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An international study of trade union involvement in community organising: same model, different outcomes

Abstract

This paper reports on a two-year study of union/community organising in the UK, USA and Australia. It takes a particular model of organising; that of the Industrial Areas Foundation, and analyses the motivation of trade unions engaging in and sustaining coalition-building activity in three community coalitions in each of the three countries. Findings show mixed approaches to working with community groups from *ad hoc* instrumentalism to deep coalition-building. While these variations may, in part, be explained by different industrial relations contexts, it appears that a union's own ideology and culture has a much greater effect on union attitude/behaviour towards non-workplace-based organising. The paper contributes to debates about the conditions under which unions succeed (or not) in engaging in or sustaining strong coalition-building beyond their traditional constituencies.

1. Introduction

Over the past three decades we have witnessed trade unions across the world trying to deal with the social, economic and structural problems that have beset trade union membership as it slumped across the world. Some unions have attempted to shift their focus from servicing existing members to organising in order to recruit diverse constituents in new labour markets. The methods and approaches taken have been similar in places like the USA, Australia and the UK (Bronfenbrenner et al. 1998; Crosby 2005; Simms et al. 2012); in each we have begun to see greater engagement by unions in community-based organising (Author A 2013a). This 'community turn' is, in part, recognition that (re)organising beyond the workplace may provide greater opportunities to engage with different groups of workers who might otherwise remain outside of the reach of unions (Herod 2001; Rainnie et al. 2007), as well as recognition that 'new' tactical approaches in local communities, which have wider appeal, may provide unions with greater opportunities to tap into social and moral concerns held by wider society—particularly in this period of deep economic crisis (AuthorC and AuthorA 2014). As such, we have seen the development of more community-based approaches where unions are working alongside or in coalition with community-based partners (Fine 2005; 2011; Lévesque and

Murray 2002; Nissen 2004; Osterman 2006; Pocock 2011; Tattersall 2010; Yates 2011). One of these, and the focus for this research, is the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF)—an American-based organisation formed in 1940 by Saul Alinsky to bring communities together to organise for the ‘common good’.

Community organising has, by and large, adopted Alinsky’s theoretical approach, if not always, his methods and tactics. At the start, he was influenced by and worked closely with labour unions, most notably the meatpackers in Chicago where he brought together the Catholic Church and the union to form his first community organisation, Back of the Yards (Horwitt 1989). But despite this early involvement of trade unionists, labour unions and the IAF do not have much of a history of working together in coalition. However, this started to change when the IAF began to organise around the ‘living wage’ in Baltimore in 1992. There was recognition that the local IAF group, Baltimoreans United in Leadership Development (BUILD), could ‘not achieve the sweeping change it was seeking without working with the labor movement’ (Fine 2003: 174). While union engagement has, overall, been limited, there are a number of examples where unions and IAF groups *have* attempted to forge common ground and have invested time and resources in exploring how to work together—although not always successfully. The aim of this paper is to examine why some unions in different locations are more successful than others in engaging with these broad-based coalitions.

However, before proceeding further, some clarification on the way the term ‘community’ is being used in this paper is necessary. As is noted elsewhere (Author A 2013a: 6) ‘when talking about trade unions and community organising, the primary distinction being made is the activities taking place in the wider communities *beyond* the workplace’. It is thus understood as a form of social interaction based around what people have in common and the concerns they share. Often grounded in specific localities, it is a place where individuals/organisations with different cultures and ideologies come together to shape and plan activities to challenge issues of social in/justice. Tattersall (2010: 20), building on the work of Saul Alinsky, uses a similar formulation when she talks about community unionism as ‘organizing workers on the basis of common identity or interest rather than the workplace’. Taking this a step further, Tattersall argues that community coalitions need three elements to be effective; organisational relationships and structure, common concern,

and an appropriate scale within which their demands can be realised. The three IAF groups in the paper have these elements and thus provide useful case studies to analyse the extent to which trade unions are engaging in and sustaining coalition-building activity

The paper is organised as follows: it begins by reviewing how industrial relations literature has begun to examine more closely the role that ‘other actors’ are playing within the employment relationship, and what it means for unions to step out of the traditional places and spaces of operation and work with organisations in the community. It then describes the IAF and the way it operates. Following this, the methodological approach is explained, before moving on to an analysis of the three case studies, exploring motivation for union involvement. Effectively the core question of the research is why is it that unions in London were unable to build a deep and lasting coalition while unions in Sydney and Seattle were more successful?

2. Building bridges: unions, other actors and allies beyond the workplace

It has been noted elsewhere in the literature that the motivation of unions to involve themselves in community organising is largely being driven by declining union membership and the failure to reverse this, along with the current economic climate that is causing large-scale job losses and deteriorating terms and conditions of employment (AuthorC and AuthorA2014; Givan 2007; AuthorA 2013a; Tattersall 2005). There is recognition that unions are currently politically and industrially weak, and have lost much of their ability to challenge exploitation at the point of production, and a realisation that unions cannot rebuild or revitalise on their own (Fine 2011; Nissen 2004; Turner and Cornfield 2007) and are thus interested in exploring the possibilities of working with allies beyond the workplace (Author A2013a).

