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Community organising in the UK: a 'new' approach for trade unions?

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Community organising in the UK: a ‘new’ approach for trade unions?

Abstract

In recent years a number of UK unions have been considering how to (re)engage with communities in order to rebuild the links that were so important to the origins and development of trade unionism. As such, we have seen parts of the UK union movement investing time and resources into exploring whether community organising can engage new actors and new union members in fighting for workers rights and against social injustice more broadly. This paper explores the factors behind this ‘new’ turn to community-based organising and outlines the current state of developments in this area; it is based on over 10 years of research into community organising in the UK, working closely with the TUC, affiliate unions and community-based organisations. Findings suggest that the current economic climate and declining power at the point of production, as well as successes by new actors in the employment-relations arena, are driving this current interest and activity in community organising.

Key words:

New actors, trade unions, community unionism, union organising, Unite, Unison, GMB, TSSA, PCS, Trades Union Congress.

Introduction: a ‘turn’ to community organising

In December 2011, Unite – the UK’s largest private sector trade union – announced it was introducing a new membership scheme ‘to ensure those pushed to the margins of society can benefit from collective power’ (Unite press release 2011). Unite’s new ‘community membership’ category is aimed at students, people who are unemployed and others not in work – categories of people who normally do not have a relationship with unions. The union claimed that their community organising initiative would ‘organise the marginalised and revolutionise British trade unionism’. While this may be a little overstated, Unite’s community organising initiative is a significant development in the UK union movement’s ‘turn’ towards community organising.

While it is important not to exaggerate the extent to which UK unions are engaging in community organising, it is, however, noteworthy that the UK’s Trades Union Congress (TUC) and a number of affiliate unions are taking significant steps to broaden their base

and engage with communities outside their normal spheres of operation. In 2008, the TUC initiated a 'Active Unions, Active Communities' project whereby it funded a number of trades union councils that were undertaking organising work with communities and community organisations. The aim was to analyse and to assess the advantages of successful community engagement by unions with a view to publicising some examples of best practice. In 2010, the TUC produced a report on this initiative where it concluded:

The time is ripe for greater community engagement and partnership working between voluntary and community organisations and British trade unions. On the one hand, the Big Society agenda encourages third sector organisations to play more active roles in civil society. In particular, it allows unions to promote their unique position between the community and the labour market, which can be further harnessed to help revitalise local economies and improve social cohesion. On the other hand, developing community-based strategies in conjunction with other third sector groups will be crucial to the success of campaigns against imminent public sector cuts, determining whether unions can successfully win the hearts and minds of the broader public at national, regional and local levels. (Wright 2010: 8)

Clearly, the global economic crisis of 2008 and the subsequent cuts to jobs and workers' terms and conditions of employment, as well as the increase in unemployment have been an important factor in helping to focus union minds. While most unions have never recovered the ground they lost in terms of power and membership following the adoption of neoliberal economic policies and the recession in the 1980s, the crisis which began in 2008 and is predicted to continue for many years yet, is unprecedented in recent memory and is resulting in significant numbers of union jobs being lost as the cuts hit hardest in the highly unionised public sector. As such, we have seen unions such as Public and Commercial Services (PCS) union and Unison take steps to make alliances with community organisations to build up their membership and organisation. So too, the GMB union, who received £305k from the Union Modernisation Fund in 2008 for a community organising project, adopted an approach 'to work purely in the communities and not the workplace. This was a new strategy for a union, and built on the developing methodology and experience of community organising.' (GMB 2012: 3).

The rail union, the Transport Salaried Staff Association (TSSA), set up a community organising team in 2010, trying to forge a common purpose and find common interest among rail users who are concerned about fare increases and ticket office closures on the

railways. The TUC also recruited 4 community organisers in 2012 to work in three regions of the UK to raise the profile of union campaigns, and to build community coalitions. So, as we can see, and as we will look at later, there is a range of community organising activity that has begun to develop over the last few years. It is, as yet, only small scale and some are only pilot studies which may not progress to anything more. Nevertheless, this activity and the much wider debates taking place around community organising, for example by the government and its 'Big Society' and the Labour Party's 'Movement for Change' are creating a certain amount of 'noise' around this issue.

This paper is based on over 10 years of research into community organising in the UK working closely with the TUC, unions and community-based organisations. It draws on considerable interview and participant observation data collected over this period and looks at developments and innovations as unions struggle to adapt to 'new' or different ways of organising. In essence, the research asks are we witnessing a turn to community-based organising and, if so, in what form/s, and what does this mean for the unions involved? What role are 'new actor's playing in the employment relationship? Before taking a look at what is occurring in a number of unions, and attempting to answer these questions, this paper will review some of the debates on trade unions and community organising and provide some historical and theoretical context through which the data might be analysed, as well as setting out the methodological approach that was adopted in the data collection.

Unions and community: origins and developments

As has been noted by a number of writers, trade unions organising in the community is not new (Clawson 2003; Holgate 2009; Wills 1996; Wills 2002). The history of trade union formation in the UK is inextricably linked to the places and spaces in which people lived and worked. In the early days of the formation of journeymen's associations in the late eighteenth century, and even, in some places, well into the twentieth century, most workers lived in the vicinity of their work. This meant that communities and workers were closely bound together in their localities in a way that is much less the case today. As trade union historian Malcolm Chase (2000: 4) notes, trade unions, until the nineteenth-century, occupied a more central place in the associational life of their members, where they would engage in self-help initiatives outside of the workplace and in the local communities in which they were situated. He explains:

Unions were far from simply being an expression of new solidarities engendered by industrialisation. Rather, they reflected and perhaps intensified, behaviours that were common place in the communities beyond them...The communities in which they [trade unionists] lived and worked had their own networks, structures and therefore capacities to organise...Trade union consciousness and community consciousness were virtually coterminous in the handicraft trades and there is no reason to suppose that this was not the case across a wide range of industries' (Chase 2000: 47).

However, these strong links between trade union consciousness and community consciousness have been severely weakened and, in most places no longer exist. As unions developed power and became incorporated into industrial relations machinery and the institutions of capitalism through the process of tripartism, the links between unions and community became less conscious. Even more so, when the Thatcher governments succeeded in undermining trade union power and trade union membership was halved. During this period unions became more inward looking and more focused on servicing their surviving membership, and unions became less visible in the wider community (Kelly and Heery 1994).

