

Volunteers and Labour Unions in Great Britain

By I. W. Bruce

BACKGROUND

Before describing the current situation in Great Britain on relationships between volunteers and paid workers it is necessary to give some of the historical factors that still affect the present. In Great Britain the relationship between the voluntary movement and the labour union movement has traditionally been an uneasy one. This may seem strange given the heavy reliance of the labour movement both now and in the past on the volunteer contribution of individual workers within union structure. However, there are a number of reasons for the English union's suspicions of the voluntary movement. Memories linger on of the means tested, morals tested and sometimes paternalistic social welfare provisions provided by some volunteers and voluntary organizations in

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the 19th and early 20th centuries. The image of the 'Lady Bountiful' volunteer distributing help to the deserving poor is a stereotype of the voluntary worker which is still strong among many union members.

Volunteer activity during the British national strike of 1926 did little to help matters when eager volunteers attempted to man many of the public services and were seen as strike breakers or black legs. Further the period of high unemployment in the late 20's and early 30's added to this sense of antagonism when the voluntary organizations who recruited the unemployed to be volunteers were seen as acting as a palliative to the situation, having the effect of reducing the wages of those in employment and at worst contributing towards unemployment by reducing the need for paid workers.

So when in 1948 the Labour Government, supported by the union movement, took the last major steps towards creating the British Welfare State as we know it today,

there were consequently heady, optimistic feelings in large sectors of the population in general and the union movement in particular that people in difficulties would no longer have to depend on volunteer and voluntary philanthropy. It was hoped that through the National Insurance scheme the nation's health and welfare requirements would be available as a right of an egalitarian basis to all people regardless of means. Further it was hoped that these health and welfare services would be provided, not through a handful of well meaning volunteers and voluntary organizations, but through paid skilled and professional workers employed by government services.

The feeling that volunteers were an irrelevancy, and an inheritance from the past, was not only shared by the labour movement but also probably the majority of professional workers in the health and welfare services. Even the voluntary movement itself had severe doubts about its role. However, the voluntary movement in response to the welfare state, successfully developed its role as a pioneer to meet new needs and services as yet not identified or taken on by the welfare state services. But it should be noted that these voluntary efforts were not seen as an alternative form of provision but rather the piloting of new provision subsequently to be taken over by the welfare state and run by paid workers.

By the time the 1970s had been reached, the situation was a very different one. The voluntary sector was no longer just a hesitant pioneer - it had also become a vigorous critic on behalf of various disadvantaged groups such as the homeless, the elderly, the mentally ill, etc. But the role of the voluntary movement as major and lasting independent provider of services was still not widely appreciated or accepted. Insofar as it is possible to generalize, the union movement still regarded state welfare services manned by paid workers as the only significant means of meeting social need. In the late 60's and early 70's there were major

budgetary expansions in the state health and welfare services and this gave new enthusiasm to those many people who felt that state services manned by paid workers would be able to cope with all problems of human need, given sufficient time and manpower.

However, despite general union suspicion and dislike of voluntary health and welfare services, they had up until 1970 done little to actively oppose the volunteer contribution.

But it was in this period of financial growth of state services that the labour unions with memberships in the government health and welfare services began to become more openly critical of what appeared to them to be the anachronism of volunteer helpers. In 1970 the national conference of one of the more active unions in the field - the Confederation of Health Service Employees - passed a resolution condemning the use of volunteers in hospitals and expressing its suspicion of the political motives behind official encouragement given to setting up voluntary help schemes. Union criticism began to grow partly because of the feeling that there was enough money around to pay for more paid workers and paradoxically because of fears that a change of government from a Labour (Socialist) administration to a Conservative administration would lead to a cut back in this growth. Union fears of financial cutbacks were proven correct. Successive Conservative and Labour administrations have cut back drastically on the rate of growth of government health and welfare services to the point now where we are virtually in a position of nil growth.

