IBM was precisely because it was unusual – not the sort of thing expected from the trade union movement.

Nevertheless, there are already a growing number of examples of good practice of trade unions using Web 2.0 tools in innovative and creative ways. What perhaps is missing is the mainstreaming of this good practice more generally within the union movement.

The New Unionism network, already mentioned, is a useful first starting point:  
[www.newunionism.net](http://www.newunionism.net)

UNI Global Union's online forum designed for staff working in union communications is another useful resource:  
[www.unicomunicators.org](http://www.unicomunicators.org)

Another website covering similar ground has been created following the Second Life union initiative:  
[www.slunionisland.org](http://www.slunionisland.org)

From their earliest days unions have been based on the collective organising of workers who come together to defend their common interests. Social networking tools provide a new way, in other words, to develop the collective strength on which unions are founded.

There are some interesting examples of unions which are bringing elements of online social networking into their work. In Sweden, for example, Unionen permits members to personalise the union website, so that they can be kept in touch, for example, with their own area of professional work and their own local and regional union structures.

The GPA-DJP (Austria) has gone a step further. In a pioneering development first launched several years ago, it created a set of online interest groups ([www.interesse.at](http://www.interesse.at)) to which its members could voluntarily attach themselves. These web-based communities of union members have been established for managerial and professional workers ([work@professional](mailto:work@professional)), for freelancers ([work@flex](mailto:work@flex)), for IT workers ([work@IT](mailto:work@IT)), for education workers ([work@education](mailto:work@education)), for workers working abroad ([work@external](mailto:work@external)) and for migrant workers ([work@migration](mailto:work@migration)). The interest groups are given a formal role in the union's structures.

Initiatives like the GPA-DJP's are focused on unions' own websites. Elsewhere unions have explored the possibility of using mainstream social networking sites, such as Facebook. In a number of cases, this has been linked to a strategy of reaching and organising young workers. In Spain, for example, the UGT in Extremadura set up in July 2008 its own profile on both Facebook and the Spanish language Tuenti site with the aim of informing young people about the union's activities and encouraging a participatory approach in its work<sup>vii</sup>. A similar motivation lay behind the Australian Workers Union's 2007 decision to have a presence on Facebook, and to encourage members to add a 'Proud AWU supporter' badge to their own profiles<sup>viii</sup>.

In Canada, the textile and catering union UNITE HERE also uses Facebook. According to Mike Thomas, a union activist from Alberta, Canada, Facebook has opened up new opportunities for grassroots work. “We’re organising ourselves on Facebook within our union. The way the government is actively seeking to destroy us, we need a way to be together. And this is what Facebook is allowing us to have without any need for infrastructure”<sup>xix</sup>.

Social networking facilities such as Facebook can be used as a mobilising tool, for example during industrial disputes. In the US, the Writers Guild of America launched a campaign on Facebook to invite other Facebook users to publicly support the 2007 Hollywood writers’ dispute. What began on November 26th with just fifteen endorsements quickly gained momentum, to one thousand supporters by November 28<sup>th</sup>, five thousand by December 16<sup>th</sup> and ten thousand by 26 January<sup>x</sup>.

The finance union COMFIA-CCOO in Spain also successfully used Facebook to mobilise several thousand people during a campaign to improve terms of employment in telemarketing<sup>xi</sup>.