But there is another factor driving academic and practitioner interest in this area and this is the increasing role of ‘other actors’ in the employment relationship. Bellemare’s (2000) work on ‘end users’ constituting actors within industrial relations, has been influential in encouraging IR scholars to ‘return to a more global societal perspective’ in their analysis of industrial relations players (Heery et al. 2012). Such a broadening of the IR terrain has led a number of researchers to focus their attention beyond that of the workplace to ascertain the type, scope and influence of other individuals and organisations within, and their

influence on, the employment relationship. Indeed the *British Journal of Industrial Relations* special edition on new actors in industrial relations provides an array of case studies that do just this (2006: 44-4) but that we need to understand the ‘challenges and limitations for traditional and non-traditional actors in an era of heightened global liberation’ (Tapia and Turner 2013: 682). However unions fully engaging with and sustaining their involvement in coalitions has often been shown to be problematic (AuthorA2009; Nissen 2004). The challenges and limitations range from lack of support from union leadersⁱ or an inability of unions to act as equal partners, or as Fine (2007: 342) has argued, to unions falling back on old ‘understandings of the industrial order and their place in it, and rely upon antiquated *organisational ideologies, cultures, strategies and structures to carry out their work* [emphasis added].’

Despite this, Heery et al. (2012: 69) in their UK study show that civil society organisations now have a ‘substantial and growing’ involvement in IR and can ‘rightly be designated “new actors”, deserving of analysis’. So, if we accept that IAF groups, organising as they sometimes do around labour market issues such as living wage, green jobs, etc, can be thought of as ‘actors’ in the context of industrial relations (Osterman, 2006), the next consideration is to understand how unions have become involved with broad-based community coalitions; what motivates them, what challenges they face and to what extent their experiences have differed in the UK, the US and Australia.

The literature on coalitions is vast and stretches back decades (Dobbie 2009; Gamson 1961; Laing 2009; Levi and Murphy 2006; McCammon and Campbell 2002; Tarrow 2006), and Nissen (2004) provides an extensive review of writings on labour’s involvement, but the focus in this paper will be on a couple of works that provide frameworks that are useful for understanding *why* unions involve themselves in working with others outside the workplace and what is necessary to overcome the challenges previously mentioned (Frege et al. 2004; Tattersall 2005). The motivating factors suggested by Frege et al. (2004) are: access to financial and physical resources; access to a community’s membership base and workers to whom unions have few connections; access to expertise and technical advice; conferred legitimacy as a result of positive association and reduced negativity as a perceived special interest group of self-interested organisation; and increased mobilisation of public support for campaigns. Whatever motivation unions have is also dependent, to a varying extent, on the union organising practice in different countries, but also—at a more micro

scale—on differing union ideology and cultureⁱⁱ. These latter issues will, as Frege et al. (2004) argue, affect the way that unions approach coalition-building: an instrumentalist union, is motivated (primarily) to achieve its own aims, adopting a lead position, with community groups subordinate—a *vanguard coalition*—or it might form a *common cause coalition*, where each partner enters to advance its own (but similar) interests. By contrast, a social-justice oriented union might take an *integrative approach*, where it offers unconditional support to their (non-labour) coalition partners.

Tattersall's (2010: 2) approach to labour/community coalition-building differs, she advocates an analytical framework based on coalition *practice and structure* (i.e. its strong organisational relationships), the presence of shared goals (common concern) and sensitivity to the geographies of campaigns (scalar strategies). Her evidence for this approach is derived from a four-year study of long-term coalitions in three countries. Instead of common cause coalitions, Tattersall (2010: 161) prefers to talk in terms of '*positive sum coalitions*', that 'enable unions and community organizations to jointly craft issues and campaigns that work to build each other while also meeting each other's direct interests.' Tattersall's framework provides a useful analytical tool that will be used in this paper to assess the success of union engagement based upon *practice and structure* (the strategy and structural form of the coalition itself), while Frege et al.'s taxonomy will be useful in analysing *union motivation* (i.e. the ideology and culture of the union entering the coalition).

In practical terms, while using different criteria and terminology, both identify what is termed here as deep coalition-building as being of greatest material benefit to all the partners involved. However, what is missing in both these approaches and what will be addressed in this paper is combination of the practical issues of 'fit' between coalition partners—the way in which structures and patterns of practice enable, or not, a full engagement of unions within a coalition, *and* the way in which the ideology and culture of a union either promotes or limits its members' involvement. The findings from this research show that these all elements are intertwined and previous work on labour/community coalitions has tended to not recognise how a fit between both is necessary for deep coalition-building.

Also another gap in the literature in this area shows that, as a long-established organisation, the IAF has been subject to much academic and practitioner analysis (Gecan 2004; Horwitt 1989; 2007; Robinson and Hanna 1994; Warren 2009; Wills 2012), but surprisingly, relatively little from a labour movement perspective (exceptions include Osterman 2006; Tapia 2012). In contrast to previous academic work on community/union organising that has either taken a single case-study approach or looked at just one country (an exception is Tattersall 2010 who looked at community coalition-building in Australia and North America), the comparative research in this paper allows for a greater exploration of similarities and differences whilst at the same time holding a set of factors (IAF methodology) constant.

3. Methodology, data and analysis

Industrial relations scholars have challenged researchers to engage in more comparative work in order to get to the heart of how and why ‘critical variables such as culture and ideology and the degree of centralisation of collective bargaining institutions restrict the responses of individual actors to similar changes in their external environments’ (Locke et al. 1995: 139). Thus this research into trade union engagement in community-coalitions in London (London Citizens), Sydney (Sydney Alliance) and Seattle (Sound Alliance) provides a good opportunity to explore these and other variables and to ask to what extent does union motivation affect the depth of engagement in community coalitions and what impact does a union’s ideological/political orientation or cultural norms/behaviour affect their involvement?

As the three coalitions in each country were all part of the same organisation—the Industrial Areas Foundation—this allowed for a strong element of control as their approach and methodology is similar in each place. Furthermore, interest in London Citizens began as a result of the limited involvement of trade unions (Author A2009) and an attempt to try to understand if this was the case elsewhere, and if so why, or why not? The others were chosen because in Australia, like the UK, there was also only one IAF group (Sydney), yet it had significant trade union support, and in the USA, Seattle was unusual for an American IAF group (where there are 57 other affiliated coalitions) in that it

had significant trade union involvement, so these provided interesting contrasts to London.