If my description of the attitudes of unions in the government services ascribes to them a certain sense of paranoia, I should point out that over the late 60's and early 70's there was an unprecedented growth in the appointment of Directors of Volunteer Services or what we call Voluntary Service Coordinators. For example, in the National Health Service in 1967 there were

only 14 Voluntary Service Coordinators. Yet by 1973 this figure had reached 225 and now there were 330. In the personal social services, a major government report in 1970 recommended significant increases in Voluntary Service Coordinators in that sector also. It had already become government policy in the probation service for official recognition and encouragement to be given to volunteering.

Therefore, in the early 1970's we had a tense situation developing. Successive governments were encouraging greater volunteer activity in government health and welfare services, while at the same time there was growing aggression from the organized labour movement towards the involvement of volunteers in government services. This situation was exacerbated by some enthusiastic volunteer action during strikes in the health services in 1973.

Having described the growing union opposition to volunteers, it is important to point out the reasons for union objection. Undoubtedly the main concern was the perceived threat that volunteers posed to paid workers. Volunteers were not only seen as threatening the overall number of paid jobs but also the type and status of paid employment. Further there was sufficient evidence of the involvement of volunteers affecting levels of earnings that this also became an issue. There were widely held assumptions behind the growth of welfare state services that they should be manned almost entirely by paid workers. There was also a genuinely felt fear that volunteers would lower the standard of services for clients and patients.

Another fear, which was not featured in many public situations but was certainly acknowledged in private, was the concern that outsiders unaccountable to these services in any legal way would become self-appointed inspectors of welfare state

services. Further, they might contribute to a minor if growing chaos through being outside a direct control of the services themselves. It would be wrong to associate this concern simply with unions representing unskilled and semi-skilled workers. Staff associations and professional bodies also worked on the assumption that paid workers were best and that volunteers could only provide service on the cheap, masking the need for more paid workers. Further it was felt that the growing volunteer involvement was encouraging unskilled and untrained people to do more than they were in reality able to accomplish.

In this description so far I have described some of the developments associated with the anti-volunteer lobby among labour unions and professional associations. That description should be qualified strongly by the assessment that only a minority of individuals, unions and professional associations were overtly antagonistic although I suspect that the majority were quietly anti-pathetic.

It should be acknowledged that a minority of union leaders and people active in professional associations were extremely positive in their attitudes towards volunteer involvement. If this had not been the case it would have been inconceivable that welfare state policy on paper would have shifted so positively towards volunteer involvement. This lobby's sophisticated analysis and promotion of volunteer involvement did a lot to lay the foundations of the more healthy relationships that now exist between the volunteer movement and professional and union bodies.

Nevertheless, back in the early 70's the situation was beginning to worry several of the more sensitive observers. Indeed it was partly their intervention which led to the setting up of The British Volunteer Centre with its purpose of encouraging more and more effective community involvement through concentrating on information exchange, research, training and development.

The Volunteer Centre was founded in late 1973 just at the time that the negative debate on paid workers versus volunteers was reaching the boil. *One of its first acts was to meet informally with several influential union leaders to see if there was any willingness to take some of the heat off the situation and to explore some of the difficult issues out of the eye of the public debate. The response was positive and in 1974 The Volunteer Centre set up a working group comprising one third trade union representatives, one third representatives of voluntary organizations and one third representatives of welfare state services which were involving volunteers. Perhaps one of the most significant contributions to the later successful deliberations of this group was the invitation and acceptance into membership of the Deputy Leader of the Confederation of Health Service Employees, the very union that three years ago had passed a resolution condemning the use of volunteers in the National Health Service. However, the significant union representation on the working group guaranteed that the discussions would be difficult and result in no whitewash of volunteerism.*

In the end the careful gathering and analysis of evidence, the skillful chairing by a major union leader, and the many long hours of discussion led to an agreement of guidelines for the relationships between volunteers and paid unskilled workers.

Guidelines were produced on relationships with unskilled workers because this was seen as the main flashpoint area. The more workers felt skilled or professionalized, the less threatened they felt by volunteers.

