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Holgate, J [orcid.org/0000-0003-2311-6981](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2311-6981) (2018) Trade unions in the community: Building broad spaces of solidarity. *Economic and Industrial Democracy*. ISSN 0143-831X

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0143831X18763871>

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# Trade unions in the community: building broad spaces of solidarity

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## Abstract

This paper approaches the subject of trade union community-based organizing from the perspective of one union's attempt to broaden its remit by recruiting 'non-workers'. In 2011, Unite, the largest private sector union in the UK, announced it was to recruit retirees, students, and people who were unemployed into a new section of the union. This is a radical and potentially ground-breaking development for a UK union where the organizing approach stems from an understanding that the purpose of trade unionism is to advance the interests of the working-class as a whole—whether or not individuals are, indeed, working—broadening the ideology of trade unionism from its narrow economic focus. The paper reports on a 4-year study of this initiative and analyses whether this can be understood as re-orientation of union purpose as a consequence of loss of power in the workplace. It further considers the potential this has for re-building wider spaces of solidarity.

## Key words:

Community unionism, coalitions, civil society, class, ideology, leadership, other actors, power, trade union identity, union organizing, Unite the union.

## Introduction

The scholarly writings about the crisis in organized labour throughout the Western world have been extensive since the main period of decline during last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and continuing into the first two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As such, it is unnecessary to repeat the debates about the cause, or report the volumes of advice about how to rectify this situation. Many writers have rightly identified that many unions are not in a position to influence the *external* factors (the economy, labour markets, political climate, legal regulation, aggressive capitalism) contributing to their loss of power and influence (see Peetz and Bailey 2012 for one overview), but have noted that a better understanding of how to mobilize

*internal* resources (e.g. leadership, organization learning, power, members' agency) could provide unions with the ability to (re)organize to advance the interests of their members and the working class more generally. Whether or not unions are able to act strategically to harness the power resources that exist within society is dependent on a number of factors, not least of which is leadership with a vision to analyze and understand how to change the balance of class forces between workers and capital (Hyman 2007). But, before considering the strategic capacity of unions to transform themselves, we perhaps need to go back a stage to (re)think union *purpose*, as Hodder and Edwards (2015) have encouraged in a recent paper on this subject. These authors remind us that there are competing notions of trade unionism, where history, politics, ideology intersect and will influence the differing roles different unions play in specific societies, and while there has been a considerable focus on union identity, union purpose has been somewhat obscured in the debates around union renewal.

As others have asked, the key question of 'what are unions organizing for?' is not given sufficient consideration in much of the literature (Simms and Holgate 2010), yet this questioning of union purpose seems fundamental to an understanding of union strategy for renewal or a recapturing of power (Simms 2012). Hodder and Edwards (2015) have thus developed an 'essence of unions framework' in an attempt to bridge the gap between the writings on union purpose, identity and union strategies for renewal, and this is a helpful tool to consider the development of Unite's community-based organizing approach. This will be considered in more detail in the following section, but before that, it is useful to set out the questions posed in the process of this research.

Firstly, can Unite Community (UC)—as the section of the union designated to community organizing has been named—be understood as a re-orientation of union purpose and what does this mean for the way the union functions (particularly in relation to organizing strategy)? Secondly, what does it mean for trade union identity to include non-workers within its membership. And, thirdly, to what extent is this initiative recognition of the loss of power in the workplace and an attempt to re-create an 'old' form of trade unionism where trade unions were once part of the community as well as the workplace?

This paper begins by considering union identity and purpose to help understand the current direction of Unite the union as it embarks on its community organizing strategy, before reviewing some of the different theoretical approaches to understanding social movement

unionism. The next two sections set out the methodological approach and the methods utilized for this research, and provide some background to Unite the union and why it has adopted a community organizing strategy at this particular time. This is followed by an analysis of the findings and concluding comments.

### **Re-creating union identity and re-defining union purpose?**

Richard Hyman's (2001) writings on union identity have been influential in understanding different models or approaches to trade unionism. In explaining how unions face in three directions—between market, class and society—his argument is that a union's ideology and thus identity locates it somewhere within this triangular model. Although acknowledging that unions resting on a single point of this triangle would be unsustainable, each point heuristically represents an extreme model of unionism. For example, the 'class' corner represents radical oppositional unionism wherein the ideology is of class division and class struggle; the 'market' corner represents business unionism where the central ideological concern is to regulate wage labour relations; and the 'society' corner represents unions co-existing with other organizations in the wider framework of civil society campaigns for social justice. Most unions would tend to incorporate elements of all three, but because of their history, ideology, culture and politics, would orientate themselves towards a certain point within the triangle, which gives them a particular identity. As Hyman (2001: 5) notes, 'in times of change and challenge for union movements, a reorientation can occur: with the third, hitherto largely neglected, dimension in the geometry of trade unionism perhaps exerting greater influence.' Whether there has been such a shift in focus is an important point to consider when assessing the community organizing development within Unite, and we will return to this in the empirical analysis.

First, though, let us reflect on Hodder and Edwards' (2015) recent essence of unions framework to assist us with the analysis of historical and contemporary trade unionism, and what this means for renewal strategies, as this builds upon Hyman's (2001) theorization of union identity. For these writers, the union organizing literature is limited in its analysis and understanding of the *purpose* of organizing, so an analytical framework is developed to explore how this incorporates internal and external forces, and how these impact upon strategy and outcomes. Figure 1 shows the elements that make up the very essence of what unions 'are' with union purpose being central and influencing all other factors. Union purpose is derived from a union's identity (workers' shared interests as workers) and its ideology (the values it espouses). As we have already noted, the actual form of identity will

depend on the degree of focus (class, market, society) adopted by the union. However, none of this occurs in a vacuum: unions are not independent from the society in which they are located and within them there competing and contradictory viewpoints. A society's culture, political climate/system, historical circumstance and its legal system will have a strong influence on the identity, ideology and purpose of unions and the way they operate—affecting relationships internally within the union, and externally in relation to employers and the state. As Hodder and Edwards (2015: 5) explain:

*'the purpose of a union is to pursue objectives that reflect its identity. Its ideology is the set of values and ideas that inform and give meaning to purpose. Strategies are concrete plans and objectives which arise from the complex interaction between the leadership and the rank and file and lead to specific actions such as campaigns to organize certain groups of workers.'*

Clearly, this process is dialectical rather than a linear, but this framework is useful in exploring what is happening in Unite as it develops its strategy for community organizing. Taking into account the various elements that make up the essence of unions framework we can analyze whether Unite is, through the Unite Community project, consciously and strategically (bearing in mind there is a divergence of views within the union in relation to the initiative) attempting to redefine union purpose in the context of neo-liberalism and the political climate of austerity in which it is operating. Before moving on to analyze the empirical data it is necessary to pause for a moment to consider what the literature has to offer in terms of understanding community organizing in relation to trade unions.

