Trade union community membership: exploring what people who are not in paid employment could contribute to union activism

Professor Jane Holgate, University of Leeds, j.holgate@leeds.ac.uk

Dr Gabriella Alberti, University of Leeds, g.alberti@leeds.ac.uk

Dr Iona Byford, University of Portsmouth, Iona.Byford@port.ac.uk

Dr Ian Greenwood, University of Leeds, i.greenwood@leeds.ac.uk

Summary

The industrial relations literature tends to argue that workers join trade unions primarily for instrumental reasons, for example, to obtain assistance if there is a problem at work. But this clearly does not apply to people who are not in work. It is in many ways counterintuitive to join a trade union when one is not an employee or in paid employment, looking for a job, or retired. Generally, there is little material benefit in doing so. Others have noted, however, that personal values, particularly associated with the ideological left, can cultivate a predisposition toward joining a union that is not based on a purely material calculus. Nevertheless, this analysis is usually applied to workers. The research reflected in this article aims to understand the motivation of people who are not in paid employment, such as jobseekers/unemployed, students and retirees, to join labour unions and become active within them. It does so through a case study of the United Kingdom's largest private sector union, Unite, and considers the contribution to, or rationale for, union activism within community membership and the possibilities for rethinking trade unionism beyond its traditional workplace base.

Résumé

Zusammenfassung

Keywords

Activism, community organising, motivation, retirees, trade union membership

Corresponding author:

Professor Jane Holgate, University of Leeds, 31 Lyddon Terrace, Leeds LS2 9JT

j.holgate@leeds.ac.uk

Introduction

Given the considerable decline of trade union density in many Western countries over the past half century, increasing attention has been paid to how unions might broaden their base to involve a wider membership constituency. One way of doing this is to develop a deeper, more nuanced understanding of people's decision to join a union and, in particular, what this means for union activism. As Frangi and Barisione (2015) have noted, this has now become a 'fundamental subject for research and union practitioners'. The focus of this article is a case study of Unite, the largest UK private sector union. In 2011, Unite introduced a community membership section, Unite Community (UC), which opened up union membership to people not in paid employment (such as retirees,[1] students and the unemployed) (Holgate, 2018). Community membership sits alongside the industrial side of the union and is dwarfed by its 1.4 million industrial members. Unite at present has only around 15,000 community members, although many more have been members since the formation of this new section. The reason is that UC members leave this section when they obtain employment, switching to membership of the industrial side of the union. Others have fallen away for various other reasons. Members of UC are mainly part of the union's political activist wing, campaigning primarily around welfare issues in their local communities on behalf of or alongside benefit claimants. But they have also been actively involved in supporting striking industrial members and unionisation drives. While Holgate's (2018) article on Unite Community considered whether the initiative was an attempt to rethink union purpose as a consequence of loss of

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[1] Although many unions have retired members sections (as does Unite), the union's 'community membership' is in *addition* to that. Unite members have the option of moving into the 'retired members' section when their employment comes to an end at the close of their working lives. The two memberships are organisationally completely separate. It is, however, possible to belong to both at the same time.

power in the workplace, in this article our contribution is to refocus attention on the subjective factors, such as what motivates people not in paid employment to join a trade union.

According to Unite, it has sought to expand its membership in this way in order to provide a way in which people can find and use their political voice by taking a stand against service closures, or coming together to improve their local communities. Our research focus, however, is the motivation of individual Unite Community members for joining a labour union – rather than a community organisation or a political party – and why they considered Unite as a space for their own social and/or political activism. Exploring different drivers of union participation is particularly relevant in the context of new forms of workplace–social movement coalitions and hybrid forms of worker organising across the community and the workplace. The focus on individual motivations contributes a different perspective to social movement unionism literature.