The majority of the research was undertaken from February 2011 to July 2012—although research on London Citizens has been on going since 2001. Data referred to in this paper mainly refers to that undertaken in 2011 and 2013. To date (January 2014) 140 interviews have been undertaken with 117 individuals (some were interviewed on two or more occasions over the period of the research), but only those interviews directly relating to the three case studies are referred to here.ⁱⁱⁱ Interviews consisted of face-to-face interviews and electronic ‘face-to-face’ video interviews via Skype. Interviewees included staff working for London Citizens (4), the Sydney Alliance (4) and the Sound Alliance (3). It also included members of the coalitions and Table 1 shows the breakdown of these in terms of the different sectors. Trade unionists formed the majority of interviewees (52 out of 89); this does not however mean that these interviewees only identified as trade unionists—many were involved in community organisations and faith groups—indeed 38 of the 89 interviewees reported that they were also members of a faith community. Fifty-two interviewees were male and 37 female.

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

Participant observation was used to note the interactions between members of the different groups—an essential method because ‘relational organising’ is central to the IAF’s philosophy and quite alien to the organising approach adopted by unions. It was also important to get a feel for the way the organisations ‘did business’—their cultures, their democracy, the involvement of the different parties and how they related to each other. Participant observation involved three-weeks in Sydney working from the Sydney Alliance office (located in the Unions New South Wales’ building) and two-weeks in Seattle working from the Sound Alliance office. As well as observation of day-to-day activity, I attended meetings and training sessions and one-to-one meetings with members of the community coalition.

I was fortunate to be in Sydney in the run-up to (and the week after) the Sydney Alliance’s founding assembly in 2011 attended by over 2000 people from member organisations. In

London, I have attended many London Citizens events over the last 12 years, including meetings, assemblies and actions. Data from participant observation (thoughts, observations and photographs) have been recorded in a diary and entered into qualitative software (NVIVO) for analysis.

3. Industrial Areas Foundation: its *modus operandi* and how it differs from unions

The IAF has a strong methodology that is applied consistently in each of its affiliates: it is important to understand this and how it differs from the way trade unions are organised. For example, there is no individual membership—the IAF is organised via institutions (largely faith-based congregations but it also includes schools, unions, non-profits, neighbourhood and civic organisations). The rationale is that institutional-based organising taps into already established structures that are more likely to have permanence in local communities and be ‘unhampered by the transitory nature of individual issues’ (Robinson and Hanna 1994: 69). This is very different to the fee-paying membership approach of unions. The IAF also aim for what Levi and Murphy (2006) term ‘enduring coalitions’ (long term co-operation with partners) as opposed to ‘event coalitions’ (short-lived for a particular protest or campaign) in which unions have tended to engage when support is needed for a specific campaign.

The IAF organising concept revolves around three main elements—power, self-interest and public relationships. *Power*, for the IAF, is conceptualised in terms of ‘organised people’ and ‘organised money’—and the former needs to challenge the latter to effect change. Power is neither good, not bad, but can be misused. *Self-interest*, according to the IAF, is what often motivates people to act and the relationships they build with each other can tilt the balance of power in their favour. The building of *public relationships* within and between member organisations in the coalition helps to establish a strong base from which to challenge power (organised money) and to act in the public arena to achieve that power to effect change (through organised people). This ideological approach and culture is instilled through all IAF training and was observed throughout this research.

The building of public relationships is carried out through its method of ‘relational organising’^{iv}. As one commentator on the IAF puts it; ‘in relational organising, building and maintaining an organisation capable of wielding sufficient power to resolve collective

issues, is seen as the end in itself rather than simply the means to an end' (O'Halloran 2006: 2). There is an expectation that members demonstrate they are prepared to undertake the necessary activity to achieve these goals, otherwise the campaign does not take place; the IAF (and Alinsky's) golden rule of 'never do for others what they can do for themselves'.

Finally, it is worth noting that the IAF makes a strong claim to be 'non-ideological and strictly non-partisan, but proudly, publicly, and persistently political' (IAF 2012). This strapline is intended to reinforce the message that the IAF does not admit political parties as member organisations, nor does it endorse politicians, or align themselves with political parties. Instead it aims for a *public engagement* with politicians, business leaders and holders of power in order to hold them to account over issues of social and economic justice. In a sense, the IAF's underlying philosophy (and, despite the claim, ideology) is related to pragmatism and compromise—it is very much dependent upon the power the community organisation can wield at any particular time and it is prepared to work with politicians whatever their political affiliations.

All of this is different to traditional unions, particularly those affiliated to labour parties: typically service-orientated (it is not unusual for campaigns led by national unions to have little actual member involvement) and reliant on fee-paying individual members. This organisational and operational context is important in understanding why tensions may arise because of a clash of ideologies and cultures between the IAF and trade unions.

4. The case studies: union involvement in community coalitions

First it is necessary to develop an understanding of the three organisations in order to get an insight into their similarities and key differences, and how this impacted on union involvement in each. These are outlined in Table 2 and explained in more detail below.

INSERT TABLE 2 HERE

The first case study is that of **London Citizens** (formally the East London Communities Organisation—TELCO—whose parent body is Citizens UK) which has been running a living wage campaign in London since 2001 and has had some considerable success

(Author AandD2007; Wills 2004). It was founded in 1996 with faith groups as the original member organisations, but has now expanded to include schools, universities, a few union branches and community/NGO-type organisations. However, overall trade union involvement with London Citizens has been limited (just 4 of the 210 affiliated institutions in 2013 were union branches) and evidence from interviews show that many trade unions and members are distinctly hostile to any form of joint working as a result of differing ideological approaches to issues such as power, politics, democracy and religion (see AuthorA 2009 for detailed discussion on this).