Union decline and power has sparked considerable debate over the future of trade unions, and particularly, unions' ability to transform themselves into organisations able to respond to the current social, political and economic climate of the time (Fairbrother and Yates 2003; Flanders 1972; Hyman 2002; Kelly 1999; Metcalf 2001; Simms and Charlwood 2010; Simms et al. 2012; Taylor 1994; Waddington 1995). For the last couple of decades a lot of academic attention has been focused on the behaviour of national trade union federations in the USA, Australia and the UK as they have attempted to instil an organising strategy based upon a particular model of union organising (Crosby 2005; Hurd 2004; Simms et al. 2012). This approach has largely been based on unions providing support (from Organising Institutes and Academies) to empower local activists to organise their own workplace: 'Its purpose is to foster self-reliance and collective identity, organizing around issues in the workplace, which can then lead to increased recruitment and sustained organizing' (Simms et al. 2012: 7). While there has been some 'success' in terms of bringing in new members and the organisation of specific workplaces (Heery and Simms 2011; Simms and Holgate 2010), as well as an acceptance that unions need to help themselves by organising their way out of decline, unions and commentators also recognise that progress

has not been as strong as was hoped (Simms et al. 2012). Early on, in debates around the establishment of the organising institutes and academies, there were voices calling for a return to a social movement approach to trade unionism based on member involvement and activism (Clawson 2003; Greer 2008; Johnston 1995; Parker 2008; Turner and Hurd 2001; Umney 2010). It was argued that what was needed was the adoption of a framework of 'strategic choice' whereby unions embraced a more 'social movement-type unionism to build the broad power necessary for institutional reform and even transformation, to revitalise the labor movement, and to combat economic and social inequality' (Turner and Hurd 2001: 21).

Now, two decades later, after the shift to organising, there is a sense that another 'turn' maybe on the way: while community organising, or more specifically in this context, community unionism, has a longer legacy and tradition in the USA, there has been growing interest in the subject in the UK. The argument made in this paper is that unions are in the process of starting to rethink their purpose. While the focus is still largely on servicing and industrial concerns (class issues), there is a sense that a broader social and political message/agenda (one that goes beyond worker self-interest) is needed to re-assert the importance of unions in the current age and, part of this, involves building external solidarity with the wider communities beyond the workplace. This approach is largely motivated by three things: the success of the broad-based community organisation, London Citizens and its high profile campaign for a living wage (Wills 2004; 2009a); local and national politicians noticing how this organisation is able to mobilise local people around community activity, and thirdly; unions and political parties waking up to the potential for growth within their own organisations.

By way of explanation: London Citizens is broad-based community organisation, made up largely of faith communities, schools, universities, a few union branches, and a small number of NGOs and began a campaign for a London Living Wage in east London in 2001 (Holgate and Wills 2007; Wills 2004). Since then, it has persuaded over 100 employers to provide the living wage to their staff. Leading organisations like KPMG and Barclays, the Olympic Delivery Authority and the Greater London Authority have become living wage employers and become influential advocates. Jane Wills, long time researcher into the living wage, has calculated that the campaign has won over £70 million, lifting over 10,000 families out of working poverty (Wills 2011). London Citizens has employed

campaign tactics, such as holding public figures to account at large assemblies, where CEOs and political figures, are asked to commit to support the organisation's demands in front of thousands of London Citizens' members. One such event was held on 3 May 2010, just three days before the UK General Election. At this event Citizens UK¹ managed to persuade each of the main party leaders to attend this assembly of 2500 people, drawn from their member institutions, something no other group other than national media would have been able to do. This was the largest public gathering in the general election campaign and each of the party leaders felt it would not be in their interest to stay away. While they were given a short opportunity to address the audience (and thus the media following the event) the main point for Citizens UK was to ascertain the leaders' commitment to the living wage (and other campaigns) and to get them to publically pledge to work with Citizens UK should they be elected to follow through on their promises. This is a traditional community organising tactic – holding politicians to account in front of their electorate. The public assembly was highly significant as it gained mass media coverage and raised the profile of Citizens UK and that of community organising, more generally.

This community coalition is thus credited with the instigation of a wider debate on and developments around, community organising in the UK. It has also spurred on the UK Labour Party, which had to contend with losing the last General Election and over half its membership² since 1997, to experiment with community organising (Labour Party 2012). Following his election as Labour leader, Ed Milliband, employed Arnie Graf, long-time USA community organiser and director of the Industrial Areas Foundation³, as a consultant. Graf has been brought in to help revitalise the Labour Party using a grass-roots community organising approach of building one-to-one relationships, empowering members, and engaging a more diverse set of members who want to play an active role in the party and their local communities. In addition, David Miliband, Member of Parliament and Foreign Secretary in the last Labour Government, set up the Movement for Change during his campaign for leadership of the Labour Party (which he lost to his brother Ed). Movement for Change (MfC) is engaging Labour Party members in London Citizens' style house meetings and one-to-one discussions with the aim of creating a 10,000 strong army

¹ Citizens UK is the parent body of London Citizens and other chapters such as Nottingham and Birmingham Citizens.

² In 1997 the Labour Party had around 400,000 members and this had dropped to just under 200,000 in 2008. (National Council for Voluntary Organisations, (2011). Participation, trends, facts and figures. London NCVO.)

³ The Industrial Areas Foundation was established in Chicago in 1940 and it is the parent body of Citizens UK.

of community organisers. MfC has a team of professional community organisers and claims to have trained around 1500 Labour Party members and claims its roots within co-operative groups, trade unions, community societies and local Labour parties, which make up the wider labour movement.

It is argued in this paper that these actions and events have made a significant contribution to the current and growing interest by trade unions in community organising in the UK, but what are the theoretical debates around community/union organising? How do they help us analyse what is taking place? And, what do they add to our understanding of the role of different actors in the employment relationship in today's economic climate and increasingly fragmenting labour markets?

Class, 'community', or both? Debates on community unionism

While there is little space to cover the theorisation of community unionism in great detail, it is nevertheless useful to highlight some of the key current issues and from where they originate. But before that, it may be useful to briefly pause to think about definitions of community and how the concept is being used in the context of this research. It is well-noted that community is a contested notion (Delanty 2003) and that it can be used to essentialise groups of people (and places), but taking a broad definition, community may be conceptualised as spaces (and places) in which people work and live, as well as social/spatial networks in which there is a shared interest or sense of common identity or community of interest. But in order to understand the distinction being made when talking about 'industrial or workplace unionism' and 'community unionism', it is useful to understand how these two might differ. For example, although people belong to many different communities, it is helpful here to think of *work-based communities* (the traditional arena in which managers, trade unions 'do industrial relations') and support or campaigning organisations that carry out their activity in local *place-based communities* outside the *workplace*. While both of these are made up of social networks of communities of interest (political or campaigning groups); or in the form of community organisations (e.g. trade unions, faith, cultural, political, social groups), they tend to operate in different places and spaces –although sometimes have the same foci. As such, 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. Of course the wider literature on this topic goes on to provide different conceptualisations of what activity actually constitutes 'community unionism' (Fine 2003; Martínez Lucio and Perrett 2009; Stewart et

al. 2009; Tattersall 2010) and those definitions and debates are of vital analytical importance when delving deep into comparing and contrasting different activities, but for the purpose of this paper a broader brush stroke is used to assess the turn UK unions are making to look to undertake organising activity outside the ‘traditional’ industrial arena.