### **Community organizing and trade unions**

Academic and practitioner interest in community organizing and trade unions has arisen because civil society organizations have developed to fill a void left by the labour movement—particularly amongst un-organized, low-paid, migrant and precarious workers (Fine 2005; Heery, et al. 2014; McAlevey 2015; Tattersall 2009). In this period of neoliberalism workers have felt their traditional form of collective voice and power dissipate as aggressive capitalism captures the whip hand. Consequently, as one writer has noted, 'political and economic forces have pushed the labour movement towards the margins of society, where religious social-justice advocates normally dwell' (Bole 1998: 45). Non-traditional employment actors (including faith groups, civil-society organizations, and NGOs) have taken to organizing in places and spaces where the labour movement is neither visible, nor particularly active (Abbott, et al. 2012; Buttigieg, et al. 2009; Cornfield, et al. 1998; Holgate 2009; Wills 2001),

thus challenging academics to rethink the terrain upon which industrial relations played out (Rainnie, et al. 2007). However, despite the burgeoning literature on community unionism and social movement unionism over the last few decades (Banks 1992; Clawson 2003; Cockfield, et al. 2009; Fairbrother 2008; Fine 2005; Greer 2008; Martínez Lucio and Perrett 2009; Moody 1997; Parker 2008; Symon and Crawshaw 2009; Tufts 1998; Turner and Hurd 2001; Wills 2001) advocating unions to build alliances and coalitions to widen their spheres of influence, this approach is not without its critics. Although supporters of social movement unionism would argue that, the potential for unions is a locally-focused, more engaged membership that is ‘embedded in the workplace and equally importantly in the community, where a distinctive and transformative union identity may be forged and promoted’ (Fairbrother 2008: 213), others feel that much of the analysis of social movement unionism is often treated as an ‘adjunct to existing trade union practice’ and where there is little consideration of both form *and* content of different social movement strategies (Upchurch, et al. 2014: 35)

Despite this particular critique, the literature on social movements (going back decades) has provided industrial relations scholars with much of the theoretical underpinning to analyze the different forms of trade unions/community engagement now emerging. This includes: *mobilization theory*, which considers how individuals acquire a sense of collective grievance (Kelly 1998; Tilly 1978); *resource mobilization theory* (McCarthy and Zald 2001), understanding that a social movement’s actions are strongly influenced by institutionalized power imbalances and conflicts of interest, and that the success of social movements is heavily influenced by group strategy and the political climate; *the concept of framing*, analyzing how framing processes are critical to attaining desired outcomes (Snow, et al. 1986); *structures of power*, questioning power relations and understanding how to isolate, identify, and analyze the web of unequal relationships in society (Foucault 1982), and *political opportunity structures*, whereby people join social movement in response to specific political opportunities (Goodwin and Jasper 1999).

Clearly there is not the scope in an article of this length for an in depth review of this work, but it is highlighted here to illustrate the extent to which this vast and broad-ranging, interdisciplinary literature can, and has been, drawn upon to comprehend trade unions as social movements in themselves, but also to understand the factors affecting how unions operate in wider social movements through engaging with other civil society organizations

outside the traditional employment relationship. Further, this literature is useful in providing deeper theoretical depth to the various elements contained within Hodder and Edwards' 'essence of unions' framework and is helpful when looking at the development of Unite's community organizing approach. However, before doing so, it is important to return to union purpose just for a moment.

While most unions are far removed from the 'radical political unionism'<sup>1</sup> advocated by Upchurch et al (2014), most would accept that for free trade unions, the underlying aim is to advance the class interests of their members (if not the working class as a whole) in opposition to the class interests of capital. Yet, surprisingly, class interest has not been particularly articulated in debates about union renewal. As, Simms (2012: 102) notes: 'since the crisis of the 1980s, British unions have largely avoided conceptualizing or even discussing their role as being embedded within class relations.' Instead, this author explains that organizing models adopted have largely focused on workplace level solidarity. A consequence of this is that despite the 'turn to organizing', this has not resulted in a re-orientation of union purpose—and certainly not a radical or fundamental transformation advocated by Upchurch et al (2014). Overall, union organizing has been criticized as being a depoliticized process remaining within the realm of economism, thus obscuring the *class* character of the struggle of the workers and removing the social movement element of social movement unionism (Simms and Holgate 2010). This results in a narrowly based trade union identity and purpose where trade union leaders lean strongly towards preserving the union as a legitimate actor within the capitalist institutional framework rather than giving agency to members to create a wider social movement where class struggle is waged within both economic and political spheres.

Yet despite this, there *has* been a renewed 'turn to organizing', in recent years, this time in the form of *community organizing*, as unions have come to recognize the need to engage with social movements and coalitions in wider society (Holgate 2013; 2015a; 2015b; Osterman 2006; Tapia 2012; Wright 2010) if they are to increase leverage, power and legitimacy. As other writers have noted, the way unions approach working with communities beyond the workplace and in coalitions—particularly being clear about their motivation of what they want their involvement to achieve—is crucial to success. Also essential is an understanding that change to organizational practice—within unions—is not likely to be successful without a transformation in ideas, organizational culture, and leadership support at the same time.