Unions that have been in membership include a handful of local Unison branches in east London, Unison nationally, PCS (a local branch) and Unite (T&G) (plus their Justice for Cleaners branch). Unison branches at east London hospitals have been the most actively involved because of the Living Wage campaign that began in 2001. This campaign was focused around cleaners and ancillary staff working at the hospitals and it was a community-based organising approach involving union branches and local faith groups. Through public pressure and high-profile stunts and lobbying of the hospital trusts by religious figures and leaders from community-based groups, the campaign succeed in achieving significant gains for low-paid workers at Homerton Hospital (Wills 2004).

TELCO and the Transport and General Workers Union (T&G, now Unite) also worked together for a short while around 2005-6. Two branches affiliated—the cleaning and hospitality branch and Justice for Cleaners. The cleaners were the more active branch and took part in London Citizens events and assemblies, but they were never really properly integrated. While the union's interest in the Living Wage campaign coincided with LC's attempts to organise low-paid cleaners in the city of London (a 'common-cause coalition') there was mutual benefit in being part of the community coalition, but otherwise union members did not take part in the wider activities of LC—mainly just attending annual assemblies.

Discussions with union officials and members in London unions about their motivation for involvement (as opposed to their actual experience of involvement) brought out a number of views, which reflect Frege et al.'s (2004) framework. One was recognition that

unions were not growing and they needed to broaden their base (i.e. access to financial and physical resources):

We're having difficulty in revitalising the union movement, [yet] everybody's in some form of organisation somewhere, if only we can tap in and get messages more broadly about critical workplace issues, we actually might have new vehicles to go way beyond our existing structures and build new and slightly different structures which might massively expand trade unionism and organised labour. (PCS Senior official)

Another commented on the opportunity to present the message of trade unionism in a different way (i.e. conferring legitimacy):

What we did get was the moral authority of having a group that wasn't an unpopular trade union championing our cause. (Unite organiser)

And another motivation was to learn about different ways of organising (i.e. increased mobilisation of public support):

I'd always believed that because of the structure problems and the organisational problems that any union organiser faces in the [hotel] industry, I felt that we needed an edge that we, as a union, couldn't provide. I think that we need to do something about organising the customers but the union thinks its job is to organise the workers, not organise the customers. I tend to disagree with that. I thought that they [London Citizens] could help me practically. (Unite branch secretary)

And, recognising that past practices were not working, London Citizen's organising approach had the potential to:

...open up opportunities for trade unions and bring a whole new set of people in contact with the trade union movement. Trade unionism is in a really bad state and you can kind of continue doing what you've always done and just hope that somehow magically it becomes effective, or you can just try organising in different ways, with different people and see what happens. And also I think there is something about the local as well that's really kind of missing [from trade unionism], which I think Telco brings. (Unison branch officer) (i.e. access to workers when unions have few connections).

Yet, despite these motivations being articulated by these trade unionists, they did not materialise in either practice or organisational change in any of the unions involved.

The second case study, the **Sydney Alliance (SA)**, has a different and significant genesis from that of London Citizens. Its foundation and early organising stage had considerable support and backing of a number of trade unions. Indeed, the canvassing stage of the project was undertaken as a consequence of substantial financial support and political endorsement from Unions New South Wales (Unions NSW). This was crucial in the SA's formation as it allowed community organisers to meet with organisations to gauge the level of support for the coalition to be established (it also helped that the director of the SA, a former staff member of Unions NSW, was trusted and seen as 'one of us' by the unions). Further, the establishment of the Australian Congress of Trade Unions' 'Your Rights at Work' national campaign in 2005, which succeeded in mobilising hundreds of thousands of workers and citizens to challenge the attacks by the Howard government on workers' rights, meant that broad support for union/community organising had already been recognised by many unions. As a newly developing organisation (SA began its organising in June 2007 and only publicly launched in September 2011) it is much less advanced than the other two case studies and has not yet had many significant wins in terms of its campaigns. But in late 2012, the Shop, Distributive and Allied Employees Association came to the SA to see if they could work together to defend public holidays. Together, and despite the New South Wales government pushing a law that would have seen workers being forced to work on the Boxing Day public holiday, they held a successful campaign to keep the holiday public. Both sides knew that they would be unlikely to be successful alone, but they realised that they had greater power together: 'We in the Alliance knew that many of our religious and community partners would be interested in the issue of public holidays too—and we thought that by working together, we could make a difference' (interview).

It is this union/community involvement in strategy and campaigns that differs from London Citizens. There is far greater engagement from trade unions in Sydney, largely because the SA decided at the outset to ensure an equitable balance between member organisations, carefully approaching unions, NGOs and faith organisations simultaneously to ensure that none of the three sectors dominated. And, it has mainly concentrated on

building a strong organisational culture and commitment of the coalition parties to each other, rather than campaigning (Tattersall's (2010) 'positive-sum coalition'). In 2013, it had 52 organisations as members (9 unions), organised across the city as a whole (rather than in chapters like LC) and secured its \$160,000 annual operating budget almost exclusively from dues paying member organisations.

Discussions in interviews about union motivation for involvement coalesced around similar concerns to trade unions in the UK: the state of the economy and the huge decline in union membership came to the fore. However, in this case, the focus was more about creating an 'enduring' or 'positive-sum coalition' to effect a transformation in the way that unions rebuild power:

I think this organisation needs to be part of the Sydney Alliance because as we've entered the 21st century we've gone into a new phase within Australian global capitalism. We actually don't have a guaranteed place inside the Labour movement, which means we have to fight for that, and that means we have to go beyond our current institutional power and actually build power through reconstructing civil society. (Official, Unions New South Wales)

A large general union, United Voice (considered a fairly 'successful' organising union) explained how it had talked for many years about the need to work with community groups but never actually did anything because it did not have wherewithal to go about it. For it, motivation was about assisting with change in organisational practice, and an ideological commitment to the aims and objectives of deep coalition-building. In the Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU), a leading figure explained that it had spent a lot of time and money trying to counter government and industry attacks on the union and felt that aligning themselves with the Sydney Alliance was about conferring legitimacy: 'we get the message out there amongst the general people, and in the process, we've formed ourselves as part of a very powerful lobby'.