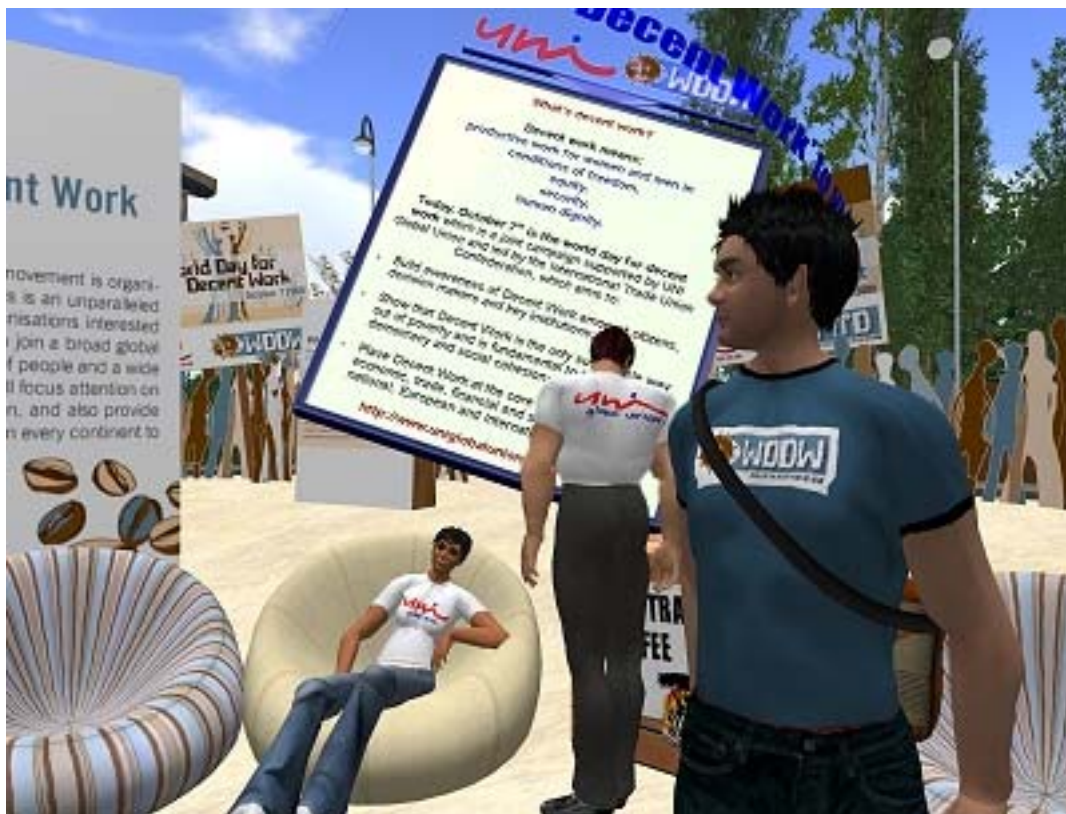
On the other hand, the same tactic can be used against unions. During the November 2007 railway strikes in France, a ‘counter demonstration’ was organised on Facebook by anti-union forces. Two thousand people signed up<sup>xii</sup>. And, as we shall see below, there can be some significant risks in relying on Facebook for union organising work.

Other Web 2.0 tools are also being looked at by unions. For example, the global transport workers union ITF has used Flickr as part of its campaign to free an Iranian unionist Mansour Osanloo. The ITF encouraged people to send photographs of themselves wearing a Free Osanloo badge, as a visual statement of the support for this campaign.



Following the 2007 virtual demonstration, unions are also exploring the opportunities posed by Second Life. The Union Island created for that initiative remains a focal point for avatars of union supporters to foregather, with regular informal meetings in the 'bar' for those new to the Second Life world or wanting to find out more about unions. Union Island has also hosted events on May Day 2008 and for the World Day for Decent Work in October 2008 (see photos).

Some unions have decided to create their own particular space ('island') on Second Life. FOREM, part of the Spanish union federation CCOO, is one example<sup>xiii</sup>. The ETUC has recently reported that ver.di (Germany) also has established an 'island' as part of its campaign to establish a German minimum wage<sup>xiv</sup>.



The overall message which comes through from all these examples is the need for unions to try out the new Web 2.0 tools which are emerging. John Wood from the UK Trades Union Congress has put it like this, in relation specifically to Second Life: "People already work in virtual teams; some are at home or in different countries. With less people working face-to-face companies will increasingly see virtual worlds as a way of giving employees a connection and familiarity with each other. And if companies are going in then so should unions. This is why we think it's important to engage with it early on. But this is not a project with a specific plan, it's about looking for potential, pooling resources. It costs very little, anyone can experiment and we can all learn together"<sup>xv</sup>.