As has been noted elsewhere; ‘Too often we have seen unions ‘commit’ to particular models of organizing practice to aid union renewal without the necessary ideological to organizational change’ (Holgate 2015b: 479). An understanding of the driving forces behind Unite Community, and the discussions and debates around this initiative, provides an opportunity to explore whether this is ideologically driven and a rethinking of purpose for this particular union.

### **Background to Unite the union**

In order to contextualize the development of community organizing in Unite, and to assess the extent to which this is a redefining of union purpose, it is helpful to provide a short historical background to the union itself. Unite is the largest union in the UK with approximately 1.38 million<sup>2</sup> members, organizing primarily in the private sector. Unite arose from a series of mergers, the most significant of which was the merger between the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU) and Amicus (formerly itself a merger between the Amalgamated Engineering and Electrical Union and the Manufacturing, Science and Finance union) in 2007. Clearly, for a union made up from these mergers (which were also made up from a considerable number of mergers in the past), means the incorporation of very different values, cultures and behaviours, but the TGWU’s identity and ideology has been the dominant force within the new union and this has been forged strongly from its history and politics. Its roots go back to the early days of trade unionism in Britain and, for the most, it has largely been considered to be a union on the left of political life<sup>3</sup>. Since the mid 1950s the TGWU has elected a series of left-leaning general secretaries often challenging the political establishment and campaigning for a better world (Upchurch, et al. 2014). The TGWU was a strong campaigning union organizing beyond the narrow remit of collective bargaining and its own members’ interest to focus on social and political issues affecting workers as a whole. It also had a deep commitment to political education, equipping members with the means to challenge and fight for workers’ rights at grass roots level (Fisher 2005) and a strong grass roots shop stewards movement. In the late 1970s—the union’s heyday—there were over 2 million members in the TGWU concentrated mainly in transport and manufacturing—industrial sectors that have been severely weakened. Today, the union is much more ‘generalist’ as it attempts to recruit in newer more disparate, and un-organized industries and sectors.



Prior to merger, the TGWU had adopted an organizing strategy that comprised around 130 newly recruited organizing staff and a focus on sectoral organizing (e.g. contract cleaning, low cost airlines, white meat industry) rather than recruiting members in individual *ad hoc* workplaces. The approach was an attempt to take wages out of competition across a regional sector and to leave behind a strong shop stewards' network (Simms and Holgate 2010). Yet within Unite, organizing has tended to remain a specialist role within the union, despite the encouragement of generalist officers to take part in organizing activity. For these staff though, the pressing needs of servicing members and collective bargaining will always trump new organizing initiatives. Further, tension between administrative and representative roles has been central to discussions on union organising (Bryson and Willman, 2006), and competing demands for resource (which are often politically and ideologically motivated) are evident in a union like Unite which has been created from a significant number of unions with different cultures and traditions. As such, the dominant forms of trade unionism (e.g. economism and servicing) from some of the unions merging into Unite has left a legacy that tends to work against an organizing culture. As Bryson and Willman have noted in their work on union mergers and finance:

*'The effective mobilization of collective action requires solution of the two collective action problems, reconciling the competing demands of the administrative and representative logics, rather than optimization of one. Over time, the balance between the two resource acquisition strategies may change, with implications for the effectiveness of union organization.'* (Bryson and Willman 2006: 2)

As such, while the establishment of Unite's Organizing Department, was an important development, it has not proved to be a radical transformation of union identity or purpose as perhaps was envisaged because it remains a specialist role within the union. In part, this is, as Hyman (2007) has noted, because inherited identities and traditions shape the likely trajectories of union renewal, as does their organizational capacity (structures, leadership, strategy, efficacy, intelligence, etc.). Creating organizational change within unions to respond to a renewed union purpose is not an easy or speedy process. It requires a deep internal focus whereby a union understands where its power resources lie, and what strategic capacity it has upon which it can draw. Having values and ideas that create a vision of union purpose and what the union is organizing *for* is of vital importance, but without an understanding of the capability and capacity of the union to act strategically, transformation is unlikely. An internal focus on capability and capacity is much neglected by unions embarking on

organizational change for union renewal, but the elements necessary for change are well-articulated by Lévesque and Murray (2010). They argue unions need to be able to mediate between contending interests (of which there are many in a large union like Unite) and to foster collaborative action (again this can be problematic when there are competing political factions in unions); to frame issues in such a way that they are inclusive and part of a broader social project; to foster top down *and* bottom up organizing simultaneously; and to have deep learning capacity such that the union doesn't become 'a prisoner of its own history, caught in a path dependency of its existing repertoires and identities' (344). Inextricably linked to this is the importance of strong leadership that can direct these elements to create a clear understanding of renewed union purpose. It is therefore important to consider how these factors may have impacted on Unite Community—the latest organizing development in the union.

### **Researching the union: as an insider and outsider**

This research began in December 2011 following the 'soft launch' of Unite's community membership initiative. In a press release by the union, the General Secretary said; 'It is time now for those on the margins to organize, to come together to challenge the decisions made by the elite in the interests of the few. This is the real Big Society—ordinary people organizing for themselves—in action'. Yet, at this stage, the union did not have a clear plan of how this new membership would be incorporated into the union, or what these newly recruited members might actually do. Immediately following the launch, the two members of staff tasked with rolling out Unite Community (UC), who were aware of my previous work on unions and community organizing, contacted me to begin a series of discussions about the pros and cons of community organizing developments elsewhere. This led to the next four years of research.

Since that time, I have worked closely with the senior member of staff responsible for UC. I have written and designed community organizing training modules; taken part in induction when the community co-ordinators were appointed to develop and recruit Unite community activists; interviewed community co-ordinators; attended training programs and branch meetings for activists; and been privileged to receive internal reports throughout the four-year period. I also became a UC member, but have not played any role in my local branch, other than attending meetings to observe.