There is an extensive literature on social movement/community unionism. It is described as a form of unionism that advocates building alliances where union and community interests overlap (Breecher and Costello, 1990; Cockfield et al., 2009; Cornfield et al., 1998; Fine, 2000; Holgate, 2015; Rhomberg and Simmons, 2005; Tattersall, 2006), but in this article, we explore whether Unite's approach differs from the more commonly understood labour/community alliances in which support is requested/offered for a particular (often time-limited) campaign. The article explores these issues through in-depth biographical interviews with Unite Community members, who talked about how, as people not in paid employment, they were motivated to become active within Unite Community. A brief outline of Unite's community initiative provides the context before we consider the implications of expanding unions in this way, and whether it could provide opportunities for boosting union membership through increased social movement unionism.

In our research, we are interested in how members articulate their reasons for joining UC and choosing this space for their social movement activism. We also speculate whether this alternative form of (non-employment related) union membership and activism could provide a way to re-imagine community unionism in a changing labour market. In describing the development of Unite Community, Holgate (2018: 17) has argued that in

the development of the Unite Community initiative, there has been a shift in organising 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 organise and be active.

On this basis, we consider the extent to which UC members have bought into this re-orientation towards a type of unionism in which there is increased focus on community (or 'society' if looked at in terms of Hyman's (2001) class–society–market nexus) as an organising space. What is it that they personally get out of being involved with Unite Community?

Why join a union when you're not in paid employment?

It is perhaps unsurprising there has been intense scrutiny in the academic literature of why workers join trade unions, and the reasons they become active within them, not least over the past 40+ years of union decline, as the unions desperately need to understand how they might mitigate their drastic loss of members. Quantitative analysis of data from surveys of members and prospective members has been a popular method of research (see, for example, Buttigieg et al., 2007; Charlwood, 2002; Deery and Cieri, 1991; Frangi and Barisione, 2015; Kirmanoğlu and Başlevent, 2011; Lowe and Rastin, 2000; Schnabel and Wagner, 2007; Toubøl and Jensen, 2014; Waddington and Whitston, 1997). There have also been many qualitative investigations that have aimed to dig deeper, to unpack the statistics in order to understand the individual decision-making of union members and non-members (Kirton, 2005; MacKenzie, 2010).

Findings from earlier studies (Nicholson et al., 1981) suggest a range of reasons for joining unions. They can be broadly categorised in three ways: instrumental, ideological and cultural/social custom. Instrumentalism is identified in much of the literature as one of the primary reasons for joining a trade union: the most frequent response in surveys is often 'in case there is a problem at work', followed by 'improved pay and conditions' (Waddington and Whitston, 1997: 522). This is perhaps unsurprising given that the raison d'être of trade unionism, as defined by the Webbs, is 'a continuous association of wage earners for the purpose of maintaining or improving the conditions of their employment' (Webb and Webb,

1894). In this respect, union membership represents a rational choice based on a cost–benefit analysis of the likelihood of gaining material benefits, such as union representation and higher wages, better terms and conditions, or job security. The union members in our study, however, are formally 'non-workers'[2] in that they are not in paid employment (but rather labelled by the UK government as jobseekers, possibly in receipt of benefit, or are retirees, or students), so these reasons do not apply.

People are not mobilised solely on the basis of an instrumental calculation of self-interest (collective or individualised), however. Other reasons advanced for joining are ideological, where there is a political commitment to the values of collectivism – where there is class consciousness and an objective to the transformation of inequality or social order (Moore, 2010). Deery and Cieri (1991: 62) suggest that for some, 'the explanation for union membership may lie in the general value system of the individual, the antecedents of which can be traced to societal and family variables'. For example, having a mother or father with a strong commitment to unionism is a predictor of union joining, as it's often connected to local historical and cultural expectations or heritage (Barling et al., 1991; Nicholson et al., 1981). A group of studies have shown that it is important to consider these social or psychological approaches if we are to fully understand individual rationales, beyond instrumental factors, for union joining and activism.