Industrial relations academics have had much to say over the last 3 decades of union decline about the importance of (re)building strategic capacity Hyman (2007) and drawing on agency from outside their current membership and structures, but overall, the practice has been much less in evidence. There are of course examples, from across the world of unions attempting to think strategically in this area but in general unions have not significantly expanded their terrain of action much beyond the workplace. Lévesque and Murray (2002: 40) however, have drawn upon interesting critiques of empirical data from unions in Canada and Mexico to argue that ‘local unions are necessarily at the heart of union renewal strategies’. Their argument is that as globalisation has negatively altered the balance of power between unions and employers such that national unions/federations are less able to challenge/influence governments and employers at this scale, then unions need to consider whether local unions are more able to tap into sources of power by working in conjunction with community and other social groups – by drawing on external solidarity. This argument is based on the view that local managers and other actors have more flexibility or room for manoeuvre at ‘the local’ and can be subject to greater pressure from unions and ‘external solidarity’ campaigners at this scale as they are more ‘in your face’.

The source of today’s debates on community unionism can be traced back to the 1960s and in particular, C Wright Mills’ *Letter to the New Left*. In this paper, Mills criticises ‘the Left’ who cling to labour, or the working class’ as *the* agents of change: ‘Such a labour metaphysic, I think, is a legacy from Victorian Marxism that is now quite unrealistic...Of course we can’t “write off the working class.” But we must study all that, and freshly. Where labour exists as an agency, of course we must work with it, but we must not treat it as ‘The Necessary Lever’ (Wright Mills 1960). Others have claimed the US civil rights movement as contributing to the shift to community-based politics and praxis, whereby those marginalised sections of society had not been incorporated into the system in the way that the organised working-class had by operating inside the corporate system through business unionism.

Ashbolt (2008: 39) writing on the New Left and community unions, argues that some came to see the poor as *the* agent of change because they had not been successfully integrated into the system and thus felt greater grievances and marginalisation from society: ‘focusing on the poor meant, inevitably, shifting attention from the sphere of work to the community. In terms of political theory, this involved a shift from production to consumption. It also involved a shift in focus from work to everyday life’. Writers in these early days struggled to develop a theory of community unionism, finding it difficult to identify where in ‘the community’ the ‘organised’ resistance would emerge, particularly as this was likely to be without ‘working-class consciousness’ and a coherent political ideology around which to collectivise. For example, James O’Connor in his paper on ‘Towards a theory of community unions’ states: ‘the only really baffling problem with which community unions will have to contend is the problem of tactics; there is no political weapon easily available which can replace the industrial strike, although it may very well be that civil disobedience is the seed from which more effective and appropriate tactics will grow’ (O’Connor 1964: 147).

Since this time, the debates have, more recently, coalesced around a number of key points: *definition* – for example trying to conceptualise what is meant by community unionism (Lipsig-Mumme 2003; Stewart et al. 2009); the different *types* of union/community engagement and whether or not this is just another form of social movement unionism (Parker 2008); the different *factors* influencing union engagement in community organising – ad hoc instrumentalism, supportive coalition, mutual support, or deep coalition-building (Tattersall 2005); the *tensions and constraints* on unions working outside the industrial arena (Fine 2005; Holgate 2009), and the *role of ‘new actors’* in the employment relationship. The main points of agreement, though, are that the changing geographies of employment, the economic crisis and its devastating impact upon workers, and the inability of unions to motivate their members to act, are all leading to a realisation that unions need to broaden the scope of their activity. And, that, unions cannot do this alone.

There have been arguments, largely instigated by labour geographers (Herod 2001; McGrath Champ et al. 2010; Wills 1998), that industrial relations or trade union scholarship has not given sufficient consideration to changes in the geographies of employment and the wider spheres in which work takes place, leading to a neglect of spaces of social reproduction and consumption and how these shape, and are shaped by,

the sphere of production. In rethinking this approach, Ellem and Shields (1999: 546) explain:

To limit analysis to this sphere [workplace industrial relations] is to understate the social embeddedness of capital-labor relations. What should be acknowledged is that the sphere of production – the traditional focus of attention of both traditional and radical industrial relations scholarship extend directly into the spheres of labour reproduction and commodity consumption. The sphere of reproduction covers those social relations and processes whereby labor power is physically and culturally reproduced over time, including demography, family formation and structure, education, biological reproduction, health and welfare, education and training and labor migration.

In effect, they are arguing that it is the *interrelationship* of these different spheres that creates ‘community’. Together these *are* the social relations of work and a sole focus on workplace industrial relations limits the opportunities, not only to engage with other potentially influential ‘other actors’ in harnessing external solidarity, but also leaves to one side the issues of social reproduction and consumption that affect the lives of the working and non-working classes. If we were to take a look at the way in which living wage campaigns have been conducted (which is mainly outside the industrial relations arena), they have largely operated within a wider social spatial framework, which includes those spaces of reproduction, consumption *and* production to which we have just referred. They have used ‘other actors’ (community organisations, faith communities, religious leaders, local politicians, etc.) to great effect (Holgate and Wills 2007; Luce 2004; Wills 2009a). Often drawing on personal testimonies to present a moral case for a living wage, they have linked together the way in which parents are unable to provide adequate food, heating or shelter for their families on the meagre wages they receive at work. A focus on workplace industrial relations however, tends to limit the space for analysing the role that these other actors are now playing in community organising campaigns that also involve workplace or broader political/economic demands. Any analysis of community unionism requires that this omission be rectified. This paper attempts to think through what the involvement of these other actors means for unions as they turn towards a community organising approach. But first, the paper will set out the methodological approach that was adopted in the data collection.