A different push factor was expressed by a National Union of Workers senior staff member who explained how he felt the union could benefit from the type of leadership development carried out by the Alliance and that this would be useful in getting union reps to understand more about community organising:

I saw it particularly as an opportunity for our delegates to learn leadership skills and for us to extend that community involvement. (Official, National Union of Workers)

For this union, the SA was seen as a ‘very good concept’, one where the issues that affect Sydney—issues of transportation and resources and the infrastructure, community harmonisation and inclusion—were also the ones that affect its members. It was claimed as another way for the union to try to encourage its members to become politically active.

The third IAF case study—that of the **Sound Alliance** in Seattle—differs from both London Citizens and the Sydney Alliance in relation to the dominance of trade unions in the coalition. While London has very little trade union engagement and Sydney is striving for a balance between labour/NGOs/faith organisations, Seattle derived two-thirds of its membership from unions and the remaining from faith organisations. It began organising member organisations in 2005 and founded in 2008 and, by 2012, included 20 union branches among its membership out of the 31 member organisations and has undertaken some successful organising to get US federal funding to get union members made redundant back to work by creating green jobs. Along with their sister organisation, the Spokane Alliance, the Sound Alliance established SustainableWorks, a stand-alone not-for-profit organisation, to create union jobs by retrofitting non-profit buildings. SustainableWorks’ mission, we are told is ‘to create living wage jobs and the pathways to them, provide social and economic benefits for families, and improve the environment by upgrading the existing building stock’ (website).

As a result of lobbying and campaigning by the Sound Alliance, the state government, signed green jobs legislation in 2009 that designated \$14.5 million for a community-based energy efficiency retrofit project to create union job opportunities for lower income and disadvantaged communities in Washington State. And, since that time to February 2013, Sound Alliance claims to have completed \$7 million in home retrofits business, performed 2,000 audits and 740 whole-house retrofits and employed 230 people full-time equivalents (directly and through sub-contractors).

Given that levels of unemployment in the buildings trades in Seattle are as high as 30 per cent, the motivation to get involved in the Sound Alliance for union locals seems obvious.

There are clearly instrumental and tangible benefits for union members in this form of community organising, but there were other motivations as well. Unions in the USA have a negative image, promoted by the media and anti-union companies, and find it difficult to counter these messages and get a different perspective out to the public. One union member from the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, active in the Sound Alliance through her union local, said they decided to get involved because:

We have somewhat of a public image to improve. There is a whole lot of negativity around unions in many parts of the country, and how do you improve that? Well you pull together in the community with common interests. (Official, IBEW local)

Another union found themselves in a fight with a local hospital undergoing building work. The locally-elected board of commissioners refused to speak to them about using unionised labour. The union was frustrated and for it, this was a major factor in getting involved in the Sound Alliance:

And the other thing was to try and get our fingers into the community a bit more, to address problems like I expressed to you, we had with the hospital. Here is a taxpayer-financed hospital that was run by a private corporation internally, but answerable to a board of commissioners who were elected. And they treated us like, we weren't part of the community and we are and we want to get our fingers out and let people know. (Official, Washington State Association of UA Plumbers and Pipefitters)

But one of the strongest motivating factors for unions to become part of Sound Alliance was the opportunity it provided for them to think about the internal development of their leaders and also to create internal organising change within the union. A Sound Alliance staff member explained:

Most of the unions that have engaged have engaged because they're interested in the cultivation of their rank and file members and they've developed them as leaders. They haven't come in with a specific kind of issue campaign that they're interested in [they] just recognise that they need more power, they need more relationships and externally probably also need to be better at engaging their own members, and...they see the Alliance as a way of accomplishing both of those things.

While there are some clear instrumental reasons expressed by unions in Seattle for their involvement (not least the green jobs), the Sound Alliance's commitment to offer bespoke leadership training for unions, including how to conduct listening campaigns among members and a focus on relational (one-to-one) organising was motivated by its *raison d'être*, to help build strong functioning civil society organisations. Its aim was to assist in a cultural change in some of the unions, so that they were more outward looking and able to develop the skills needed to organise in a different way as part of the wider community, and also in a reciprocal way with other member organisations in the Alliance. In this respect there was a commitment to both common cause and deep coalition-building among some of the union partners.

5. Understanding similarities and differences: a comparative perspective

The last section provided some background on union involvement in the three community coalitions and reveals some distinct differences to the way that unions engage with and participate as members in the three IAF organisations. While these variations can, in part, be accounted for by the different industrial relations context in each country (e.g. decline in union densities – 12% USA, 26% UK, 18% AUS; unions' politics funnelled through Labour parties in UK and AUS; greater involvement in community-level organising in the USA; greater resource allocation to collective bargaining and servicing due to increased employment law in UK and AUS), this is not the main explanation. Other factors such as union culture/ideology, commitment to organisational change, training, and leadership, appear to have a greater effect on involvement and the subsequent benefits (or otherwise) from working as members of these community organisations, and these factors will be considered in turn. So to return to the research question, why was it that unions in London took a more *ad hoc* instrumentalist approach while the unions in Sydney and Seattle tended toward more deep coalition-building?