As Guest and Dewe (1988: 180) have noted, the social, cultural, material and psychological aspects of whether an individual joins a union and their subsequent activism 'will be shaped and perhaps modified by subsequent work experiences and possibly also by a more conscious political commitment'. In the writings of Nicholson et al. (1981) this conscious political commitment to unionism is picked up in the notion of 'ideological activist', which is used to describe politically motivated union members. Ideological reasons are also articulated in a later study by Toubøl and Jensen (2014) who note the importance of a union member's normative and attitudinal characteristics, particularly the positive correlation between left-

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[2] We use the term 'non-workers' in inverted commas mindful of the contested definition of work and the wider theoretical debate about the boundaries of work and employment. Indeed, many Unite Community members, while not in paid employment, often carry out various forms of unpaid work, reproductive and care work for their families and community. Note, however, that although Unite rules do not allow paid workers to join the UC section of the union, we did find a few UC members who occasionally undertake marginal or intermittent paid work, often on a 'self-employed' basis, but these are people joining outside of the rule book (mostly unknown to the union). The Unite rule book clearly states that membership is only open to people who are not in paid employment. If in paid work, people are directed to join the main/industrial section of the union – according to the rule book people cannot be members of both.

wing ideology (class) and union membership. Here we might expect to find that workers who have an ideological predisposition to collectivism will join unions even in circumstances where there might be little material benefit (for example in a non-recognised workplace) and this is borne out by a review of studies in this area (Riley, 1997).

Our study also suggests that unions may expand their membership (and union activism) by becoming relevant to people who are politically committed (in terms of social justice) but who are not in paid employment, yet have a desire to be actively involved in a union movement that sees itself as a broader social movement to improve working people's lives towards a more equal/just society. This suggests an untapped potential for union growth. We have learned from the COVID-19 pandemic and concerns around climate change, the #MeToo and #Black Lives Matter movements, that there are considerable numbers of people, many young, who are active on social justice issues but who are looking for a home for their activism. As such, exploring new forms of membership and activism is an important area of consideration for unions wanting to increase their membership, scope of activity and social relevance. We explicitly focus on the concept of activism and motivation as described in the work of social movement theorists such as McAdam (1988), Tilly (1978) and McCarthy and Zald (2001).

Gathering data on motivation: interviews, participation and observation

The research began just after the UC initiative was conceived in 2011 and it has continued throughout its formation and subsequent existence. The methodological approach has been qualitative and inductive. Using in-depth interviews, observation and participation, the researchers immersed themselves in the activities of Unite CU branches to obtain a rich understanding both of what was said, but also what has been done. As a result of their expertise in trade unions and community organising, the researchers also acted as 'sounding boards' in discussions about direction and progress, and have taken part in training, presentations and workshops with Unite staff and UC members, as well as attending branch meetings over a seven-year period.

Initially, the aim of the research was to observe what was taking place on the ground as the parameters or direction of the community initiative had not yet been formulated. It was only

after a structure for this section of Unite had been devised, funding allocated and staff recruited, that a vision emerged of what Unite Community might be in practice. Once articulated by the union, this allowed the development of research themes and questions. A key focus was motivation, and it was through in-depth biographical interviews that members were able to clearly articulate the values that drew them to become not only members, but activists as well. It was values that the research hoped to capture, which is why in-depth semi-biographical interviews[3] were chosen as the most appropriate method (Rosenthal, 2004). We were interested in people's stories and formative influences and this allowed interviewees the opportunity to reflect upon their life choices, decision-making, motivation and routes into activism (Bron and Thunborg, 2015). Interviewees were provided with an uninterrupted opportunity to explain how their commitment to trade unionism and social justice came about, whereby interviewees were encouraged to identify these issues through their own associative or chronological structures. This led to lengthy life histories that framed the more recent decision to become active in Unite Community. We listened closely to each individual's narrative in order to understand whether and how members developed a sense of injustice, and from where decisions to collectivise originated (Kelly, 1998). In total, 48 interviews with lay members were undertaken with an overall average of two hours per interview (29 were retired, 10 unemployed, seven employed, one student and one other). The average age was 59 and there was an almost even split between men and women; 39 had previously been union members (often of other unions). We also conducted 18 interviews with Unite staff. Interviewees were selected either by direct face-to-face requests at branch meetings, or via email from lists of members in branches. We approached interviewees by explaining that we were interested in exploring member motivations for joining and becoming active within Unite Community.