Research methodology and practice: participation, observation and embeddedness

It is important to note at the start my own personal engagement with community organising. I do this because in adopting a critical social science research approach I am accepting that researchers are social actors, with ideological and political viewpoints, and having made their position clear, critical social researchers are being honest with their audience, who may judge if their research, methods, and conclusions have been invalidated by the researcher's identity. While much of the academic debate around critical social theory has originated and been advanced from a feminist perspective, others, concerned with diverse oppressions, have also argued for their right to position themselves, and their research, on the side of the oppressed (Fay 1993; Truman et al. 2000). Indeed, feminist standpoint theory explicitly justifies research from an interested position, which may, for example, in the case of research *for* women, have an emancipatory agenda (Harding 1987). Further, other writers have specifically argued against a 'disinterested pursuit of truth' when researching discrimination and movements for social justice (Humphries 1997; Papadakis 1993)(Humphries, 1997; Papadakis, 1993). As (Marable 1995: 116) has argued:

The evil in our world is politically and socially engineered, and its products are poverty, homelessness, illiteracy, political subservience, race and gender domination. The old problematic of the 1960s – whether we are part of the solution or part of the problem is simultaneously moral, academic, and political. We cannot be disinterested observers, hiding behind the false mantle of 'scholarly objectivity,' as the physical and spiritual beings of millions of people of color and the poor are collectively crushed.

This author asserts that there is an imperative for research to contribute to the eradication of the widespread inequality in society given that the modern world is increasingly divided into the 'haves' and the 'have nots'. This is not to suggest that the researcher is 'biased', instead, it is argued that due to imbalances of power in society, it is a justifiable aim of research to assist in countering imbalance and providing voice to those who are seldom heard. However, explicitly politically motivated research is a contested approach within the social sciences (Cealey-Harrison and Hood-Williams 1998; Hammersley 1995; Humphries 1997; Humphries 1998). For example, Hammersley (1995: viii) is critical of post-positivist social inquiries that have 'explicit and direct political commitments, notably "critical", feminist and "anti-racist" and post-modern approaches.' His concern is that growing pressure from governments and industry sponsors on social science researchers will inevitably impact upon the degree of objectivity of research:

I do deny the legitimacy of research that is immediately directed towards achieving some practical or political goal rather than the production of knowledge. I do this not least on ethical grounds: because such an approach involves trading illicitly on the generally held assumption that research strives to be objective. (Hammersley, 1997: 1.12)

Yet the production of knowledge and the achievement of practical or political goals cannot be conceived as being in opposition. A critical/radical social research agenda is also ambivalent to claims about 'objective' truth that is advanced within positivism and asserts instead that all knowledge is created by social processes and is dependent on the positionality of the researcher *and* the researched. Indeed, 'knowledge' is categorised using unconscious assumptions based on society's constructed norms, dominant ideologies and our own lived experiences, rather than merely accumulated as data reflecting an objective reality. Criticism of a critical social science approach is countered by opening up research to scrutiny by ensuring that the beliefs and behaviour of the researcher are part of the evidence presented for validating the claims of the research (Harding 1987) and as such it is important to state one's positionality when doing this type of research.

I am actively involved in a community organisation that received a small amount (£7,000) of seed-corn funding from the TUC in 2009 as part of its *Active Union, Active Communities* project. As the, then, secretary of Hackney TUC (a local body of the TUC), the aim was to develop greater links with trade unions and community organisations in this London borough. This initiative has been analysed in detail elsewhere (see Wright 2010), but will be discussed briefly in this paper. Further, I have assisted Unite the Union in discussions about the establishment of their community membership and the recruitment of their community membership regional co-ordinators, as well as helping to design their community membership educational material for local branches. I acted as a consultant to the GMB on their Union Modernisation Fund project 'Engaging communities and building social capital' and I have given presentations to at the TUC on community organising as well as at a training session with the community organisers who were employed in 2012. Each of these has provided opportunities to have informal discussions about community organising and to develop a close understanding of trade union praxis. My personal involvement has also give opportunity for self-reflection and to consider the application of theoretical understandings of trade union organising with its practical engagement at a grass roots level. The research therefore adopts an emancipatory research approach (Witkin 2000) where there is a commitment to social justice and equality and this

has shaped the design, methodology and techniques used. Echoing the view of Compton and Jones (1988) that organisations cannot be studied at a distance, I am, nevertheless, alert to the distinction that needs to be made between researching the world and at the same time shaping the world that is being researched.

Data for this paper have been collected over an extended period of time beginning in 2001. However, the most recent data has originated from a much larger study into community organising in three countries⁴. This recent project has involved 138 interviews with 114 people and extended periods of participant observation in community organising initiatives. For the purposes of this paper, however, I will only be drawing on one set of this data – the 36 interviews conducted in the UK with trade unionists since February 2011. While this is deliberate and necessary to understand the specific changes taking place in trade unions, I am however, conscious that, as such, community organisations are left out of this particular narrative and any weaknesses from the union initiatives are not critiqued from a community perspective. These missing voices, however, will be heard in future writings arising from this research and, are not central to the discussions taking place here. Participants in the research include senior staff at the TUC and affiliate unions that have responsibility for organising, as well as staff trade union organisers with responsibility for developing community organising. In addition, there were interviews with 5 lay representatives who have been involved in organising outside their workplaces. Data from interviews was recorded and transcribed and interviews included face-to-face interviews and a small number of electronic face-to-face video interviews via Skype.

Data (thoughts, observations and photographs) from participant observation (meetings, training session and organising activity) were recorded in a diary and entered into qualitative software (NVIVO) for analysis, along with interview transcripts. An iterative process was used for analysis and a close reading of transcripts and diaries was undertaken in an attempt to answer the research questions. Established strategies were used to analyse data: coding, memoing and integrative sessions. Thoughts and ideas were memoed as they evolved throughout the study – an open process that was later refined to focus on emerging core concepts. Integrative sessions were used to share ideas with research participants via follow up interviews to increase insight. Comparison (similarities and

⁴ ESRC-funded (RES-000-22-4144) 'Broad-based community alliances: a comparative study of London, Sydney and Seattle'. This research looks at trade union interest and involvement in community-based organising in three cities (London, Sydney and Seattle). The research began as a result of an interest in the way that trade unions were responding to decline in power and influence.

differences) between the organisations were explored to understand and identify meanings and interpretations expressed by individuals or groups within the unions as to their reasons for involvement in community organising initiatives. All interviews and participant observation were conducted within an ethical framework approved by the university.

Recent developments in community unionism in the UK

This section will take a look at some of the recent developments and innovations in terms of community organising as the union movement⁵ struggles to adapt to ‘new’ or different ways of organising. It begins with the TUC’s initiative ‘Active Unions, Active Communities’ designed to make the case for why community engagement should be a more comprehensive part of union strategies. The TUC funded a couple of union/community projects, of which Hackney TUC was one, where unions were developing community networks to organise non-unionised workers and generally promote the benefits of trade unionism in the wider community.