The guidelines developed by the group are by no means a manifesto on behalf of volunteerism. Indeed, I measure their success by the fact that they have been criticized by some volunteers for being

too discouraging of volunteering yet also criticized by some more militant union members for being too positive toward volunteerism. What these guidelines represent is a middle ground that is acceptable to the vast majority of volunteers and union members.

Since their publication in 1975, over fifty thousand copies of the guidelines have been requested and there is a great deal of qualitative evidence that they have had a significant impact on maintaining and improving good relationships at local level. I should point out that they are a voluntary agreement and are in no way legally binding.

Another significant outcome of the working group had nothing to do with the guidelines themselves, but to do with the regular meetings of senior labour union officials, voluntary organization leaders and government service managers. I now feel confident that should any national crisis blow up on the issue of volunteers and paid workers there is sufficient personal contact and trust between these three groupings that The Volunteer Centre could quickly and easily call them together again with beneficial results. Indeed a little under a year ago we convened two further meetings of the group to review the guidelines and as a result they were strengthened, no mean gain in the British situation of economic cutback and rising unemployment.

THE GUIDELINES

The first guideline specified that any change in the level of voluntary service should be preceded by full consultation with interested parties. This local consultation is always necessary because in our country as I suspect in the United States of America, local situations vary enormously. So it is important that management, staff organizations, representatives of volunteers

and where feasible, representatives of those receiving the service, should get together to sort out the implications of any volunteer proposals at the earliest stage.

I know that there are many attractions in not getting into extensive consultations. Firstly, they slow down the implementation of proposals and the consultations themselves often throw up other problems which need solving. Also, it can be argued that if proposals are not brought formally to the attention of local union leaders they will often turn a blind eye to things to which in a more formal situation they might object. There is also a more militant view in the volunteer world, which is certainly not mine, which says that it is none of the business of union leaders what volunteer services are introduced. I would argue with this view, but in a sense it is irrelevant whether one feels that union leaders do have a right to comment or not. In the event of their being dissatisfied, they have such a potential veto that it makes sense to gain their agreement. Put more positively, if one can gain union backing, many problems that would otherwise be there just simply disappear.

Consultation is not simply in favour of the union side either. In England we have had several examples where union proposals for withdrawal of volunteer services were accepted by management without any consultation with the volunteers and voluntary organizations. This guideline insists on tri-lateral negotiations and should prevent a bi-lateral agreement between management and unions which by-pass volunteer representatives.

I would go further than the formal limits of this guideline which calls for formal consultation and say that it is a good tip to keep in regular contact with local union leaders on an informal basis. I know many local relationships in Britain which have started out being very tense, but through sensitive nurturing have changed radically. Union members at all levels were invited to

social gatherings and meetings of volunteers. The volunteer service director was careful to identify and relate the voluntary work that union representatives undertook in other aspects of their lives to the volunteer work going on in the work situation.

The second guideline is simply that the agreement of additional voluntary activity needs to be made widely known among the interested parties. This sounds too obvious to be a guideline but in our experience it is a great temptation, once an agreement has been hammered out, often with difficulty, to feel that the main job is then over. As you well know, this is not so. If all the nurses, orderlies, social work aids, porters and cleaners do not know that agreement has been reached with the union, difficulties will follow. If they are not informed of the type of work that will be undertaken then things can go badly in the day-to-day situation. Volunteers may be rebuffed and perhaps consequently respond aggressively, thus starting a vicious spiral of antagonisms.

The third guideline is that voluntary work should complement the work of paid staff and not substitute for it. This is one of the most difficult guidelines to interpret. Essentially it is trying to encapsulate the notion that volunteer work is at its most effective when it is providing a service or a resource in a way that a paid worker, by definition, could not provide. A useful check question is, "if we had all the money and staff we needed, should we still prefer to use a volunteer for this task?"

The most obvious examples of volunteering in this area are befriending an isolated person voluntarily, an activity which is very different from that of the regular visiting by a paid social worker. Another example might be of the provision of advice of welfare rights being more acceptable in certain instances from a volunteer not

associated with authority than when this advice comes from a paid worker who is seen to be part of the authority system. A more general example might be the volunteer being a guide in a hospital, where the fact that a guide is a volunteer and not paid makes him or her seem to the patient and relatives to be just that little bit more like one of them and thus help to overcome their sense of discomfiture.