## Understanding the downside

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Derek Blackadder, a union organiser from the Canadian Union of Public Employees, is well aware of both the benefits, but also the potential problems, of using Web tools like Facebook for union purposes. Derek used Facebook's facility to sign up 'friends' when he was evaluating the opportunities of using Facebook in his union work, and promptly found his account had been removed, on the grounds that he had made too many 'friends' too quickly. John Wood from the UK TUC launched a 'Free the Blackadder One' campaign on Facebook to have him reinstated, and pulled in over 3000 supporters. The campaign appeared successful in that Derek's account was temporarily reinstated, before being eventually removed again by Facebook.

In a thoughtful article<sup>xvi</sup>, Derek has assessed the lessons he has learned. He sees advantages of social networking sites like Facebook:

"These sites offer accessible ways to self-organise. Workers who share a common employer, occupation, union or issues like health and safety concerns, are creating networks, sharing insights, venting, coordinating actions, and just generally doing good and useful things often without any formal connection to a union... To recap, on the up side, social networking sites are cheap or free, easily accessed, are established and hugely popular, and (pay attention, this one is crucial) are already being used by workers to facilitate fast communication".

The down side, however, also has to be recognised: "Nothing you do on sites like Facebook is really private... The simple fact [is] that such sites are big, profit-making businesses. The effects this has on what we can do with these sites are pretty wide-ranging. We need to understand that we don't own and so don't control these sites, and what that means when we use them to do union work."

He refers to a case from elsewhere in Canada in 2007, when the SEIU tried to use Facebook as part of an organising campaign for casino workers in Halifax, Nova Scotia, and where Facebook removed the union's page on its site. (Despite this, the organising campaign was ultimately successful).

Unions should also be conscious that their own use of Facebook and other social networking sites can potentially leave union activists and members open to victimisation. Once again Derek Blackadder has an example: "When Starbucks was facing an organising blitz in the US a while ago, brighter-than-I-wish-they-were managers copied members' listings from social networking site groups set up by recent grads from the more progressive labour relations programs in the US. That list was then matched to a list of Starbucks employees and the union's 'salting' efforts were exposed (getting pro-union people hired on to help a union drive)<sup>xvii</sup>". Even the sort of online endorsement of the kind encouraged in Australia by the AWU with its "Proud AWU supporter" badge could, in some work situations, backfire.

The veteran internet activist Eric Lee has a very similar message, warning against jumping on the latest Internet bandwagon fad. He has another cautionary tale, from London's Metronet Company, where a union Facebook group was joined by managers, who then used the group to spread false information. Lee concludes: "What you're doing by outsourcing your campaigning to Facebook is growing their company, giving them direct access to your supporters and

members". The alternative, he says, should be "do-it-yourself online campaigns where you retain the information"<sup>xviii</sup> .

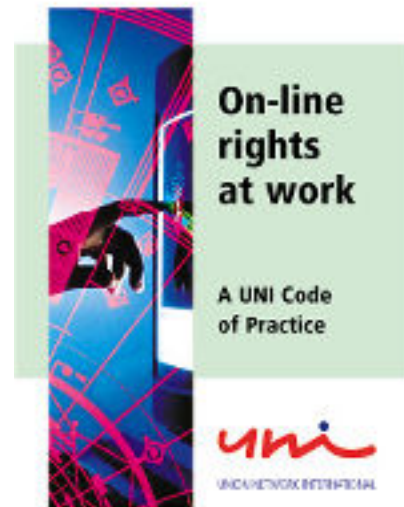
A more general diatribe against Facebook has been launched by the British journalist Tom Hodgkinson, writing early in 2008. He accuses Facebook, through its three owners, of being "an expression of a particular kind of neoconservative libertarianism", concerned to turn friendship into a commoditised profit-generator. "Once in receipt of this vast database of human beings, Facebook then simply has to sell the information back to advertisers...This is precisely what's happening"<sup>xix</sup>.