Union culture and ideology

Taking London first, evidence from data collected suggests that most of the unions that have been involved with London Citizens have (overall) found the relationship to be a difficult one—or they have not managed to form a working relationship and this, it is argued, has been due to a cultural and ideological mismatch. For example, Unison has been the union most engaged, but this has largely been via national office at a policy/funding/research level, where the campaign around the living wage fits with

Unison's vision for low-paid workers. There are a small number of Unison branches in membership, but their involvement has been minimal—often amounting to a few members attending annual assemblies (apart from the hospital campaigns mentioned in the early days). The *modus operandi* of London Citizens is quite alien to UK trade union culture and tradition: as a Unison member of LC said, 'I think our union culture has become extremely restrained'. Many times at LC events it was observed that trade union members were deeply uncomfortable with LC assemblies and organisational behaviour: they did not like the constant applause and cheering, finding events 'too staged-managed' and too respectful to those employers and politicians who were often considered 'the enemy' by unions. The whole strategy of inviting powerful people as guests (before holding them to account) in a large assembly format was also considered strange; unions were far more used to being 'on the other side of the table', rather than engaging with them in this 'friendly' way. So too, the idea of 'democracy by doing', as opposed to democracy via voting was also quite alien. As unions were unable to get their members to engage in participative democracy in the way that faith groups and schools were able (because union members did not attend meetings), this led to union voice being marginalised. However, these last two points are, for the London unions interviewed, as much ideological dissidence as cultural resistance (Author A, 2009).

Despite the comments noted earlier about motivation for involvement in London Citizens (access to marginalised workers, conferred legitimacy and positive associations), the leadership of unions primarily tended to think about community organising in terms of whether or not it leads to an increase in membership. Of course, this is not an irrelevant consideration for unions with declining membership and limited resources, but maybe one that fails to understand that community organising can offer a way of rethinking change to organising practice—which may, in time, steer greater organisational leadership and membership growth. If a union approaches coalition-building only with a consideration of 'what's in it for us at this particular moment'—as was the case of unions in the London Living Wage campaign—this is likely to restrict investment in building the infrastructure and relationships necessary to be a full partner in a broad-based coalition such as London Citizens—then there is no 'common concern' or move towards deep coalition-building. Thus, what we see missing from Tattersall's necessary elements for successful coalition-building from unions in London is the development of strong organisational relationships

and agreement over shared goals in building the coalition. And we see some important differences between the case studies in this regard: unlike in London, the unions in Sydney and Seattle, have, taken as a whole, invested considerably in their respective IAF organisations—of course, both in terms of considerable finance, but perhaps more importantly, through the involvement of leading staff and members, where they have seen it as a means of shifting organisational culture and organising practice. As a senior officer from the Seattle teaching union explained, their involvement with the Sound Alliance was motivated by the possibility of kick-starting organisational change within the union:

So part of it [reason for joining] is internal organising in terms of us being more relevant. The Association would be more relevant to people's lives. But the other part of it is some kind of infrastructure and culture shift that allows us to stick with it. And, the role of training has been a key factor in assisting with the progression of a ideological shift towards deep-coalition-building.

Instilling organisational change through training and education

It is this issue of training that has been a key factor in assisting with the progression of a ideological shift towards community organising. For example, in London, fewer than 20 trade unionists (and no high-profile leaders) have undertaken IAF community organising training. Compare this to Sydney, where 400 have undertaken this training (in fact, most of the general secretaries have taken this training, along with many—or in one case—all of their staff) and Seattle (where most senior trade union leaders have been through the training and where bespoke training has been undertaken with individual unions). The significance of this is that the training inculcates a sense of what the coalition is about and why it uses the methods it does, and it teaches the necessity of continually building strong organisational relationships to reinforce the coalition's common concerns. There is a strong focus in IAF training on identifying and using power collectively, but the key element is the relational organising where individuals are taught the purpose of, and how to do, one-to-one meetings. This is central to the IAF's organising approach, not only of cementing the coalition's shared goals, but also by building strong relationships between the different member organisations and teaching people to engage with people they might never normally talk to and by creating ideological 'buy-in' from those in unions with the power to get their unions on board. As one of the IAF directors explained:

So it requires the leadership of those unions to be comfortable with that and I think that has come out of some careful relationship building, often the leaders going through the training themselves so

they see how it can work and they don't feel threatened by that. I think those things have been done really well here [Sydney]. Almost all of the top union leaders have gone through the six-day training.

The training is also the way of identifying potential leaders who can carry their communities with them in actively challenging power. Those who have been through the training, therefore, get a deep understanding about the ideology and culture of the coalition and what is it about, something that was apparent from the interviews: all interviewees were asked to describe the IAF groups in three words or phrases and in London, the answers were unsure or vague, while those in Sydney and Seattle were not just clear, but had been instilled from their training and experience of involvement in the coalitions—showing a much greater understanding of IAF philosophy and purpose.

Leadership and its impact on levels of commitment to deep coalition-building

It was found across all of the interviews that support from union leaders made a significant difference to the way trade unions involved their staff and members in the community-coalitions, as without an ideological buy-in to the practice and structure of deep coalition-building from the top, unions were less likely to invest in much commitment to collaborative working. But also of significance was the approach of leadership of the IAF groups towards unions. The directors and staff of the IAF chapters play a strong role in defining the culture and organisation of the coalitions. While it is the membership that decides, through in-depth listening campaigns, the specifics of what they will organise around (issues)—and this will be very different in different geographical areas—the director and the staff will largely determine the practice, structure and methodology adopted by the coalition.