Some may question whether or not researchers can achieve valid knowledge of the social world in which they are themselves embedded. Feminist epistemology suggests that we can, and emphasizes that knowledge production is specific to time, place, person and experience and is therefore ‘grounded’ and ‘situated’ in what Liz Stanley (1997: 204) refers to as ‘epistemic communities’—groups of people who share ideas about what constitutes knowledge. According to Stanley, these ‘communities’ develop a ‘grounded objectivity’, rooted in an acknowledged viewpoint. In this case, the researcher, in acknowledging a ‘point of view’, does not claim privilege in their knowledge production, but recognizes that the role of the researcher in the research process impacts upon the collection, content and interpretation of data. In accepting that knowledge is partial and embodied, situated knowledge allows a critical engagement with the world in which researchers and their respective subjects can recognize that they are part of social processes rather than just objects of enquiry (Haraway 1991). As others have argued an ‘insider’ researcher has some advantages not least an easy contact with participants and an understanding of the micro politics of an organization (although these could potentially be disadvantages as well) (McCarthy 2009). Criticism of this approach is countered by opening up the research to scrutiny by ensuring that the beliefs and behavior of the researcher are part of the evidence presented for validating the claims of the research and that participants are able to comment on the findings prior to publication (Harding, 1987). I would therefore position myself as both an insider and outsider having both a material interest in the trade union movement as a member and through my academic research as a ‘critical friend’.

In total, 30 hours of interview time in 36 interviews have been undertaken with 13 individuals over the four-year period—twelve of these with the national organizer for UC, one with Unite’s assistant general secretary who oversees UC, and the others were staff community-co-ordinators in the various regions of Unite. Most interviews were recorded and transcribed—in others, diary notes were taken. In addition to this was all the material gathered through participant observation at staff events, branch meetings and training, plus internal documentation. Qualitative software was used to analyze the data using a coding system developed according to the themes from the research questions.

## Unite Community membership: why now?

In December 2011, Unite, the largest private sector union in the UK, announced it was to recruit ‘non-workers’ (retirees<sup>1</sup>, students, unemployed) into the union, where these ‘community members’ would be developed as ‘community activists, bringing together people across their locality who have felt left down or excluded by politics to ensure that they too have a voice at a time of economic turmoil and social change for the nation’ (Unite press release, 2012). Senior staff at Unite described the UC initiative as ‘ideologically driven’ and a response to being let down by the Labour governments. Unite is a union affiliated to the Labour Party, but like many other unions was disillusioned by the 1997-2010 ‘New Labour’ government’s failure to significantly advance the interests of working class people. So when the Labour Party lost power, and Len McCluskey was elected Unite General Secretary in 2011, the union adopted a more radical and combative style:

*Unite Community came out of the election process, the campaign and the manifesto for Len. It’s a political realization that we’re facing such an attack right now that we can’t win some of the struggles for the NHS [national health service], education of our kids, the welfare state, all the fundamental things that are being attacked, simply by balloting our members industrially. So many of our members lack confidence and are in sectors of the economy – for example in the NHS – where they’re not gonna take strike action. It’s just fact, it’s the reality of it, and we have to realize that if we’re gonna win the battle for the NHS it’s gonna be a battle that involves all of our members, all of our communities, everybody in society. (Unite senior staff member 1)*

The decision to open up Unite’s membership to ‘non-workers’ also arose from seeing grass roots response from different sections of society to the election of a neoliberal coalition government in 2010 and the severe implementation of austerity, including deep cuts across the welfare program where they are having the greatest impact on the poorest people in society. It was also a way of raising awareness of trade unionism to young people many of whom never come across unions in their workplaces or who have little knowledge of what union actually do.

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<sup>1</sup> Unite (and its predecessor the Transport and General Workers Union) have long had a retired members section of the union, but this operates differently to Unite Community. Retired members section campaigns for ‘pensioners’ rights and social justice including the state pension, health and after-care, transport and social care’. Unite has constitutional branch, regional and national structures under rule for its retired members. Unite Community operates under and completely different structure and with a different purpose/modus operandi.

*It was really embarrassing, we were sitting in the TUC [Trades Union Congress] general council in 2010 discussing the minutes of the last meeting whilst students were on the streets. And I think that inspired us to say how do we link up with the student movement? How do we link in with the unemployed, how do we find a voice for people that are completely disenfranchised from politics, who feel that politicians, politics per se are saying nothing to them...there's 900,000 young people unemployed, how do we engage with them, and the students who are on the streets? (Unite senior staff member 1)*

An observation from many of the interviews was the extent to which staff and members invoked the language of class when talking about UC: 'I think it's about the wider Labour movement and our responsibilities to our class', said one interviewee. This was a recurrent theme as was the reference back to the campaigning history and identity of the union at its formation in 1922. The sense that the union could no longer operate *solely* within the industrial sphere had become evident. Members, it was said, were reluctant or unable to undertake or win strike actions, and the majority of members are (as in most unions) passive dues payers whose only engagement with their union is when they have a problem at work, and, as such, the collective power to leverage change was very weak. Thus, the discussions taking place within the union following Len McCluskey's election were about addressing some fundamental questions: 'what's happening within society right now and where does the union position itself? How do we make ourselves relevant outside of the industrial arena in social policy arena, in the community arena?' (Unite senior staff member 2).

### **What is Unite Community membership and how does it 'fit' within the union?**

Unite Community membership is open to all 'non-workers'—people who are unemployed, not able to work, who are carers, retirees and students—effectively those who do not ordinarily have the opportunity to be part of a union. Membership is deliberately cheap—at just 50 pence per week—and members have most, but not all, the benefits of industrial membership. Members are geographically based in the localities in which they live, and when numbers reach 50 a group can formally constitute and become a local branch. At this stage, the branch receives £500 from head office to assist its local campaigning activities. Unite staff deliberately encourage branches to debate amongst themselves the issues around which they want to organize. Notwithstanding this, the focus for most branches has been broadly the same: issues angering people mainly relate to welfare cuts—the attacks on disability benefits, the 'bedroom tax'<sup>4</sup>, benefit sanctions (for being late for appointments or being ill), etc. UC members have set up peer support groups, training, and advice sessions to help

claimants facing sanctions, and have been successful in challenging these at appeals. Other community activities have been around the sell-off of social housing, particularly in London; ethical procurement and living wage campaigns; domestic violence; organizing and supporting food banks for people experiencing crisis; removal of disabled passes on public transport, as well as holding Unite publicity stalls at community events. Five Unite Community Support Centers have been established as places in local communities where people can gather to organize, hold training and education, access support, and provide advice sessions. Unite Community members have won thousands of pounds for people who were not claiming benefits to which they were entitled and center volunteers have also won bedroom and Council Tax appeals helping people stay in their own homes.