Hackney TUC helped to establish a broad-based community coalition, Hackney Unites, to carry out its community-based activities, recognising that given the relatively high unemployment rates in the borough and the fact that high proportion of Hackney residents worked outside of the area, it was difficult to use ‘traditional’ organising strategies. HTUC decided that it might be more productive to engage and organise workers (and non-workers) living and working in Hackney through the community groups with which they were involved. In its first year, an event was organised with a working title of ‘Community conference’. The idea was to bring disparate groups together to explore common concerns. A wide range of groups was invited to attend including local political, ethnic minority, religious and campaign groups – precisely the ‘other actors’ referred to earlier. Since then Hackney Unites has run a community conference of 400 people, a workers advice project, an unemployed workers project, a making learning work festival, etc. Through these events and campaigns, Hackney Unites has reached out and involved a much greater diversity of people in the local community than Hackney TUC was able to do on its own. Following an analysis of Hackney Unites, a report from the TUC concluded ‘Hackney Unites shows promising signs of how unions can foster links with local organisations around issues of mutual interest to raise their profile and promote union

⁵ Although each of these case studies have different scalar structures (from the local to national, to a federated structure), the main focus is on their activity a local level – even though decisions made be made at a different scalar dimension.

activity' (Wright 2010: 47). Despite Hackney Unites' success, and following a change in direction, Hackney TUC withdrew from the coalition, taking issue with the consensus approach to organising the coalition had adopted.

In February 2012, the TUC took their 'Active Union, Active Communities' project a step further when they employed 4 community organisers in 3 different regions of the UK. This was an ambitious project, funded by a small levy on unions affiliated to the TUC. The organisers were sent into regions and tasked with the aim of raising the profile of union campaign issues, linking these to local issues and to build community coalitions around issues of concern in their neighbourhoods. The major problem facing this project at the outset was that it only had initial funding for 12 months, with a review as to whether this should continue after 8 months. But, as most community organisers would tell you, establishing community coalitions takes time to build relationships of trust and, that jumping into activity before this is built, has been shown to create organisations that are unlikely to last beyond the issue at hand (Tattersall 2010). Further, the measures of 'success' to evaluate the project were a big 'ask' for the newly recruited organisers after 8 months. They were expected to be able to demonstrate 'results' in actions involving members of unions and the wider community; to generate shifts in union members and the general public's opinion; to generate publicity (for local campaigns) and; to put pressure on and or change the behaviour of the campaign targets. Despite these ambitious targets, the organisers were able to generate local campaigning activities (particularly around anti-cuts campaigns and youth unemployment), yet affiliated trade unions were not convinced that this was a wise use of resources and it was decided at the end of 2012 to disband the project.

Individual union community organising initiatives

While there is not the space to report, in detail, on each of the unions mentioned in the introduction, it is useful to highlight briefly the work that they have been doing and the reasons for their 'turn' to community organising, before analysing what this means. Unison is perhaps the forerunner; involved with London Citizens to successfully organise workers to campaign for a living wage at hospitals in east London in 2001, (Holgate and Wills 2007) a number of local Unison branches joined this broad-based coalition, actively campaigning together and achieving considerable wins for their members – a situation unlikely to be achieved by (either) acting alone. Nevertheless, union involvement in the coalition largely ceased after the wins and now only one Unison branch in east London remains in

membership. In the last year, however, Unison has begun to involve itself in a number of its regions with other Citizen UK groups. For example, Unison in Nottingham has provided funding (to employ a community organiser for two years) to help establish Nottingham Citizens (a sister organisation to London Citizens) and the union has been central to its establishment. Asked why they were involved, a senior Unison official said: 'I'm very conscious of Unison have a desire and a commitment that's included in our rulebook to work with the community, to be a part of the community. And it's something that I don't think that we've ever made real and seemed to me to be a potential opportunity to bring that to life really'. In talking about the practical benefits of working together in coalition she continued:

I think that there's quite a lot that we as a trade union could learn from the tools and techniques that are needed to build broad-based community organisations. We can use those in the workplace and there's just loads of lessons in there for us, I think. For me that's now moved up the agenda to what I want Unison to get out of it. (Senior Unison official)

To further this approach Unison has recruited a full-time 'community organising coordinator' at its national office to provide support for community organising initiatives in the regions.

As noted at the start of this paper, Unite, the largest private sector union in the UK, has made a significant commitment to community organising with the establishment of the community membership department (2 staff) and the employment of 7 community organisers in the regions. The remit of these staff is to 'identify, recruit, train and develop community activists who will advance Unite's community membership within their communities, and to assist community activists with their work in creating community groups and branches and their integration into the structure of Unite' (Job description for Unite regional community coordinators). Recruited in September 2012, it is too early to evaluate their success in achieving these objectives, but examples of the work being done show the extent to which these staff are establishing links with community organisers and working with the new Unite community members to become active in their communities. For example, by January 2013 the Unite community branch in Liverpool has around 400 paying members, which meets regularly. Its main area of work so far has been around cuts

to the National Health Service and what is referred to as the 'bedroom tax'.⁶ Public meetings on these issues have attracted large numbers of people, some of whom – particularly the black community of Liverpool – have generally not been part of these type of campaign groups, which have traditionally been led by left political parties. Similarly in Sheffield, the Unite community branch in that city has been particularly active and was fully functioning as a constituent branch in October 2012 as soon as it reached the required 50 members (over 200 members in the region – January 2012). It is now heavily involved in campaigning around nursery closures, but also traditional industrial relations campaigns such as supporting striking lorry drivers on picket lines at a Tesco retail depot where the workers were protesting against redundancies. As the community organiser explained;

'They [the community branch members] were instrumental in helping the picketing – the Unite Industrial Officer in charge of the dispute called me and she said that it was the community members who showed the lorry drivers how to picket properly – the young people were active in jumping out in front of lorries, and really wanted to get stuck in!' Not only did they do this but they took it upon themselves to go around workplaces as a Unite community branch delegation – going around to workplaces and union branches collecting money for the dispute' (Unite community co-ordinator).

This is a useful example to show how the relationship between the community membership and the industrial memberships in Unite are beginning to work together – to draw on that local external solidarity to pressurise an employer. Another example is in the north west where there are lots of potential Unite community members but they do not have enough money to pay the Unite community membership dues, despite this being as little as 50 pence per week. Here, an arrangement has been made with an industrial branch to sponsor a number of Unite community members by paying their union dues for them.

The Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS) tentatively dipped its toes into the realm of community organising in 2010 when they approach London Citizens about the potential of working together to organising workers in the government's Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). PCS put £12,000 into a Living wage campaign with LC whereby LC would provide some community organisers to work alongside PCS staff and activists to

⁶ From April 2013, social housing tenants deemed to be under-occupying their properties will be charged an under-occupation penalty, which will be deducted from their housing benefit entitlements. The new levy, dubbed the 'bedroom tax', is central to the government's welfare reform agenda, but has attracted criticism from housing associations and charities.

target this important government department. However the partnership was not particularly successful, as it appears that each side never fully understood their different ways of working and how to enmesh these together. As one PCS official reported at the end of the relationship:

We didn't feel like a partner in this campaign...We certainly don't feel that we were working together and we wanted to work together. I don't feel they [LC] had any understanding or made any effort to understand what we were doing and why we were doing it.

A similar view was expressed from at London Citizens perspective:

I found working with the union very difficult, very difficult. The union was inflexible and bureaucratic, requiring sign off from higher up the chain on a regular basis. (London Citizens organizer)

But there was a more fundamental problem in that neither the union nor PCS seemed to understand each other's perspective or had an agreed understanding of what they were each trying to do in this campaign. There were strategic disagreements about the best means of taking forward the campaign that were never jointly discussed, resulting in each partner becoming frustrated and irritated with the other. The union however, remains committed to finding a way to spread its organising work into local communities:

There's much more will in unions at the moment to be more outward looking, looking towards people who they regard as service users but are also citizens. And so there is an opportunity at the moment to expand in the way that organised labour operates. (PCS senior official)

The Transport Salaried Staff Association (a national rail union) is another union that has directed its campaigns at service users in order to demonstrate the intersection between workers' interests and that of service users. In 2011, the TSSA, took the decision to establish a community organising team (3 staff) to create community alliances to defend public transport and to challenge the cuts agenda. In their first year, there were two main issues around which the union has worked with communities, trying to forge a common purpose and find common interest. The rationale for this was explained:

If we can get passengers, people using those transport services, actually on the same side as rail workers, people working in the transport industry, we will actually have a far more powerful coalition to effect change. (TSSA staff community organiser 3)

To start with, the TSSA's approach to community organising was different from some of the other unions in that it was less focused on local place-based community engagement and more on transport users as a community in themselves – all faced with the same problem of overcrowding of trains and high fare increases. The union formed a coalition with a number of campaign groups (Climate Rush, Bring Back British Rail, Disability Back-Up, Campaign for Better Transport, etc.) and other rail unions like the RMT. The aim was to build a broad alliance (Together for Transport) involving as many people as possible, drawing on people's self-interest to get them to take some form of action. One way was to use social media (Facebook, Twitter and text messaging) to create some 'noise' around the issues and getting the message about the campaign into the public sphere. As the organiser explained:

So the idea being that millions of people are spending an hour of their morning sat on a train probably reading a newspaper, reading a book, actually that's ample time to be getting messages to those people about the campaign. And actually getting them active on board the campaign as well. And so we actually used a number of ways to do that, through Twitter. On the 3rd January we had a huge on-line campaign launched and on one day alone 3000 people actually got on Twitter and directly sent messages through to the Treasury and George Osborne. (TSSA staff community organiser 3)

A second prong to the campaign has been to use local TSSA activists at stations up and down the country handing out leaflets and postcards but also capturing data from passengers to use in the campaign. Within a few weeks of this activity they had 2500, names, email addresses and postcodes which would enable them to approach passengers about joining local campaigns/coalitions, as well as adding to the national social media profile the union was establishing.

The third element to their community organising approach was to think how to get rail users to support TSSA members who were in danger of losing their jobs over local ticket office closures. As one of the community organisers said 'we didn't think that people really were going to engage in some sort of abstract defence of ticket office staff' so instead the union worked at a grass roots level around threatened stations to draw in members of local community interest groups. In Hackney, a London borough with 9 stations affected by threatened closures they tapped into groups representing disabled residents in Hackney,

older people's forums and local Labour Party and Green Party to help them map the effects on local rail travellers.

Finally, the last of the unions to be discussed in this paper is the general union the GMB. This is a different approach again as their community organising work is more explorative and research-based than the others already discussed. In a sense it was more about developing a methodology around community organising – an attempt to understand the social capital of communities and decide what resources the union needed to do community organising work – rather than undertaking specific community-organising campaigns. Here the union secured money from the government's Union Modernisation Fund to undertake a project to 'build relationships of trust and reciprocity between GMB representatives and vulnerable communities to ensure the GMB can provide lasting support' (GMB 2012: 3). Firstly, the union surveyed their current staff officers to assess the extent to which there were barriers and challenges in reaching vulnerable workers and from this they developed a training pack to assist in dealing with some of the issues that arose from the survey (e.g. lack of language skills of GMB officers, understanding different cultures and religions, perceptions of trade unions from non UK workers). The second phase was to run training sessions with previously identified 'vulnerable' communities with which the union had little contact. These were largely migrant or minority ethnic communities – and the training sessions were looking at finding out what problems these communities face, how the union can engage them and identifying potential community organising leaders. As a result of this work the union feels that it now has a 'model of community interaction' that will be 'formalised and systemised through GMB's national policy frameworks'.

Discussion, analysis and conclusion

It is clear from the above pen portraits that there are very different approaches to the way unions are engaging with the idea of community organising – some of it project-based or ad hoc (Unison, GMB and PCS), and others (Unite and TSSA), where there has been a strategic decision taken by unions to invest considerable resource into community-based organising. Nevertheless, it would seem from observing unions over the last few years there has been a significant – although as yet not that well-developed – turn towards community unionism. But what do we learn from these community/union organising initiatives and the factors behind their development, success and failures?

Firstly, the global economic crisis beginning in 2008 appears to be a major push factor in moving unions in the direction of community organising: ‘General Secretary after General Secretary wouldn’t have stood up [at TUC Congress in 2010] and talked about community organising in other environments if we’d still had a reasonably benign economic environment’ (National officer, PCS). And, it is evident from most of the case studies, that where the campaigns have been allowed to spontaneously develop, that these have taken place in local communities around the impact of the cuts on local people and local infrastructure. This is particularly the case in Unite, where the union is opening up its membership to ‘non-traditional’ members – unemployed, youth and retired non-members with a clear objective of creating a ‘fundamental shift’ within the union to bring people together, in their own place-based communities to organise.