In order to understand the purpose of the union's initiative, interviewees also included Unite Community coordinators, the paid organisers in each of the union's regions, and three senior officials with responsibilities for UC. A few of these were interviewed on more than one occasion. One senior staff member was interviewed multiple times, and met with on a regular basis over the past 10 years. In addition to interviews, there was participant observation at

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[3] We refer to the interviews as 'semi-biographical' because although interviews began as life stories of social justice motivation the interviewers later followed up with probing questions about involvement in Unite Community.

branch meetings and attendance at workshops/training over a three-year period in three different Unite regions. Field and interview notes were taken and where possible, recordings were made and transcribed verbatim. Data were inputted to text analysis software and codes applied to the interview transcripts according to a number of themes. Themes were related to issues of motivation (for example, political history, previous trade union experience, union identity/purpose, social justice, power, voice), alongside interviewees' biographical histories. From this, the literature on motivation for joining/activism, and social movement unionism, was re-read alongside data to help us understand how decisions were made and how this led to activism when part of Unite Community. There is no space in an article of this length to explore the motivations of each of the 48 interviewees in depth, but the accounts selected here are representative according to the coding of the transcripts. By focusing on narratives from a few of the interviewees we are able to unpack individual stories in more detail. This allowed us to explore how social norms, individual values and a collective and class-based sense of belonging have a profound influence on the willingness of people not in paid employment to join and be active in a trade union. The next section considers how these issues were articulated by the interviewees, and the extent to which people's identities, education, health, work status, personal and social life, politics, attitudes to unions, and historical factors affected their decision-making around becoming active members of UC.

Understanding union purpose and individual motivations for joining

It is important to begin by exploring what interviewees thought the purpose of UC to be. It may be assumed that this would be fairly obvious, but the union's publicity material at the time was somewhat opaque. The union's website stated

> Unite's mission is to organise people to strive for a society that places equality, dignity and respect above all else […] Unite's community membership scheme brings together people from across our society. Those *not in employment* are welcomed into the union family, adding another dimension to our strength in thousands of workplaces across the UK and Ireland.

But this tells us little about activities or how members can get involved, or how the branches function. So how did members articulate *their* understanding of what they were joining and the purpose of Unite Community?

Overall, most interviewees described UC as providing a space for people not in paid employment to be part of the union movement, but struggled to put into words how they would actually describe it to someone on the street who didn't have much understanding of unions. This is perhaps unsurprising if we take the common understanding, provided by the Webbs (Webb and Webb, 1894: 1) of UK trade unionism as being about maintaining or improving workers' employment conditions. It proved difficult for many interviewees to explain why a person who is not in paid employment should join a trade union: 'for quite a while I couldn't get my head around it and couldn't quite pin it down' said one member with a long history of trade union activism, and 'I can't honestly think of a proper answer', said another with a similar background. Most, however, were comfortable in describing the initiative as a community-based union for the unemployed or the underemployed to engage in social justice campaigns. One interviewee described it as revisiting the mutual aid tradition of 19th century trade unionism. While these understandings 'fit' with the vision from the originators of the initiative – namely that it provides a campaigning voice for the unemployed – many interviewees expressed the view that its purpose was/should also be for the *under*employed and those workers without a traditional workplace, for example those employed in the 'gig economy' or forced into self-employment or in precarious jobs. One interviewee said, 'it should provide a voice to people who have no defined workplace', yet Unite's rule book explicitly states that people who are working, or who are employed, should join the industrial side of the union, not Unite Community.

The political nature of UC was evident to interviewees, who understood it to be about organising unorganised groups of people in the community into politics through a non-partisan organisation. Others described UC as providing a home for those on the political left, aligned or otherwise, to undertake campaigning work. Dave, who was retired, but still doing some freelance trade union tutoring work had been a lifelong union member. In fact he was a GMB branch president, a Unison senior shop steward, and a graduate of Ruskin College, where he had studied economics.