Hodgkinson's polemic is a valuable antidote to an unthinking rush to embrace a Facebook future – and, by extension, the other proprietary Web 2.0 tools. Derek Blackadder's conclusion suggests a more measured approach, however: "We need to be out there with a presence on Facebook and the other sites. But the goal shouldn't be to use those sites to organise anything much more than a departure for safer quarters."

## Web 2.0 in the workplace

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The introduction of the internet into the workplace context in the mid and late 1990s led to something of a spate of employment disciplinary issues and disputes, as managements and unions attempted to tackle the implications of a powerful new technology. UNI (and its predecessor Fiet) was a pioneer in addressing these issues and the UNI *On-line Rights at Work* Code of Practice, first launched in 2000, remains a valuable statement of good practice, covering issues such as trade union access to electronic communications media, privacy and private email and internet usage by employees<sup>xx</sup>. Many companies also quickly moved to develop formalised internet and email usage policies, removing some of the uncertainty which had been facing their staff.



The development of Web 2.0 tools has led to a similar rush of employment issues, which unions need to be able to address. To some extent the parameters have not yet been drawn: it's not necessarily clear what are acceptable ways of using Web 2.0 tools in the workplace situation, and what are unacceptable ways.

One issue is the right of companies to expect loyalty from employees in their personal, as opposed to their work, time<sup>xxi</sup>. This lay behind the case from Scotland of Joe Gordon, who was sacked from his job at a major book retailer for forthright comments posted on his personal blog about his 'Evil Boss'. Gordon's argument was for freedom of expression: "I posted these comments in my OWN time, writing in my OWN home for my OWN blog... I am not a serf; I am not an indentured servant. I am a free man with the right of freedom of expression. The company does not own me, body and soul – conforming to their rules at work is to be expected, but in your own time and space?"

Joe Gordon argued that, had he complained about his employer to friends in a bar, he would not have been punished. His difficulty, however, was that he clearly identified his employer in a medium which potentially had a worldwide exposure.

Another somewhat similar case linked to a personal blog was that of Catherine Sanderson, who was sacked for comments made about her employer, an Anglo-French accountancy business based in Paris. She did not name her workplace, but her employers argued that some unflattering comments could identify the company and be damaging to their business. The outcome here was different from the Joe Gordon case, in that she was subsequently found to have been unfairly dismissed and awarded €44,000 in damages.

This sort of issue is also occurring in relation to social networking sites. In November 2008, the airline Virgin Atlantic sacked thirteen cabin crew after they had used Facebook to post critical messages about the airline's passengers and to make jokes about faulty engines. The airline said that the Facebook comments 'brought the company into disrepute and insulted some of our

passengers<sup>xxii</sup>. Another case, also from the UK, surfaced when an employee of a major UK retailer was sacked for creating a potential network of fellow staff members with the theme 'I work at \*\*\* and can't wait to leave because it's shit'.

In Canada in late 2007, members of the UFCW working for a company in Winnipeg were disciplined after they had criticised their supervisor on Facebook. After union intervention, they were able to keep their jobs but were suspended from employment in punishment for a week. As the UFCW's Robert Ziegler commented afterwards, "There is always going to be the time when someone is going to be unhappy with their work or their co-workers. You can say that verbally, privately, but as soon as you put it in writing, it's an official record of it". The UFCW magazine has warned members to be careful of what they write on websites<sup>xxiii</sup>.

As Ziegler points out, personal information posted on the web is there for employers to see. One recent press story concerned an Australian telecommunications worker who was disciplined for faking a sick day; unfortunately the worker had shared an account of his big night out the evening before on Facebook<sup>xxiv</sup>.

Another issue associated with social networking sites which unions have already started to address has been called cyberbullying, or in other words situations where managers or work colleagues use information in an employee's social networking profile to harass them. The problem of cyberbullying of public sector workers on social networking sites was the subject of a fringe meeting at the 2008 UK Trades Union Congress.