However, while all this may be termed ‘community-focused’, UC branches have also led on a number of industrial campaigns at the same time. For example, they have been instrumental in highlighting the issue of zero hour contracts<sup>5</sup> and targeting restaurant chains in a ‘Fair Tips’ campaign. By targeting Sports Direct, a large company using zero-hour contracts, UC members have not only gained huge press coverage of this issue by co-ordinated action at over 40 shops across the UK and attending the company’s AGM to ask questions, but their continuing protests have also resulted in the billionaire founder of the company being forced to face a committee in parliament over working conditions at the company (Goodley, et al. 2015). UC members have supported industrial members by attending picket lines and doing collections for workers out on strike. This linkage between UC and the union’s industrial side was intentional at the start of the initiative. Over 50 industrial branches have been encouraged to financially sponsor local UC branches and, in some cases, to make the weekly 50 pence membership payments for those unable to afford the subscription. There is also recognition that a lot of the industrial members join for ‘insurance for the future’ whereas a lot of the community members are out on the streets campaigning. This community section of the membership is often angry and looking for the opportunity to be active. As one officer said, ‘they are very different to the industrial membership’, and there is a hope that the industrial branches will learn from the dynamism of the UC branches in the way in which they organize and make decisions. As new and more fluid branches, comprised of members who are encumbered by the traditional (and bureaucratic) trade union way of doing business, UC branches have brought vibrancy to their activities from which the industrial side of the union could learn. But what does the development of Unite Community mean for the

union's identity and the way it functions? Does this approach effectively split the focus of the industrial membership away from any sort of campaigning with a community focus?

### **A union facing in two directions?**

Union officials reported that the UC strategy and the industrial strategy were not envisaged as being separate entities—indeed quite the opposite:

*Our objective, I suppose, is to collectivize our communities and link our community activity with our industrial activity, so there's no separation between what we do at work and what we do in our community.* (Unite senior staff member 2)

Yet, in reality, they are in distinctly separate spheres of the union where there is little crossover between members: the Organizing Department focuses industrially on the workplace and UC's focus is in the community. While there may be some practical logic to this division of labour, the two departments have little engagement with each other and are headed by different assistant general secretaries in separate parts of the union with their own sectional interests. The Organizing Department has around 130 permanent staff and a tightly defined sector-based industrial organizing strategy, whereas UC has just one organizer in each of the 10 Unite regions, all of who were originally on temporary contracts. The membership in both sections is, to all intent and purpose, structurally and organizationally separate.

It is understandable the union is cautious in its development of the UC initiative as the spending of union resource has to be considered via a cost/benefit analysis, and justified to the executive and membership. However, at the outset, the leadership was focused mainly on numbers—a figure of 25,000 UC members was estimated to make the project cost-neutral. Unite was keen to see the extent to which UC could bring in new members and develop activity in local communities yet, as anyone with understanding of community organizing knows, this form of organizing can take considerable time and resource to establish and maintain relationships. After 4 years, over 15,000 members have been recruited, and 106 community groups/branches established—along with a number of high profile campaigns and significant activity at local level. But it remains to be seen if the initiative will continue. Despite Unite's leadership accepting UC has 'punched well above its weight' and created more publicity for the union than could be bought for the wages of the 10 Unite

Community co-ordinators, the UC initiative is still seen as the poor relation in comparison to the organizing department.

This suggests that in terms of union identity Unite is not quite clear where its focus lies and it is perhaps facing in two directions at the same time. The reasoning behind the conception of UC, official statements, and analysis of interviews with staff, appear to indicate a re-calibrating of union identity, where a clear case is being made by the union that workers' shared interests go beyond those of the workplace and this space needs to be an organizing focus. While Hyman (2001) would likely place Unite (prior to UC) quite firmly between market and class in his geometry of trade unionism, the discourse emerging from the union since 2011 would perhaps indicate that Unite is being pulled more towards the class/society axis as the union recognizes its loss of power and weakness in challenging exploitation traditionally through collective bargaining and industrial action. A strong and overt discourse of class struggle is evident in many of the interviews and public statements on UC. The 'community' seems, at this particular juncture, to offer a new opportunity to reach out to people who are disillusioned with politics and the attacks on working class people, thus providing non-workers with a space to campaign and be active within a different arena of class struggle:

*I grabbed my chance of Unite community membership with both hands, relishing the opportunity to play my part in changing the narrative on austerity, telling people in my community and beyond that we really do not have to take austerity on the chin, and that ordinary people like myself have the power to change this government. [UC member Wales]*

This member went on to explain being part of the 'Unite family' of 1.38 million members was important in providing a strong sense of identity. To be a member of a large trade union gave this and other community activists a belief that they could more effectively campaign for change as they had that support and infrastructure of a large organization behind them. It is hoped by the leadership of the union that UC could act as a catalyst for mobilizing the industrial membership in the same way as UC members as community activists in their own localities.

Essentially, Unite's strategy in developing UC could be seen as a shifting of a degree of focus from the external (employers and the state) where its influence has been considerably diminished over the last few decades, to the internal, whereby the union is looking to rebuild



relationships within (and outside) the union at grass roots level. This is not to say the external focus has been completely abandoned, but that there has perhaps been a re-envisaging of union purpose in the context of the current political and economic climate in the UK to build political opposition to austerity beyond the workplace. To what extent, though, has this actually occurred in practice, and how is this re-focusing on political and community organizing understood or perceived by the membership?