To date, four months after the start of the project, nine Unite community branches have been established in Liverpool, Wirral, Salford, Manchester, Leeds, Sheffield, London (Camden and Islington), Glasgow and Edinburgh – all (except London) in traditional working-class communities with a tradition of high union density among workers. Unite General Secretary, Len McClusky, made a direct appeal to *class* interest when he called for non-workers to become part of the union family: ‘It is time now for those on the margins to organise, to come together to challenge the decisions made by the elite in the interests of the few. This is the real Big Society – ordinary people organising for themselves – in action.’ This is a direct challenge to UK prime minister, David Cameron’s, conceptualisation of the Big Society, whereby his vision is of ‘civic conservatism’ involving ‘redistributing power and control from the central state and its agencies to individuals and local communities’ (Cameron, 2010), but is, in reality, an attempt at creating lower cost substitutes for state public services.

What appears to be at the heart of Unite’s view of community organising is an attempt to tie together a trade union consciousness and a community consciousness – going back to Malcolm Chase’s (2000) description of trade unionism of the nineteenth century when he talked about a convergence of trade unionism and popular politics – with people drawing on strong social networks in their communities. This is a union attempting to reshape its purpose by drawing upon the agency of those currently outside the employment relationship – the external solidarity referred to by Lévesque and Murray (2002). It is noteworthy that it is mainly in the trade union heartlands of the north of England and

Scotland where the first Unite community branches have been established. Here trade unions remain embedded in local communities to a greater extent than in many other regions of the UK – albeit much weakened from earlier times. The Unite community organising that has taken place in the cities mentioned above has drawn upon strong social networks that have been in place in these communities for decades (for example, ex-miners in Yorkshire, retired union members and ex-dockers in Liverpool and the Wirral), making it easier to establish relationships of trust much more easily than would be the case if starting from scratch as an outsider.

A second factor in driving the turn to community is also a recognition that, as manufacturing employment and Fordist mass-production declined, and welfare benefits have been cut or reduced, labour has been re-commodified so that workers are more tenuously attached to their jobs and their workplaces meaning a loss of occupational and class identities that previously bound (unionised) workers together. As such, declining worker bargaining power – at the point of production – has led unions to think about how to shift organisation from the workplace to the community, such that communities and their leaders have started to become important actors within the employment-relations arena. This is most clearly evident in the Citizens UK community organising approach, which has made an important intervention as a ‘new actor’ in its campaign for the living wage. The organising and tactics of this broad-based community organisations, has, however highlighted some of tensions in community/union relationships. Its campaign tactics are pragmatic rather than ideological and often involve a combination of protests, coercion through public pressure and partnership with employers and politicians. In many ways this is a similar approach adopted by trade unions – though a union is also a specifically constituted employment actor – and is thus subject to certain restrictions in law which do not apply to community organisations. Other factors distinguishing the two forms of organisation are that workers and union members are expected to remain in a relationship with employers following any campaign, but are also subject to sanctions and potential dismissal if employers take exception to their form of campaigning. Of course, it is possible to overcome these tensions if each organisation is both cognisant of them and has a willingness to work collaboratively. This did not appear to be the case in the PCS/London Citizens pilot project mentioned earlier. The aim, from the perspective of PCS, was to test how the two organisations might work together with a view to the union formally joining London Citizens as a dues paying member alongside all the other groups

who are part of the coalition. The intension from London Citizens, although never explicitly articulated, was to further the living wage campaign by being able to run a campaign in the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) – where government cabinet minister, Iain Duncan Smith, had responsibility – but who was also, according to Citizens UK, ‘the major ally of the living wage in Whitehall.’

Yet PCS organisers felt side-lined and excluded from the decision-making or had much input into tactics in this workplace where they were organised and had union recognition. One remarked; ‘I think that Citizens see this as something that they’ve always done and just got on and dealt with it rather than it being a joint venture’. The PCS national organiser also recounted a conversation with a senior LC organiser and expressed a similar viewpoint; ‘his [LC organiser] line is, unions don’t mobilise, unions don’t organize, so, if you want to get involved with us, that’s fine, if you don’t want to get involved with us, that’s also fine. But it’s sort of up to you really to deal with us on our way of organising’.

This was a common view from trade unionists interviewed for this research – that Citizens UK have a very specific model of community organizing – a tried and tested methodology that is applied to all Industrial Area Foundation affiliates throughout the world – but is one that does not always neatly apply to, nor is inclusive of, unions as differently constituted organisations to those of community groups or religious organisations that form the bulk of their membership. Also it fails to take on board the on-going employment relationship with employers, which is often adversarial. So in the case of the living-wage campaign at the DWP, it is easy to see why tensions might arise as the union was in constant conflict with this Minister (their employer) over attacks on pay and working conditions and job losses affecting PCS’s members, yet Citizens UK was trying to build a friendly relationship with Iain Duncan Smith as they viewed him as a powerful potential ally in promoting the living wage campaign nationally. Indeed, when Citizens UK finally forced the DWP to ensure its cleaning contractors agreed to the living wage in December 2012, the Director of Citizens UK issued a press release which said: ‘We wholeheartedly congratulate Iain Duncan Smith for taking a lead in Whitehall. He has shown his commitment to make work pay.’ While the living wage for these poorest of paid workers at the DWP was welcomed by PCS, the union was, at the same time, fighting this Minister over compulsory redundancies, so would find it difficult to ‘sell’ to their members a congratulations to Iain Duncan Smith for ‘his commitment to make work pay’. Clearly, these are issues and

tensions that could possibly be overcome with constructive dialogue between the organising partners, but as has already been noted, this requires the parties to adapt and alter their respective models of organising and to be sensitive to and respect the different pulls on each organisation.

These types of tensions were evident in a number of the other case studies as well. For example, the Hackney Unites community organisation did not sustain the involvement of the Hackney TUC, which felt more comfortable operating as a traditional trade union body with motions, minutes, committees and formal delegates voting for positions, rather than the looser, more ad-hoc, informal, consensus-based approach adopted by Hackney Unites who worked with a broad spectrum of community activists and politicians.

Different tensions, however, arose within the TUC itself. The local community organising project, whereby 4 organisers were recruited to build community-coalitions, was abandoned after just 8 months, without allowing the project to really get established. In one sense, it is difficult to establish exactly why the TUC decided to withdraw support as politics within the federation can be difficult to untangle, but it appears that fraught negotiations around affiliation fees resulted in the project being shelved in order to make cost savings. However, it may be that other factors, such as debates around where the political direction of the TUC should be currently focused, or whether this community organising initiative was concentrating its efforts in the right area, or even whether community organising should be a strategy at all, also played out in the decision to bring an end to the project.