This guideline is also saying that in a situation where there are say five identical jobs being undertaken by paid workers, it is unacceptable to bring in a sixth person to do an identical job when that person is a volunteer.

In other words certain jobs are for paid workers and not for volunteers. It seems likely that types of jobs that are seen to be inappropriate for volunteers will vary as time passes. For example in the past in hospitals in Britain volunteers were frequently used for clerical duties, especially in medical records. Because, I suspect, of the changing patterns in volunteering with fewer married women to do volunteer work virtually full time, it has been increasingly the case that paid workers have been appointed to these jobs. The scarce pool of volunteers have been increasingly allocated to work that depends on their unique contribution as volunteers. Thus, now it is generally accepted that clerical work in hospitals should be undertaken by paid workers and not by volunteers. Such demarcations will, I am sure, vary over time and differ between one country and another.

The fourth guideline states that the action of volunteers should not threaten the livelihood of paid staff. In Britain there have been occasions in the past, where without proper consultation, voluntary activity has been implemented which has had repercussions on earning levels and has sometimes even threatened the jobs of paid staff. Such action, however well meaning or intended, can only lead to a deterioration in the level

of industrial relations and result in a poorer service. Examples of volunteer activity affecting earnings levels quite frequently occur in our health services. A fair number of unskilled workers have financial bonuses attached to specific aspects of their work. For example the amount of crockery they wash up or the number of chairs that have to be moved. It is very easy, unless there is proper prior consultation, for volunteers to become involved in washing up or chair moving which inadvertently affects these financial incentives. As we all know such a problem only has to occur once for rumor to fly.

Although that example is fairly straightforward, it is often difficult to draw what seems to be the right conclusion in the situation of severe staff shortage in a particular area. However, the guideline is quite clear and in the majority of cases it is followed in that volunteers should not be used in situations brought about simply by staff shortages because of the risk that such activity will mask these shortages and result in them never being rectified. It is straightforward in theory but in practice it is difficult to interpret.

For example in one situation a hospital had been short of filing clerks in the medical records department for several months. Because there had been these staff shortages for so long, huge backlogs of work had built up and inefficiency was occurring. When new workers were recruited there appeared to be no time to train them and they were not only faced with work which they could not do, they were being criticized for the backlog and inefficiency. As a consequence the new workers regularly seemed to leave almost as soon as they arrived. The head of the medical records department was quite convinced that if only he could clear the backlog and train incoming workers that there would be no problem. He approached the local Volunteer Service Director to ask

for volunteers to help him achieve this. In the end the Volunteer Service Director for the hospital agreed to place volunteers in these jobs which were reserved for paid workers on the understanding that firstly, the department would train the volunteers; that secondly, the labour union leaders' agreement should be sought and obtained; and thirdly, that there would be a strict time limit set for the volunteer involvement. However, even with these provisos, the Volunteer Service Director was not entirely happy because she knew how difficult it would be to apprise everybody in the hospital of the particular circumstances of the job and she also knew how easily rumors get around to the effect that volunteers are taking over paid workers' jobs.

I am sure that these rather rigid rulings are leading you to feel that changes in the British system must be difficult to bring about. This should not be the case. The only provision that is laid down is that the action of volunteers should not threaten the livelihood of paid staff. Let us take an example in which research shows that volunteer involvement can be beneficial in an area which was previously undertaken by paid workers. This can still be negotiated under this guideline, provided the livelihood of the paid workers is not put in jeopardy. For example in England there is a major service provision which we call Meals-On-Wheels, where meals are delivered to the houses of mainly elderly people who are finding it difficult to cook their own hot meals. This is largely run by paid workers. However, experiments are taking place in several areas whereby instead of meals being prepared and delivered by paid workers, neighbors are being given expenses to prepare an extra meal and take it to the neighbor. Preparation and delivery of meals by neighbors (i.e., volunteers), is being encouraged partly for reasons of cost and partly because it is hoped that such neighborly contact will have other spin-offs such as reducing isolation. Clearly the implementation of

such a scheme on a wide basis would be seen as threatening the livelihood of the cooks and drivers associated with the official Meals-On-Wheels service. However, we have an acute shortage of drivers and cooks in many welfare services, and so provided these two groups of people can be deployed to other work which is acceptable to them, then this new form of meals delivery involving neighborhood volunteers is not threatening workers' livelihoods and can be implemented.