Dave made reference to UC's purpose of providing support to Unite's industrial side. This was also well understood and articulated by many interviewees; indeed, this was one of the most frequently mentioned reasons offered for its existence. 'I think its main purpose really is to act as a continuation of the union movement and support for those still involved in industrial struggle, I think that's what it was created for', explained George, another retired lifelong trade union member and political activist. This comment suggests that, instead of being a new departure, the UC initiative's activities somehow meet expectations of what unions *should* perhaps have always been about, and suggests that a blurring of community–workplace battles was important for this member.

A different perspective was put forward by Linda who was one of the few interviewees without a background in trade unionism. Linda's key motivation for joining Unite Community was to campaign against and organise around the government's austerity measures and their impact on communities. She expressed her initial reservations about joining – 'I've always thought of unions as very blokeish, very male' – but hoped that more women and people from ethnic minorities, and disabled people would get involved to make it more representative of local communities. She envisaged Unite Community as providing a space for campaigning around environmental and climate issues, housing and the sell-off of the National Health Service and that it would be much more 'broad-based' and outward looking:

> I think the unions need to rebrand, particularly to appeal to younger people and students; they need to move away from what's happened in the past and go for a really big rebranding that will appeal to the students.

While austerity has been one of the major foci of Unite Community activities, environmental issues had not gained the same traction at the time of the research. Nor has membership expanded much beyond the over 50s age group, suggesting its appeal is mainly to those with a history of trade union activism, or people with experience of similar structured campaigning organisations, or even just people with time on their hands.

Investigating motivation

Most interviewees had either had a history of active trade union membership or involvement in left-wing politics; in many cases both. Twenty-nine of the 48 interviewees were retired and

wanted to remain active in the union movement, but previously their opportunities had been limited to retired members' sections[4] that focused only on retirement issues, or were viewed as social sections. Unite Community offered something different, with a much broader focus, aimed at satisfying members' interests in campaigning around wider social justice issues.

The members we interviewed were strong advocates of social justice campaigning and this was the key motivation for most in becoming active within Unite Community. If we analyse UC members' narratives there appears to be a clear ideological 'fit' that leans most towards Hyman's (2001) class/society nexus in terms of the ideal type of union identity; in other words, it is regarded as a social justice movement rather than just a means of regulating employment relationships. For example, in telling his story, Mark drew upon his personal history to explain why, even though retired, he wanted to remain active in the union movement. He explained how, although he did not come from a political family, or even a home that contained books, he had always been interested in politics, and even considered himself a communist while still at school. In exploring where his commitment to social justice originated he recalled a student strike in the mid-1970s. This together with teachers' strikes during that period led to his radicalisation: 'I remember them very well […] I think the teachers would have been an influence, definitely'. His working life was spent in social services in local government, where he became a team manager. Prior to promotion he was 'very active' in the union but found it difficult to maintain this position in his new role. His commitment to the union remained strong, however:

> I stayed with the union but it's a bit difficult when you're managing a team of people, it's kind of contradictory in a way. So that was a problem, but I maintained my union membership all the way through and never, ever crossed a picket line.

Once he had finished work, Mark had time on his hands and wanted to do something in the community, including some more political work. He heard about Unite Community from someone who was interested in the housing activism in his locality: 'I thought, OK, that sounds good, and I liked the idea of the union actually doing something outside of the workplace, that was quite important for me'.

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[4] A number of interviewees held dual membership of unions – they were retired members of their previous union, as well as Unite Community members.

Another UC member Katrina's upbringing was very different from Mark's in that she came from a privileged background and an intensely political family with generations of activism, both in the political sphere (Christian socialist) and in the union movement. She recalled being taken by her mother to picket lines at the age of 14, and being drafted into leafleting against the National Front in the 1970s. These influences had a profound effect on her own views of social justice. Her involvement in progressive causes was considerable, from environmental organisations and international causes to legal support groups and trade unions. Katrina, formerly a solicitor, was 55, but not working because of caring responsibilities. She had also worked in a high street bank. Her motivation for joining UC was deeply ideological; there was a strong political attachment to collectivism as a way to effect change; 'I believe in an alternative society, I want to help encourage other people – all of us – to work to change this society for an alternative social society.'