As noted earlier, the Sydney Alliance had taken great pains to get the balance of the coalition just right so that none of the sectors (union, faith, NGO) felt another was dominating. And, within the union sector, similar care was taken to balance unions with differing political leanings such that the union movement (and the other sectors) did not get the impression that this was an enterprise of the 'Left' or the 'Right', or the conservatives or progressives. The union movement of New South Wales could see this as an alliance that different types of unions were able to buy into. The avoidance of

sectarianism or a party political agenda was of great importance to ensure that all member organisations were able to judge whether or not issues around which to organise were for the ‘common good’, rather than had the potential to be divisive. This approach was carefully managed by the SA’s Director, who had prior experience of working for Unions New South Wales, and who also had detailed personal knowledge of the leaders and politics of each of the unions approached to join the coalition. It was because she was seen as a ‘union person’ by the unions and had experience as a community organiser before working in the union movement that gave the union confidence to get involved right at the start:

I think what is significant about Sydney Alliance is that the impetus came from the trade union movement to set it up. What [the Director] did was she focussed first and foremost on getting the funding from the peak council, Unions New South Wales, so that we had seed funding for 12 months...and unions at that stage really got it. (Trade union leader involved in SA)

Similarly in Seattle, the Director of the Sound Alliance had been a lifelong union member and worked for 13 years organising with farmers who were facing foreclosure, before forming, first the Spokane Alliance, and then the Sound Alliance. It was these experiences that assisted in building credibility with union leaders. Moreover, as noted earlier, the way in which the Sound Alliance recognised it needed to adapt its language and training so as not to alienate union members who tend to have a different organisational culture and way of behaving to that of faith or NGO organisations. Because of his past experience, the Director was able to adapt to this audience and design training to fit the specific cultural needs of particular unions:

All of our best experiences with the unions are in places where the primary leaders have gone through, ideally the week-long training. And they’ve taken time to really see, and think about how they can—to think about how it’s different and how they can use it to best benefit their organisation. And then they come back and they’re very strategic about how to use our organising methods. (Director of Sound Alliance)

Even so, this did not always work and some unions were not interested or did not take part in the training and only stayed in membership for a short while:

They don't quite get it because they haven't really been involved...they came in with this perception...and they're willing to give it a try, but they default to previous experience. And for almost all of the unions, ours is a way of organising they've never been involved in. They've been involved in coalitions around a particular issue, or for a coalition where they can, among themselves, just decide on an issue, at a real top leadership level...(Director of Sound Alliance)

So those unions that approached community organising without an ideology of 'shared goals' or which were purely 'instrumental' actors (particularly evidenced in London, although this also occurred in some unions in both Sydney and Seattle), never formed the organisational relationships to engage in deep coalition-building.

Conclusion

What this paper has attempted to do is to provide an understanding of the motivation of unions in involving themselves in community organising and becoming part of community coalitions and how this can be characterised. What was evident from interviews was that union decline and a realisation that declining power at the point of production and the changing structure and fragmentation of the labour market is forcing unions to think about finding different ways of providing positive messages about their worth and reaching out to new constituencies of members, and that this is encouraging the push toward community unionism.

The international comparative research has provided the opportunity to unpack the reasons for different levels of union engagement (e.g. ad hoc instrumentalism or deep coalition-building) and to consider the factors fostering or inhibiting new forms of non-workplace based organising. It is evident that, for unions, deep coalition-building requires a rethinking or adaptation of organisational culture, especially where there is little lived experience of community organising in recent times. Unions in Sydney and Seattle appeared less troubled than unions in London by the different cultures and ideologies of the other organisations in the coalitions—particularly that of the faith communities—so there was not the same degree of mismatch that Fine (2007) has described in her findings where, she argues, they fall back on traditional ways of carrying out their organisational practice.

Union leaders in Australia on the whole, did not view working with faith groups as a negative, explaining that some Australian unions have, historically, had a connection with faith groups, particularly the Catholic Church. Similarly, faith institutions play a strong role in the civic life of the US, so they also were less troubled by a cultural ‘mismatch’, whereas the UK union movement has a strong secular tradition—even if this was not the case in its formation and this was problematic in building meaningful relationships with other coalition partners (Author A, 2013).

Unions in Sydney and Seattle appeared more inclined to see their involvement with community groups as contributing to cultural change *within* their organisations (particularly changing organising practice) which required a strong commitment to play a contributory role in deep coalition-building, whereas in London, engagement was seen as more an ad hoc instrumental means to membership growth where the only reason for engagement was around the Living Wage. In a sense, this is at the heart of the problem of difficult working relationships with community groups and unions and perhaps applies to unions more broadly, beyond these specific examples. For example, the IAF places its greatest emphasis on building and sustaining its organisations (its *raison d’être*), and it does this through its culture of relational organising. For it, campaigning issues are secondary. The primary aim is to ‘teach the art of politics’ to its members and develop leaders to act in their (and their community’s) interest. Alinsky’s golden rule of never doing for others what they can do for themselves contrasts with the predominant union model of ‘servicing’ its membership and dealing with issues relating to collective bargaining (Tapia 2012).

Despite the turn to organising over the last 20 years or so, union operation and practice is still largely based on a professional servicing role meaning there is not the same relational culture between members and little leadership development beyond that of key union officials (lay or otherwise). This tends to inhibit the ability of unions to get members to play a role in community coalitions as many union members view their membership as transactional, not ideological—they are paying for a service, not contributing to organisational development or campaign activity. It is therefore understandable that some unions find it difficult to persuade members to get involved in community activity if they are not involved in the activity of the union itself. It was for this reason that unions in

Seattle and Sydney decided to get involved in these IAF community coalitions to attempt a cultural shift of member engagement within their own organisations using the tools and techniques of community organising—there was a ideological commitment to change the culture of the union to one that would have an impact on organisational practice that involved wider spaces of engagement beyond the workplace.