One related concern of workers has been aired in the columns of both the British and the French press. The Financial Times' headline set out the issue: "My boss wants to be my friend on Facebook". The FT quoted a reader who had made the following comment: "I work in an advertising agency and my boss (who is quite cool) has just asked to be my friend on Facebook. I feel invaded – I'm passionate about my work but want to keep it separate from the rest of my life. I definitely don't want him spying on what I say to my friends<sup>xxv</sup>".

A recent article by French journalist Augustin Scalbert quoted a similar story where a woman employee of a PR agency also reacted the same way: "I'll never accept my boss as a friend on Facebook. This is my personal space...My boss doesn't have to know who I really am, beyond my professional competencies. On top of that, it could be used to keep tabs on me". The article was titled: "My boss as Facebook friend: warning, danger!"<sup>xxvi</sup>

The use of social networking sites and, more broadly, of personal information posted on the internet crops up in relation to recruitment. Information about private lives – what individuals spend their evenings and weekends doing, their friends and relationships, their personal photographs – is now widely available on-line. Young people in particular are posting information about their personal lives without necessarily thinking ahead to the implications that their indiscretions may be available to employers ten, twenty or thirty years hence. As one young person, quoted in the French newspaper Libération, recently put it, "There's maybe photos of me on 'Fesse Bouc' in the act of throwing up or smoking a joint, who knows what. Think of the implications"<sup>xxvii</sup>.

A number of reports have come to light of employers who have indeed used personal information on candidates' social networking sites to influence their decision during the



recruitment process. One was quoted in a study by Viadeo as saying “We found that the candidate was personally into some activities which did not fit ethically into my company”. Another said “His website showed a negative side to him including excessive alcohol abuse”<sup>xxviii</sup>.

A third employer made the following admission: “In the past, I’ve simply Googled candidates, whereas now I type their name into MySpace as well. I’ve found some interesting things on that site. One candidate declared in his personal profile that he was against religion and anyone who believed in it. I dropped his application like a hot potato”<sup>xxix</sup>.

The Financial Times’s technology writer recently advised his readers: “Almost certainly your next employer will ‘Google’ your name to check on your online activities. Some, particularly in the US, will even order a full background search from an online provider such as Intelius (www.intelius.com) or Abika (www.abika.com)”<sup>xxx</sup>. For trade unions, however, there are very convincing reasons why employers should be strongly discouraged from this sort of practice.

Firstly, there are equal opportunities issues to consider: good recruitment practice is to assess each candidate for a post using the same criteria and selection processes. More generally, it is not considered acceptable recruitment practice to ask candidates personal questions about such things as their beliefs, sexuality or relationships. Accessing information on social networking sites should equally be considered unacceptable practice.

The issue of the extent to which employers have the right to influence or modify their employees’ on-line lives also extends to virtual worlds. For example, should companies have powers over employees’ Second Life avatars?

As mentioned earlier, real companies are represented in virtual worlds such as Second Life, and are doing real business there. A number of companies, including IBM and Intel, authorise their employees to ‘work’ in Second Life, typically in on-line meetings and discussion events. IBM has drawn up *Virtual Worlds Guidelines* for its employees, which in general take a commonsense approach. For example, they state: “As a general rule your private life is your own. You must, however, be sensitive to avoid activities in a virtual world that reflect negatively on IBM...” Nevertheless, the penultimate paragraph of the Guidelines has something of a sting in the tail: “You do need to consider whether your digital persona could be linked to IBM in activities in which you participate on your own time. Any conduct that adversely affects your performance as an IBM employee, that of other employees or IBM’s legitimate business interests may result in disciplinary measures, including dismissal”.

The difficulty here is, in part, that the rules are not yet clearly established on what is and is not acceptable. The increasing merging of work and personal life also creates difficulties.