In terms of ideological commitment to activism, feminism was the key influence in Eve's route to social justice campaigning. She didn't have much of a trade union background, having only briefly been a member of a teaching union, and because the work that she currently did was not in a unionised sector. At the time of the interview, she was acting as branch equality officer and, despite UC rules, was working, doing sessional counselling on a self-employed basis. Her background was a working-class family in the north of England with parents who were in the Labour Party and the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. Eve's parents were the first in their families to go to university and she explained,

> if you were of that generation and in that particular sort of transitional position – I suppose from a working-class – I think, in many cases, you took the responsibility very seriously to do something with it. They would use the privilege that had been fought for and won and bestowed on them that they had a duty to give back and to make the world better.

Although her parents didn't talk politics in the family home – 'my parents had an idea that you don't brainwash your kids into political attitudes' – there was nevertheless a sense that social justice values can be learned and absorbed through behaviour, even if not expressed verbally. As a young child Eve was acutely conscious of, and a witness to, gender discrimination and violence against women. In her youth, she visited Greenham Common women's peace camp in the 1980s and worked at Women's Aid providing support for abused

women. More recently her campaigning activities had been in the anti-globalisation movement, but Eve was looking for something more stable, 'less random, more coherent, systematic and strategic', an organisation that wasn't a political party with a centralist structure. Something that was inclusive of the radical left;

> Because of the campaigning that I'm doing, I felt more like the campaigning was actually my central occupation and the other stuff is what I have to do to put bread on the table. So really, I want to be in a union that reflects what I do rather than where I get my income from. That, ultimately, is why I'm in Unite Community.

With these powerful words Eve suggests a different form of unionism from the accepted view that it is a particular workplace and occupation that forges the bond with a union. Rather, in this case, it is a wider sense of being part of the working class, whereby the union is a home for political praxis, but in a larger and more transversal social movement. In Eve's case, it was issues related to the local community and social reproduction (for example, claimants' rights and housing) rather than external support for industrial disputes that determined her affiliation with the union. As such, Eve was not really looking for a 'trade' union in the traditional sense, but rather an established organisational structure with a resource base to help her engage with and propagate her political beliefs. In essence, her motivation stems more from wanting to be part of a 'social movement organisation'.

The retiree members interviewed for this research generally started their working lives in the late 1960s and 1970s at a time when around half of all employees were trade union members, collective bargaining was the norm, covering 75–80 per cent of workers, and unions had considerably more power and thus were able to win more significant concessions than today. As a result, normative influences at workplace level would have meant that many workers came to see union membership as a *social custom* – an 'obligation'[5] to conform – or perhaps the result of a concern not to be labelled a 'free-rider'. But also the *material value of collectivism* was much more evident in this period as unions were able to extract wage increases from employers. But while social custom or instrumentalism may have been an influence on notions of collectivism in early working lives, it was evident from the life stories articulated here that today the key motivating factors in joining a union and activism for this

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[5] Indeed, in many workplaces there was an 'obligation' to conform as trade union membership was compulsory (a 'closed shop'). This meant that union membership was a precondition of employment.

group of members were political attitudes and individual social values and ideals. What do these biographical narratives of UC members tell us about the potential for a much broader community-based *unionism*, and about union purpose more broadly? Can unions 'capture' new membership by focusing more on social justice activism alongside, across and together with industrial unionism?

Rethinking union purpose: opportunities for growth?

Unite's introduction of community membership provides an opportunity to question the *purpose* of trade unionism. The core business of most trade unions is largely to bargain collectively on behalf of their members and to represent them when they have problems at work. It can thus largely be to be considered instrumentalist. Attempting to redress the imbalance of power in the employment relationship is a key union activity, but unions also have a long history of ideological commitment to wider social justice issues, many of which do not have a direct impact on what happens in the workplace. This resonates with Kaufman's (2008) notion of an 'original industrial relations paradigm' that embraced the employment relationship beyond the world of union and management rules and institutions. We know from the literature, however, that, for most workers, concerns about wider social issues are *not* the primary motivations for joining trade unions, and few members are involved in this aspect of union activity, or have knowledge of union campaigns on political or environmental issues, for example. This may be because people do not associate trade unions with this form of activity and thus they maintain an instrumental approach to membership.