### **Workers and non-workers, their relationship to their union**

While UC makes up only a tiny percentage of Unite's total membership it does raise some fundamental questions about what it means for trade union identity to include non-workers as members. Firstly, the non-workers recruited into Unite perhaps have a different relationship and expectation of their union than their industrial membership counterparts. For the latter, the union provides insurance should they face problems at work. They expect union leaders and officials to engage in collective bargaining, and lobbying of the Labour Party and governments to amend and introduce legislation to improve their terms and conditions of employment. For the most part, it is a transactional relationship where the majority of members play no part in union activity:

*It's a struggle to get our industrial membership engaged, it's an ongoing struggle...people just see the union as an insurance, we're there for when things happen to them, we negotiate their pay. You wonder whether the union's just not done a very good job in bringing people on politically. And some of our structures are quite moribund, so you tend to sort of see someone with a bit of potential in a workplace, but then you stick them on a regional committee (UC community co-ordinator 3).*

Unite Community members, however, are disposed to join the union in order to take part in community campaigns within their locality: 'I really feel like we've got an army out there of [UC] activists that will do stuff for the union in quite a remarkable way' (Unite senior staff member 2). The union, therefore, tends to mean different things to the two membership categories. The values and ideas that give meaning to union purpose, and what unions do practically are, for UC members, actively expressed in terms of political campaigning, whereas for the majority of the industrial membership, who are mainly passive, their level of unionateness remains either un-articulated or unclear. They are overall more content to abdicate both ideology and union purpose to the union's leadership. Given the detachment of most members from their union, it is perhaps safe to say that the UC initiative is unknown

to most. One Unite officer remarked that apart from the industrial membership activist base, that is generally supportive of UC, most members are unlikely to be aware of this recent turn to community organizing, indeed ‘most would not even recognize who the General Secretary of Unite is!’

Secondly, the tension between the largely class-based social movement activity, as practiced by UC members, and the ‘constraint’ caused by the separation of politics and economics (political economism) in industrial relations practice, results in what Upchurch et al (2014: 32, 33) refer to as ‘crisis of interest articulation’. What these authors argue is that unions have ‘jettisoned their old transformative agenda [class politics] in return for piecemeal gains [of collective bargaining]...[and are thus unable to] create internal mechanisms that would allow networking to develop to a new age of disaggregated and de-centralized political campaigning and activity’. While Unite’s leadership, through UC, strongly articulates a message of class-based trade unionism emphasizing the fundamental differences between the interests of capital and labour, and the need for a grass-root, community-led political challenge to austerity and neo-liberal marketization, this is not a message that is reaching the industrial membership through an organizing strategy directed specifically at them. Instead, this part of the union remains ‘stood down’ as the leadership has given little thought as to how, or if, these members could, or should, be activated.

An example of how the bureaucratic structures of Unite militate against innovation in strategic community-based organizing is the way that the membership is divided into distinct and separate branch structures. This in turn affects members’ relationship with their union. While the industrial branches can support UC branches by funding and financing of members, there is little fraternizing between the two memberships. As one interviewee explained: ‘if you’re a Unite industrial member you sit on the industrial branch, you do not sit in the Unite Community branch...they [the union] don’t like mixing the two’. This is a reference to the way the two forms of membership are completely separate. The union rule book says that; ‘Community Members shall have no entitlement to hold any position in the union or to participate in any of the union’s structures beyond the Community Group/Branch of which they are a member’. Nor are UC members entitled to vote in elections the Executive Council, but they are for the General Secretary. Similarly, Unite has been clear that membership of UC is *only* open to those ‘not in paid employment as well as those not seeking employment’. So, if an unemployed Unite community member manages

to get a job, then they most likely will find they are no longer eligible to be a UC member. If they find work in a Unite organized workplace they will have their membership transferred to the industrial branch, but if it is an un-organized work place, they may lose their Unite membership entirely—the union thus losing a willing member and activist in the process. This decision was made to ensure that working members are placed in the right section of the union in order that they pay the correct membership fee to entitle them to the benefits of ordinary members, and that they are placed within a branch at a particular workplace, or with workers in the same industry, occupation or sector. But if there were not competing priorities within the union seeking to ensure control of important power bases a different decision may have been made. For example, dual membership could have been written into the union's rule book thus allowing members to be active in both spheres should they choose. Similar organizational/structural constraints arise in the democratic functioning of the union. For example, Unite has regional 'area activists committees' where branches can delegate two members to sit on these (non-policy making) committees. UC co-ordinators explained how they would like to break down the restrictions on who can attend these committees by turning them into area activists' fora open to all who want to play an active role in their union and community. The union rulebook, however, works against the changing and breaking down of such structures—particularly in the short term—as rule changes can only take place on a bi-annual basis.

### **Strategic capacity and union transformation**

To what extent has Unite the capability and capacity for transforming itself in line with the vision it is espousing to be a political campaigning union that aims to be a 'movement for change'?

*There's a wide disengagement at the moment from political activity and that's a void that we're filling with Unite community. (Interview with senior staff member)*

*I think it's about the wider Labour movement and what our responsibilities to our class are. (Unite Community Co-ordinator 13)*

While the messages emanating from Unite are clearly framed in the language of class and in opposition to austerity—and a lot of the UC activity in branches is the practical implementation of this discourse—there is little evidence of sufficient internal focus to understand what strategic capacity the union has, or its capacity to effect cultural and transformative change to carry this narrative forward *throughout* the union. Although UC was

an idea that emanated from Unite's leadership, and particularly its General Secretary, the actual design of what UC might 'look like' in practice has been left to more junior staff to figure out. While this could be seen as encouraging innovation, it was also felt by some in UC that there was a disconnect between Unite's vision of community organizing and the way this 'fitted' with the overall focus and day-to-day activity of the union. The issue of 'contending interests' was not really considered in the design of UC, nor was there sufficient attention on how to foster collaborative action across the two types of membership (and staff) for the proposed social project of fighting austerity. But, as Heery and Kelly (1994: 18) have pointed out in their work on union form, conflict between union managers, activists and officers will 'in large part determine the success of attempts to manage unions... National union leaders, that is, may be committed to the strategic management of their organisations, but the implementation of strategy is dependent on the cooperation or compliance of other groups within trade unions.' As yet, though, there is no unanimity throughout the union as to the worth of the initiative.