A set of principles, to form the basis of a possible future code of good practice, was suggested in a December 2007 briefing paper, written by the present author after the topic was discussed at the 2007 UNI Europa P&MS Conference. These principles are as follows:

- There should be clear guidelines, established by collective bargaining, to establish the extent to which access to online services, including social networking, is permitted in the workplace. Good practice is that employees should be permitted to use online services for non-business purposes, provided that this does not affect their ability to perform their job.

- Employers should acknowledge that employees' personal lives are increasingly being lived online. Employees have the right to express their opinions online, provided that they do not unreasonably seek to damage the reputation of their employer.
- Employers who make online searches (for example, via Google) on individual candidates during recruitment processes, or who employ recruitment consultants who do so, should make it clear to candidates that this action is being undertaken. Employers should check carefully that this does not discriminate against some candidates.
- Access to personal online information about individuals, including social networking site profiles, should in no circumstances be permitted either during the recruitment process or after appointment.
- Managers should understand the position and role they occupy in the workplace. It should therefore be considered unacceptable for managers to request access to the friendship networks of their members of staff on social networking sites.

## Towards Unions 2.0

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Trade unions can, and should, use Web 2.0 tools in their work, in the same way as they have, over the years, made use of all those other things, from typewriters to telephones, which once upon a time were new technology too.

But is there more to it than this? As mentioned earlier, a number of writers have suggested that new ways of using the web will have fundamental changes in business practice: the *Enterprise 2.0* will, it's argued, have little need for industrial-age management practices of command and control, and plenty of need for ways of working based on participation and networking.

What about the suggestion, raised by Ulrich Klotz and Christine Revkin among others, that unions too need to undergo a similar fundamental change if they are to recreate themselves for the twenty-first century world of work? Do we need to follow their lead in talking about *Unions 2.0*?

If trade unions were not already in existence, there is every reason to believe that today's generation of workers would come together to create organisations to defend their shared collective interests. But today's workers – particularly younger workers – would almost certainly go about this process in a new way. Instead of creating union structures focused on face-to-face meetings in the workplaces or in local branches in cities and towns, the web would be the way in which networks were built up, campaigns launched, debates held.

Union democracy would very likely be different too: instead of hands being raised in meeting halls and conference centres, decision-making would be facilitated electronically, online. And traditional union structures, which in many respects replicate the hierarchical structures of industrial-age businesses, might also be eschewed: instead of a pyramidal framework with union rank and file members seen as comprising the mass base, the structures might very well be horizontal, member-to-member, peer-to-peer, rather than vertical.

All this inevitably should challenge unions to re-examine their current practices and ways of operating. Certainly, if unions are genuinely concerned to ensure that young people entering the workplace for the first time – the so-called Net generation – are attracted into trade unions, unions' involvement with the online world has to be more than simply skin-deep: it has to be woven quite fundamentally into their ways of being.

There is an urgency here for action, since technology moves on. Already, commentators are discussing developments for the next generation of the web, a three-dimensional internet which is likely to be highly personalised and focused more and more on access through mobile devices such as phones and ipods/mp3 players. Quite what Web 3.0 will be likely we don't know; but it's already time to start preparing for it.

Information for translations:

Original texts, where not English.

Klotz: Um als 'Gewerkschaften 2.0' in der 'nächsten Gesellschaft' erfolgreich fortbestehen zu können, werden sie sich in all ihren Strukturen and Prozessen sogar noch weit grundlegender wandeln müssen als die meisten Unternehmen

Mon patron comme ami: «Je n'accepterai jamais mon patron comme ami sur Facebook. C'est mon espace privé... Mon patron n'a pas à savoir qui je suis réellement, en dehors de mes compétences professionnelles. En plus, ça peut être un moyen de flicage»

Libé : «Il y a peut-être des photos de moi sur Fesse Bouc en train de gerber ou de fumer un pet' dans une soirée, et je ne le sais même pas! Imaginez les dérives!»