It has been suggested elsewhere (Holgate, 2018) that Unite, in its development of the Unite Community initiative, is perhaps attempting to redefine its own union purpose in opening up the social justice/campaigning element of unionism to incorporate a wider constituency beyond employees. If this were the case we may see the form of unionism starting to shift from a key focus on instrumentalism to a more altruistic model of collectivism and social unionism-type activity; a move toward the societal aspect of unionism, as suggested by Hyman (2001) in his work on union identity (the degree of a union's focus between market, class and society). Whether or not this is the case with Unite (or perhaps it is too early to tell), it would nevertheless appear from the interviews that, for these members, a key motivating factor in joining was precisely the opportunity for the union to be a vehicle for broad *working*

class-based social justice campaigning in the local community, in accordance with a notion of the 'working class' that goes beyond formal participation in employment (and thus comprises retirees, unpaid carers and jobseekers). The ideological commitment to unionism went deeper than this, however, being deeply political.

There were many opportunities for social justice campaigning where Unite Community members lived, but doing this under the umbrella of a trade union was central to the stories told by the interviewees; that is, it was important to them to bring their social justice campaigns in their local communities into the 'home of labour', crossing the falsely rigid boundary of workplace and community issues (see Alberti, 2016). While happy to be part of the 'Unite family' of 1.4 million members, and all that offered in terms of credibility, structure, resources and media coverage – among other things – what mattered most was that the campaigning work was done, and *seen to be done*, by the trade union movement. Most interviewees had been members of other unions, but their ideological commitment was to trade unionism and the effectiveness of collectivism per se rather than identification or loyalty with any particular union (or indeed their predecessor unions). The interview with Linda, in particular, suggested how trade unions, alongside their traditional centralist structures, might create a looser network of social movement organisations, working within and alongside unions in local communities.

Interviewees reported how involvement in Unite had created a sense of belonging for them and provided a space for political activism that wasn't available elsewhere. While many of the interviewees were seasoned political campaigners (often as members of the Labour Party or other left-wing political parties), it was revealing that, despite having already had a political 'home', interviewees felt that Unite was providing a different and more conducive space in which to form collaborations around broader social justice concerns/campaigns that went beyond traditional class politics. As one member remarked, 'Unite has something to offer that political parties can't'. This sentiment, expressed by another member, seemed to resonate throughout the branches the researchers talked to: 'we pride ourselves on being non-sectarian, we've got Socialist Party, we've got Socialist Worker, we've got Green, we've got the Communist Party, Morning Star readers, some Labour Party members – we're a real mix and we work really well together'. The interpretation of this finding is that UC branches are creating an activist-organising space for local campaigning, but unlike political parties UC is

able to draw people from different parties to collaborate, thus widening the scope of activists willing to take part in campaigns.

It is evident that the UC members interviewed demonstrate an ideological commitment to collective activism in a way that is at odds with the majority of 'ordinary'[6] Unite members in the industrial sectors of the union. Unite is similar to most unions in that the great majority of members don't play an active role. If people are motivated to join a trade union for non-instrumental reasons, however, and there is perhaps an untapped residual commitment to collectivism in a section of society, this can only benefit trade unions looking to grow and develop greater influence. For example, UC members have been involved in or led campaigns against zero-hours contracts in Sports Direct, against precarious low-wage hospitality work in TGI Friday, as well as campaigning against the government's workfare, and representing claimants at benefit sanctions hearings.

As noted earlier, Unite's community membership is (officially) available only to people who are not in paid employment. This specifically precludes paid workers, and indeed Unite members in the industrial side of the union. By providing opportunities for community-based campaigning, however, Unite could act as an effective vehicle for the recruitment and engagement of members within their unions, helping to convert non-members into members and crucially, for a union wanting to grow, to convert members into activists. The interviews showed how people who are partially in employment/underemployed, retired, on benefits, or who are part-time self-employed, or students can play an important role as union advocates in the community and in workplaces, strengthening solidarities and building transversal alliances (for example, between welfare claimants and service workers, zero-hours and permanent workers).