The fifth guideline is that voluntary workers should not normally receive financial reward.

Oddly enough, it is the more hard-line volunteers and hard-line labour union members who agree with this guideline and the more middle-of-the-road people who are worried about it. Indeed the working group could not really reach agreement under this guideline. In Great Britain it is commonly accepted that volunteers should receive expenses that they incur when they are doing their voluntary work. However, as in the United States we have become increasingly worried about disproportionately few poorer people who are involved in volunteer programs. One method which has been developed to overcome this is to provide small payments to these volunteers, not as a financial incentive, but simply to make it possible for them to participate. The payment does not make these people employees because they do not have contracts. But they are not really volunteers either, because they could get a lot more money elsewhere and undertaking the work represents a real sacrifice. As you can imagine, union opposition to this is quite explicit. They feel that these people are being exploited because they are not being paid the rate for the job and are also undermining wage levels of paid workers.

So there is no good news under this guideline and what in practice is happening is that a number of programs of 'paid

volunteers' are receiving a significant degree of union opposition.

Perhaps the most emotionally charged area that the guidelines address themselves to is what volunteers should do in cases of union/management conflict. *The sixth guideline says that volunteers in a situation of industrial conflict, which might for example be a strike or go slow, should undertake no more voluntary work than they would do in the normal situation. However, it goes on to say that additional volunteer work can be undertaken provided this is agreed to by the management and those staff organizations involved in the dispute.* The reason for this fairly strict guideline is clear to see. Strike breaking is an emotive word and this is how enthusiastic volunteer activity has been seen in the situation of some strikes. Inevitably what happens is that such action, while it may have a helpful effect on the people being disadvantaged by the strike, has a much greater effect on the intransigence of the strikers. In several situations where volunteers have undertaken the jobs of striking workers it has apparently led to the whole dispute taking far longer to resolve. If that is the short term disadvantage one of the longer term disadvantages is that the relationships when normal work is resumed become difficult if not impossible and result in real setbacks for the volunteer work.

It should be noted that in England threats to life and limbs as a result of disputes in government services are regarded ultimately as the responsibility of the government. Their traditional approach in extreme circumstances has been to call in the armed forces to man critical services. However, the key issue for local negotiation in this guideline has to do with union agreement for extra work. In the situation of a strike, it is often the case that the striking workers are quite pleased that volunteers undertake certain emergency duties. In this way the union can then

feel that it is being militant and pushing its sanctions to the limit but the humanitarian instincts of union members can be satisfied with the knowledge that their action will not bring about undue suffering. More pragmatically it will not result in a loss in public sympathy for the strike action because of extreme difficulties experienced by clients.

The seventh guideline recognizes the central role of the Volunteer Services Director. In England this person is seen as having a key promotional role in relation to volunteering and is also expected to take account of all points of view. Therefore, the seventh guideline recommends that when any party (e.g., the volunteer or a paid worker) feels that the spirit of the guidelines is being broken, he or she should immediately talk with the Volunteer Service Director to see if the matter can be sorted out. If it cannot the matter is then referred to full arbitration between the union, management and volunteer representative.

So, this article has attempted to describe the background factors in Great Britain which led to a worsening situation in relationships between volunteers and paid workers and The Volunteer Centre's attempts to bring together the interested parties to draw up guidelines for effective practice. They are complicated and sometimes difficult to interpret. Never-the-less, in local situations, agreement can be reached and good relationships maintained and improved. The evidence appears to be that this has had a major impact on creating positive cooperation between the labour unions and the voluntary movement in Great Britain.