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- <sup>ii</sup> Don Tapscott and Anthony Williams, Wikinomics: How Mass Collaboration changes Everything, published January 2008
- <sup>iii</sup> Ulrich Klotz, Mit dem 'Unternehmen 2.0' zur 'nächsten Gesellschaft'
- <sup>iv</sup> Christine Revkin, UNI and the Web 2.0
- <sup>v</sup> [www.newunionism.net/network.htm](http://www.newunionism.net/network.htm)
- <sup>vi</sup> <http://wiki.org>
- <sup>vii</sup> UGT Extremadura se une a las redes sociales de Tuenti y Facebook, <http://www.extremaduraaldia.com/tecnologia/ugt-extremadura-se-une-a-las-redes-sociales-de-tuenti-y-facebook/61703.html>
- <sup>viii</sup> The Australian Workers Union is looking to market itself to a new generation of Australians by launching a Facebook application, <http://www.australianit.news.com.au/story/0,24897,22918834-15318,00.html>
- <sup>ix</sup> Union Organizing 2.0: Labour enters the Facebook matrix, <http://briarpatchmagazine.com/2008/11/01/labour-enters-the-facebook-matrix/>
- <sup>x</sup> [www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=7519916618](http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=7519916618)
- <sup>xi</sup> Facebook, las redes sociales y los sindicatos, <http://blog.comfia.net/webmaster/esindicato/2008/01/17/facebook-las-redes-sociales-y-los-sindicatos>
- <sup>xii</sup> [www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=20166712344](http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=20166712344)
- <sup>xiii</sup> Information from [www.unicommunicators.org](http://www.unicommunicators.org)
- <sup>xiv</sup> ETUC newsletter, January 2008
- <sup>xv</sup> Welcome to Union Island, Labour Research, August 2008
- <sup>xvi</sup> Facebook Facts: Finding Friends and Foes, [http://ourtimes.ca/Talking/article\\_87.php](http://ourtimes.ca/Talking/article_87.php)
- <sup>xvii</sup> Derek Blackadder, op cit
- <sup>xviii</sup> Bandwagons and Buzzwords: Facebook and the Unions, [www.ericless.info/2007/11/bandwagons\\_and\\_buzzwords\\_faceb.html](http://www.ericless.info/2007/11/bandwagons_and_buzzwords_faceb.html)
- <sup>xix</sup> Tom Hodgkinson, With Friends Like These..., The Guardian (London), 14 January 2008
- <sup>xx</sup> The Code is available (English language) at <http://www.union-network.org/UNISite/Sectors/IBITS/ICT/documents/On-lineCodeE.pdf>. Other language versions can be accessed through the UNI IBITS home page.
- <sup>xxi</sup> This and a number of examples which follow are taken from the Online Rights at Work briefing paper note written by Andrew Bibby for UNI P&MS, December 2007
- <sup>xxii</sup> Ben Quinn, Virgin sacks 13 over Facebook 'chav' remarks, The Guardian (London), 1 November 2008
- <sup>xxiii</sup> Company suspends employees for Facebook rants, CBC News, 10 September 2007. [www.cbc.ca/canada/manitoba/story/2007/09/10/facebook-union.html](http://www.cbc.ca/canada/manitoba/story/2007/09/10/facebook-union.html)
- <sup>xxiv</sup> Ben Quinn, op cit
- <sup>xxv</sup> Lucy Kellaway, My Boss wants to be my friend on Facebook, Financial Times, 3 October 2007
- <sup>xxvi</sup> Augustin Scalbert, Mon patron comme ami sur Facebook : attention, danger ! <http://eco.rue89.com/2008/10/01/mon-patron-comme-ami-sur-facebook-attention-danger>
- <sup>xxvii</sup> Karl Laske, Double Facebook, Libération, 6 December 2007
- <sup>xxviii</sup> Recruiters say 'no' to job applicants with poor Internet reputations, 28 March 2007, [www.viadeointhenews.com/English/press/view.asp?id=1&pressid=22](http://www.viadeointhenews.com/English/press/view.asp?id=1&pressid=22)
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