While the usual caveats of generalisability apply to case study research of this kind, union involvement in these community coalitions has shown that even where union engagement is shallow and instrumental (as in London), there may be problems in developing lasting relationships, but there are still tangible benefits (e.g. the implementation of the living wage). However, with a deep involvement and commitment to long-term engagement with coalitions (positive sum coalitions) there exists the potential to create cultural change (as envisaged by some Sydney and Seattle unions) so that unions are able to transform their organising practice to be more responsive to members' concerns and to develop greater leadership capacity. But, for unions to reap the benefits of shifting their organising activity beyond the workplace and into the community, they will need to step outside their mode of operation and to rethink the way in which industrial relations might be practiced in today's changed labour markets. This might require significant change in ideology and culture affecting internal and external organisational practice as well as broadening the terrain in which all employment relations actors operate. What is evident from this research is that organisational spaces beyond the workplace require unions to rethink their traditional approaches to organising new members and current member involvement and to embrace the different understandings and practices of other parties outside the employment relationship.

In recent years there has been some research into the role of 'other actors' in industrial relations (such as the community coalitions discussed in this paper), but as yet there has been little consideration about what this means for how industrial relations scholars and union practitioners think about the future of union organising and renewal. With the increased global activism around corporate social responsibility, tax avoidance and fair deals for workers and their conditions of employment (e.g. Occupy, UK Uncut, garment workers in Bangladesh, Winconsin, etc), how can we understand the involvement of these different groups in the context of our field of study and what change does it require for

unions to embrace working with these new actors? The findings from this research suggest that the way unions approach coalition-building, and particularly their motivation of what they want their involvement to achieve is crucial. The common cause coalition in Frege et al's (2004) typology, where each coalition partner enters to advance similar interests and Tattersall's (2010) analytical framework of factors necessary for successful coalition practice offer food for thought for unions taking steps towards a community organising strategy. It has, where these elements have been embraced, the potential to have significant impact on changing organising practice (as it has started to do in unions like the building trades unions in Seattle and some of the unions like Union Voice in Sydney). However, where unions are non-supportive of their coalition partners and have only instrumental reasons for involvement, then unions, like those in London will find little lasting benefit.

What this research shows, and how it brings together the work of Frege et al and Tattersall, is that change to organisational practice is not particularly successful without a change in ideas and organisational culture and leadership support at the same time. Too often we have seen unions 'commit' to particular models of organising practice to aid union renewal without the necessary ideological commitment to organisational change. While it is not suggested that coalition-building is the only model by which unions might organise their way out of decline, this research provides an insight into the processes, practices and cultural and ideological changes that may be necessary if unions want to find ways of working with new actors in the wider community of which workers and the employment relationship are part.

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Table 1: Number of interviewees

	London Citizens	Sydney Alliance	Sound Alliance	TOTAL
Total number of interviewees (interviews)	27 (32)	36 (47)	26 (29)	89 (108)
– contacted via faith org	0	5	4	9
– contacted via union	16	22	14	52
– contacted via community organisations	11	9	8	28

Table 2: Key differences in union orientation to coalition-building

Key differences in union* orientation to coalition-building	London Citizens	Sydney Alliance	Sound Alliance
Leadership of IAF group had union background/understanding of union culture	No	Yes	Yes
Unions involved in early formation of IAF group	No	Yes	Yes
Significant union involvement in coalition	No	Yes	Yes
Union leadership supportive of coalition	No	Yes	Yes
Involvement utilised to instigate organisational change in union	No	Yes	Yes
Frege et al – Motivation 1: access to financial resources	No	No	No
– Motivation 2: access to new groups of workers	Yes	No	No
– Motivation 3: access to expertise and technical advice	No	Yes	Yes
– Motivation 4: conferred legitimacy	No	Yes	Yes
– Motivation 5: increased mobilisation for public support	Yes	Yes	Yes
Tattersall's practice and structure: strong organisational relationships	Weak	Strong	Medium
Tattersall's practice and structure: presence of shared goals	Weak	Strong	Medium
Union density in 2013 in each country	26%	18%	12%
Culture/tradition of labour/community organising	Weak in UK	ACTU Recent Your Rights @ Work campaign	Tradition of campaigns with community partners in USA
Characterisation of approach to coalition-building	Ad hoc instrumentalism	Some deep coalition building	Some deep coalition building

* Note: while it is the case the individual unions demonstrated different orientations to coalition-building this table attempts to provide a characterisation of overall union involvement in each of the three IAF organisations

ⁱ Union leadership in this paper refers to those officials in a leadership capacity – not necessary the most senior leader in a union like a general secretary.

ⁱⁱ Union ideology and culture are referred to here as a union's political and strategic orientation that guides the way the union operates both internally and externally; it is the union's traditional patterns of practice or accepted way of doing things. Union culture is bound up in the way meetings and strikes are conducted and the way in which organising practice is carried out. As such different union cultures can provide explanation of different practices across different unions. As Meardi, G. (2011) 'Understanding trade union culture'. *Industrielle Beziehungen*. 18 (4): 336-345.) notes traditional industrial relations approaches focusing on institutions 'have an explicit antipathy for culture,

seeing it as merely an expression, and never an explanation, of institutions. In such a theoretical landscape, the actual meaning behind industrial relations concepts (i.e. 'strikes', 'union member', 'works council') remains often unproblematised, in favour of comparisons of crude indicators 'at a distance'. Culture is then left aside, as a convenient 'emergency' variable, to account for the 'unexplained residua'.

- iii The research also included wider community/union organising in the UK with the TUC, TSSA, Unite and GMB and this is continuing.
- iv The approach used is via one-to-ones - 30-minute meetings between an organiser and individual for the purposes of establishing a public relationship and identifying if the potential exists for development of the individual as an activist or leader. These are conducted all the time within the organisation—most meetings having a relational element where individuals get to know what motivates others to be involved. This process is central and IAF organisers will undertake lots of these during the course of every week. Indeed, when establishing a group this process can last for 2-3 years before any issue based organising takes place.