Conclusion

This study has provided an opportunity to reflect on why people who are not in paid employment are motivated to join a union, and become active within it. It also gives food for

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[6] We make a distinction here between 'ordinary' union members, and lay activists such as branch officers and union representatives on the basis that the latter two groups are more likely to be of an ideological disposition.

thought regarding the purpose and possible future direction of trade unionism in the current period, when labour is much less organised than it once was. Unite's community initiative offers the potential for a reimagining of how unions could organise in such a way as to include a much wider demographic who are interested in being active in social justice campaigns. While the primary purpose of trade unionism should remain defending workers' interests, a more expansive, inclusive definition of 'worker' could include precarious and temporary workers, those forced into bogus 'self-employment', those with multiple workplaces and those with none. This, as the interviews have shown, also includes those not in paid employment, recognising the changing and fluid nature of and involvement with work and employment over the life course and of forms of union motivation and social activism based on a wider notion of the working class.

With less secure employment, increasing self-employment, and the growth of the gig economy a greater community focus could, as we have seen with Unite Community, widen the organising focus and at the same time provide a non-party political home for people who are motivated to engage in community and national campaigns around broader social justice issues. In this sense, this model of trade unionism could restore the link between work and community that was more evident in the past, and in doing so adopt the 'whole-worker organising' approach envisaged by Jane McAlevey (2016) in her book *No Shortcuts. Organising for Power in the New Gilded Age*, in which the union is actively operating to harness power in *and* outside of the workplace. Such a model could provide a focus for people who would not normally work together to collectivise in their local communities because, as we know, participation in social movements can lead to a process of socialisation in which feelings of commitment to an organisation or cause can develop, and loyalty to others deepens as a consequence (Passy, 2001). Unions, in adopting such an approach, could thus use this to their advantage in terms of utilising 'non-worker' members as advocates and activists for the union movement, recreating a culture in which unions are, once again, embedded in communities, and playing a greater role in social and community politics. This would respond to Kaufman's (2008) call for a return to an original industrial relations paradigm.

The aim of bridging the workplace and the larger community, as reflected in the words of Unite's internal report on the Unite Community initiative, has, in part, shown the potential

for incorporating industrial and community activism. At the same time, it highlights the false dichotomy between community and workplace organising that has been written about elsewhere (Alberti, 2016).

To conclude, it is understood that many union members are more actively engaged in their communities than they are in their unions, so in theory there is potential to broaden the base of trade unionism if they decide to invest in a community organising approach. However, it is acknowledged that to date this widening has developed so far only because the activists in question are, in the main, over 55 years of age with a history of trade union involvement. To *really* widen the scope of union activity, Unite Community may need to attract people from a much wider demographic, and spectrum of precariousness (including the new generations of intermittent and gig workers) than it originally envisaged when the initiative was conceived. In doing so, however, the union – which is wedded to the Labour Party through its political affiliation – may find that a 'rainbow coalition' of future members may begin to challenge the union's one-party allegiance, or conversely, this may become a stumbling block for the union in the growth of its community membership.

The research has also shown that there is an untapped residual commitment to the ideology of collectivism through trade unionism, and people holding these sentiments are motivated to (re)join if asked and provided with the resources for social justice campaigning in their communities. Properly resourced, with leadership support to spread such initiatives through the entire union, the advantages of a community organising model, in addition to industrial organising, are threefold: (i) increased membership and ability to hold onto this through a person's life course; (ii) enhanced legitimacy from both members and the wider public; and (iii) greater resources upon which to draw both industrially and via political campaigning from increased capacity of member involvement. This, however, would require a radical rethinking and re-imagining of the purpose of trade unionism, restructured imaginatively in such a way as to meet the needs of workers and 'non-workers'. This radical thinking in renewing trade unionism is all the more necessary in a world in which the nature of work and employment is changing so quickly and so deeply, and in ways, it seems, not fully realised by some trade union leaders.

Funding

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