Although Unite's executive committee receive regular quarterly reports on the development of UC and a short video was presented to the union's national conference, there is no evidence of any process of organizational learning taking place (among staff or members) as to what the community organizing strategy might mean for a wider renewed vision for the union. Understanding strategic capacity within an organization is, however, necessary to facilitate transformation. As Hyman (2007: 202) has observed: '...within trade unions, particularly those long established, the widespread respect for precedent and protocol means that the traditions of all the dead generations frequently inhibit learning.' This being the case, effective organizational learning requires strong leadership skills that can drive innovation and change *throughout* the union. Trade unions have a tendency to be cautious and to rely on familiar repertoires of behaviour and tactics, even when circumstances change. Added to this is bureaucratic and structural inertia, or the institutional sclerosis that is inherent in many unions (Pocock 1998). A leadership is thus needed that can overcome these problems. However, this requires more than announcements and statements, it needs a process of internal change backed up by education and training, and being able to change the minds of members, activists and staff, such that the values and ideas espoused in the union's vision are those to which the majority of people can sign up. However, at the moment, UC is, in effect, an adjunct to the main body of the union—a political activist wing of the union where community organizing campaigns take place

separate from the union's more passive industrial membership and it remains to be seen if it will remain.

### **Concluding remarks**

One of the things this paper set out was to consider the extent to which Unite is consciously and strategically attempting to redefine union purpose in the context of neo-liberalism and the political climate of austerity. The ideology that is driving this community organizing initiative can be understood in the narrative of class struggle espoused by the union at leadership level but also from the UC membership—a shared anger at attacks on precarious workers, and the 'non-working' poor. Unite has recognized that its ability to effect change in the external environment has been considerably reduced over the last 30-40 years—and even more so since the financial crisis of 2008, such that industrial action is, in the main, or not even an option in many cases. Many years have passed since the union was able to leverage the kind of power necessary to force significant concessions from employers and the state. It is argued here that this recognition has resulted in *some* rethinking of union purpose within Unite as to what the union is actually organizing for and where its focus should lie, but there are constraints that limit the effectiveness of the UC strategy that arise from sectional interests within different parts of the union.

As noted earlier, Unite's identity and ideology is very much derived from its inherited traditions (and TGWU cultural dominance), and many observers of union behavior would place Unite, because of its history, quite firmly between market and class in Hyman's (2001) geometry of trade unionism. This is not to suggest homogeneity among Unite's members and staffers. Indeed, it is accepted that there are competing identities, ideologies and sectional interests within the organization (as there is in any) but, overall, the union could be broadly categorized in this way. The union's strong class identity—expressed in terms of a narrative of inequality and the unequal balance of power in the employment relationship—has continued from its past and, it is argued, is being re-applied in the union's current incarnation. Yet, with the development of the Unite Community initiative, there has been a shift in organizing focus towards people who are not in work, but are angry about the effects of austerity on the most vulnerable in society. This suggests perhaps a slight re-orientation of union purpose as Unite draws these 'non-members' into the union and creates a space for them to organize and be active. The 'community', and wider society beyond the workplace, is seen to be an active arena into which Unite can expand. It is also an attempt to show that unions should be concerned with more than just terms and conditions of employment, and

that they could be organizations for the working class as a whole, not just those privileged to be in organized workplaces. In this respect Unite could be seen to be moving more towards a re-orientation between class and society and away from an external focus on the market—something that is perhaps required in an increasingly fragmented labour market where the ‘gig economy’ is taking hold and transforming what it is to be a worker in a workplace.

Yet it is further argued that the rethinking of union purpose has only gone so far and that Unite is actually facing in two directions at the same time. While the UC strategy is developing a new approach to union activity (recognizing that organizing in the community requires a re-analyzing of where power and leverage might be located), the main body of the union—the industrial membership—continues as it has done in the past to focus on the workplace and has a completely separate organizing strategy. In terms of the way the union functions, this means the two sections of the union are acting independently with little interaction. While it is evident that the UC initiative is, in part, a recognition of its loss of power in the workplace and Unite is showing a willingness to adopt a more social movement orientated unionism, where it could mobilize to broaden the base of trade unionism, there is, as yet, no attempt to implement a community organizing strategy across the union as a whole.

It is not inconceivable though that Unite *could* mobilize its industrial membership (which is also affected by the effects of austerity) to campaign and organize with UC members in the localities in which they live in opposition to neoliberalism. The union has framed its narrative very clearly in terms of class ideology. The austerity measures implemented by the government are presented as impacting on everyone in society—both in *and* out of work. The political opportunity structures to respond to this are evident—there is a residue of anger against attacks on the poor and vulnerable and it is clear that some people do want to be part of a wider social movement that can organize to challenge these attacks. While there may be currently little expectation among industrial members that they can effect much change in their own workplaces, they may, like UC members, choose to be active in their local communities where they feel they can have some influence or effect in they were provided with the opportunity. Yet the way the union is currently structured seems to militate against building these wider spaces of solidarity.

At the outset, the paper asked what it means for union identity to include non-workers. Evidence from the literature indicates that for a union to transform itself into a wider social movement, which includes organizations and people beyond the workplace, means more locally-focused activity at grass roots-level; it entails experimenting with collective action beyond traditional union tactics; it requires patience to build alliances and coalitions; and necessitates a change in culture to understand different ways of organizing that embrace emancipatory politics within and across diverse groups. The answer then, is that it requires internal change to include different ways of working, the breaking down of barriers and the ability to re-construct a broader conception of solidarity.