In Unison, the situation is slightly different. The union has had over a decade-long relationship with Citizens UK, and it was involved at the start of the living-wage campaign in East London in 2001 and, at a national level, have been supportive throughout this time investing considerable financial resources at various times. At local level, however, there have been similar difficulties to those experienced by PCS, where Unison branches have felt they have not been listened to or included in campaign strategies and tactics and as a result have withdrawn from the coalition, such that only a handful of local branches now remain as part of the coalition. For Unison, though, the living wage has become an important part of its campaigning activity and it has seen the effectiveness of community-based grass-roots activity that has resulted in the wages of some of its lowest members

receiving considerable pay increases⁷. As of January 2013, there were 33 local authorities in England and Wales paying or committed to paying the living wage and 18 in Scotland – the very area in which the bulk of Unison’s membership is located. This long involvement with Citizens UK, and the success of the living wage campaign to deliver for its members, has meant that in Unison there is a willingness to also now involve themselves in Citizens UK chapters in regions outside London. Nottingham as already been mentioned but there are also initiatives developing in Cardiff and Glasgow. An added factor sparking Unison’s interest in developing a community-organising approach is its close involvement with the Labour Party and the previously mentioned commitment in this direction from the Labour Party leadership and Movement for Change, which is training community organisers throughout the UK.

So what is it that can be concluded from this research and the questions asked in this paper? Firstly, there is definitely evidence of a growing interest in UK unions in the ideas and practice of community-based organising. It is clear from the above case studies that there is, however, there is no single model or approach to what this looks like and it differs considerably from union to union. The TUC has attempted to provide some leadership and direction by suggesting a community-organising approach that tries to base itself ‘in the community’ but its resources are limited and thus it was difficult to demonstrate positive outcomes in the short time its project was in existence. This was further complicated by the fact that the TUC does not have an identifiable ‘brand’ around which to mobilise community activists or the public in general, so its community-organising work was largely unidentifiable with the federation. Instead, materials and literature and organisations formed were either generic anti-cuts or youth unemployment initiatives, but in the community these were not readily associated with the TUC, or indeed any specific union. From this respect it is perhaps understandable that there was a questioning as to whether these were resources well spent.

The second question posed in this paper was what does community organising mean for the unions involved. For a number of unions it has meant an investment of significant financial resource, but more importantly, it has meant questioning their traditional tactics and strategies and looking to develop different ways of working that are able to incorporate the type of ‘new actors’ that were talked about earlier. In accommodating non-traditional

⁷ In February 2013 the difference between the UK’s statutory minimum wage (£6.08) and the living wage (London: £8.55 and outside London £7.45) is £2.47 (London) and £1.37 (outside London).

partners, it has meant some ceding of control on their 'side' of the employment relationship. As we have seen from the discussion around tensions, there are a lot of issues for unions to consider when entering into community-coalitions, particularly in terms of their obligations to members, their democratic structures and decision-making. In a sense, it is this role of new actors and how unions deal with their role in the employment relationship that is at the heart of how union/community organising can and does work in practice.

We have seen an expansion of the literature on non-union forms of organisation around work-related issues, most notably around workers centres in the USA (which are not making greater alliances with unions) (Fine 2005; Gordon 2005) and the extensive interest in the community organising of the IAF (Holgate 2013; Holgate and Wills 2007; Jamoul and Wills 2008; Robinson and Hanna 1994; Tapia 2012; Wills 2008; 2009a; 2009b). Yet, there is, a need to understand the concept and role of new actors in community-unionism more widely. Rather than thinking of them as just additional players in shaping employment relations at the workplace level, or as Kessler and Bach (2011: 84) describe them 'functional equivalents to the traditional collective actors', or even as secondary actors to the principle actors in Dunlop's systems theory (Bellemare 2000), we perhaps need to think much more broadly about the role these new actors are playing and could play as they intervene in community-organising involving trade unions. But also to study what they may add towards developing the strategic thinking necessary to build that external solidarity that Lévesque and Murray talked about in their research. As Hyman (2007: 199) points out, unions need to respond to the external and internal challenges in this post-Fordist/neoliberal era that have had such a detrimental affect on collective representation but to do this, unions need the type of strategic thinking that he describes as being more likely 'when there is a leadership team from diverse backgrounds and with a range of organisational experiences, and is least likely when there is a homogeneous leadership group deeply embedded in bureaucratic routines'. What is very noticeable is that it is generally the case that community organisers tend to fit into the former category and trade union leadership into the latter, so there is perhaps a lesson for unions in how to expand and develop the diversity of their organisations if they are to reach into the wider constituencies of non-members.

As we have seen, the strategic choices made by these new actors operating ‘in the community’ and outside the industrial relations model – with its focus on the workplace – may be very different to those of unions, management or the state. Less constrained by rules, legal processes and employment contracts, these other actors are able to engage in less-conventional methods of activity to persuade the traditional actors to change their behaviour. This has been evident in the living-wage campaigns where moral arguments, public pressure, embarrassment and the notion of corporate social responsibility have been used to good effect to put forward social justice arguments. In many ways this could be seen as a move away from the ‘class’ arguments which have been central to left politics and much ‘traditional’ (and industrial focused) trade union consciousness. As C Wright Mill’s said, and as was quoted earlier, ‘where labour exists as an agency, of course we must work with it, but we must not treat it as ‘The Necessary Lever’. Here, in these forms of community organising, we are witnessing agency outside of the ‘traditional working class’ not only playing a new role in the employment relationship, but also providing an answer to James O’Connor’s ‘baffling problem’ of what tactics community unions can use to be effective in the employment arena.

Traditionally unions have tied themselves to traditional class politics with industrial action in the form of strikes as the ultimate threat to force employers into agreement. But the declining power of the union movement has removed this threat from many unions, weakening their ability to act to defend their members’ jobs and terms and conditions, such that a number are in the process rethinking or reshaping their overall purpose. The global economic crisis and the response to it from the many spontaneous social justice movements that have sprung up in the UK and across the world (e.g. the Occupy movement and UK Uncut) – most of which are community-based – are perhaps examples of ‘other actors’ that O’Connor talked about providing the seed of civil disobedience from which more effective and appropriate tactics could arise. It is perhaps time, that we, as industrial relations academics, take a much greater step outside the arena of workplace industrial relations to give more thought to the neglected spaces of social reproduction and consumption and the wider communities in which workers live their lives. To do so might give greater insight into how unions need to respond to declining power at the point of production and how ‘community’ might be harnessed as an important and powerful actor both in the employment relationship and in the broader social and political demands made by unions.

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