Yet many unions, like Unite, are constrained structurally and organizationally by their past (and the present), which creates obstacles to the type of organizational learning and power analysis necessary for this type of innovation—despite the strategic objectives espoused by the leadership. To meet the challenges faced by loss of power, and the building of new alliances, is much more than adopting a laundry list of organizing tactics, or creating an adjunct to traditional trade union practice. What is required is rethinking of the structures of power in society (not just in the industrial arena) and what sort of tactics are needed to mobilize around these in the most effective way, but further it requires a deep internal focus on how to make this happen with a leadership that can understand a union's strategic capacity for transformative change. Unite has begun to articulate a view of working class common interest through its UC organizing initiative, and early findings show that there is potential for building wider solidarities beyond the workplace, but the union still needs to figure out how to change the union internally to respond to its rearticulated identity and purpose of working class solidarity. The diagram in Figure 1 has shown the dialectical interrelationships of the various elements that make up the very essence of a union, with union purpose at the center, but the element that appears to be the most problematic in Unite, in terms of union renewal and change, is the internal focus. Without an ability to lead organizational change *throughout* the union, unions will remain wedded to their traditions and routines, that are no longer effective, as well as the sectional interests that work against a unitary approach. Oligarchic tendencies work against innovation as sections of the union operate in silos in order to maintain power structures. Only a strong leadership that is prepared to re-conceptualize what trade unions are actually organizing for can overcome these restrictions and re-orientate the union so its purpose (if that is what it is aiming for) is a social movement operating for the benefit of the working class as a whole.





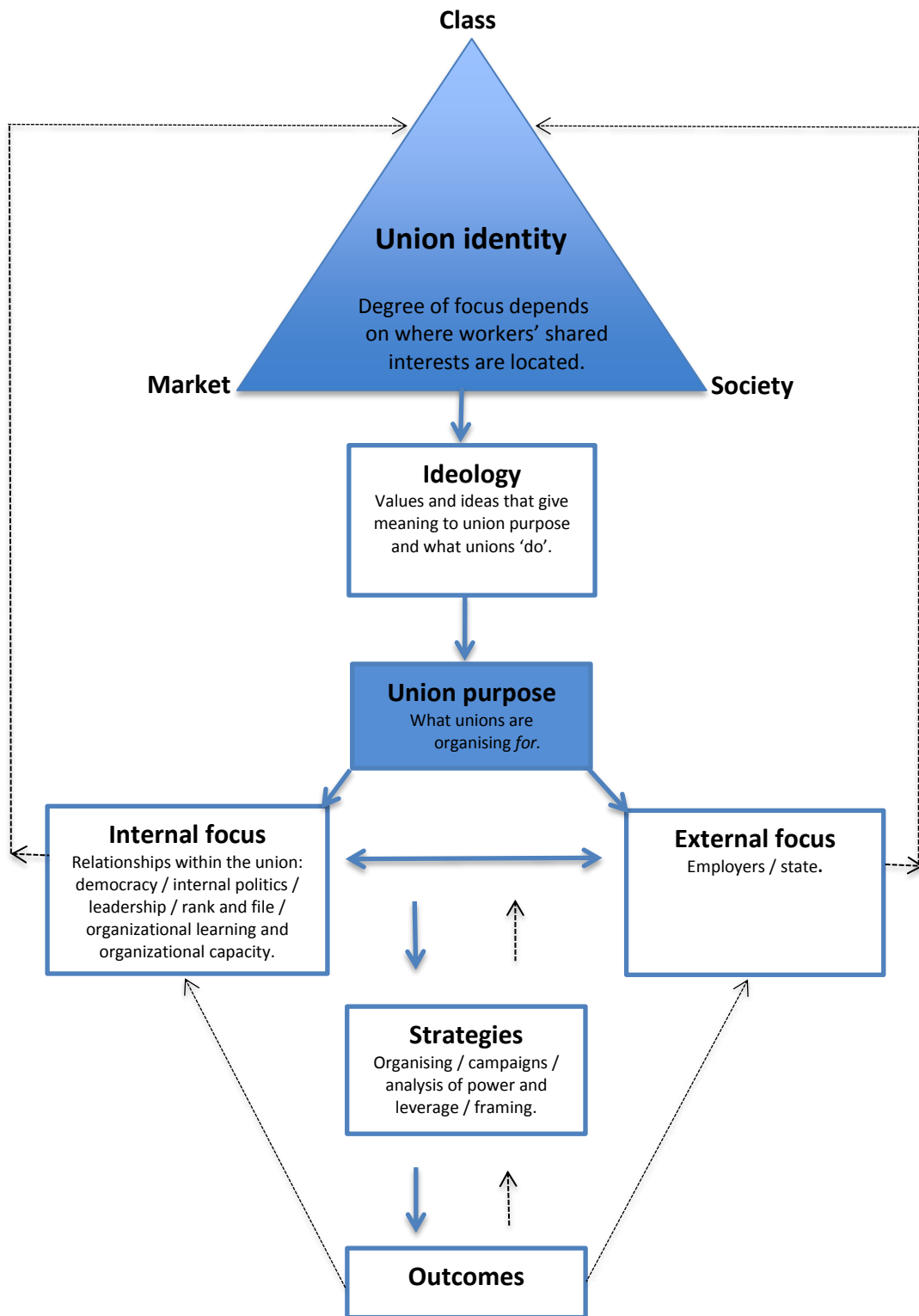
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**Figure 1: Adaptation of Hodder and Edwards' essence of union framework (2015) and Hyman's geometry of trade unionism (2001)**



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- <sup>1</sup> Radical political unionism is described by these authors as ‘class based trade unionism, cognisant of the fundamental difference in the interests of capital and labour, politicised in its opposition to neoliberal marketization, and inclusive of wider social currents beyond the workplace (p39)
- <sup>2</sup> Annual Report of the Certification Officer 2016-2017. UK Certification Office for Trade Unions and Employers’ Associations.
- <sup>3</sup> Transport and General Workers Union did however have a policy prohibiting communists from holding full-time and lay union office but this was effectively ignored at the shop floor level.
- <sup>4</sup> Also known as the under-occupancy penalty, this was a change to Housing Benefit Entitlement that means claimants receive less in housing benefit if they live in social housing that is deemed to have one or more spare bedrooms.
- <sup>5</sup> Zero hours contracts are where the employer does not guarantee a fixed number of hours and where employees do not have the same employment rights as those on traditional contracts. Critics say that the contracts are being used to avoid employers’ responsibilities to employees. The Office for National Statistics estimates that around 744,000 people were employed on these contracts in 2015.