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To cite this article: Lucy Mayblin (2016) Troubling the exclusive privileges of citizenship: mobile solidarities, asylum seekers, and the right to work, Citizenship Studies, 20:2, 192-207, DOI: [10.1080/13621025.2015.1132570](https://doi.org/10.1080/13621025.2015.1132570)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13621025.2015.1132570>



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Published online: 01 Feb 2016.



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## Troubling the exclusive privileges of citizenship: mobile solidarities, asylum seekers, and the right to work

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### ABSTRACT

This article discusses asylum seekers and the right to work in the UK. Differential access to the labour market is one of the ways in which the state maintains a distinction between British citizens, who 'belong', and non-citizens who do not. While such a policy approach garners widespread support amongst the general public of citizens, it does not go uncontested. This article discusses a UK-based campaign, 'Let Them Work', which has sought to influence the government in extending the right to work to asylum seekers. In doing so, it demonstrates the ways in which the stratified regime of citizenship rights is contested politically, and explores how such contestation troubles the exclusive privileges of citizenship by enacting mobile solidarities from marginalised spaces.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 1 May 2015  
Accepted 7 September 2015

### KEYWORDS

Acts of citizenship; asylum seekers; citizenship; mobile solidarities; work

### Introduction

The right to work is a restricted privilege to which migrants are granted unequal access in relation to citizens. On a sliding scale of privilege some migrants are able to obtain visas to work in the UK relatively easily, while for others (notably asylum seekers and irregular migrants) working is prohibited. This differential access to the labour market is one of the ways in which the state maintains a distinction between British citizens, who 'belong', and non-citizens who do not. This situation might be understood as a stratified regime of rights (Morris 2012). While such a policy approach garners widespread support amongst the general public of citizens, it does not go uncontested. In this article, I discuss a UK-based campaign, 'Let Them Work' (LTW), which has sought to influence the British government in extending the right to work to asylum seekers. I do this in order to demonstrate the ways in which the stratified regime of citizenship rights is contested politically, and to explore how such contestation troubles the exclusive privileges of citizenship by enacting mobile solidarities from marginalised spaces.

The analysis focuses on two key issues: First, how citizenship was represented in the campaign and to what extent this moved beyond dominant scripts. Two main representations

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of citizenship are identified: citizenship as something which must be struggled for, which contrasts with the government's conception of earned citizenship; and citizenship as a liberal social project but one which involves all who are present, not just those granted citizenship rights by the state; second, the ways in which 'mobile solidarities' (Squire 2011) were invoked and by what means. The campaign invoked two different mobile solidarities: worker solidarity and human solidarity. Both involved the eliding of citizen/non-citizen distinctions in the creation of collective political subjects – workers and human beings – in order to mobilise around the right to work in a manner which sees migration as legitimate, and the multiple diversities which it brings about positively.

The paper draws on textual evidence from the LTW campaign, which ran 2008–2010. This includes speeches, leaflets, press releases, media reports, campaign briefings and archived web materials. Grey literature was gathered via correspondence with LTW activists and the timeline of events verified with these individuals. Texts were gathered and coded using Nvivo data analysis software. The article is structured as follows: the next section outlines the situation of asylum seekers in Britain, unable to work and forced into welfare dependency, and introduces some of the ways in which this policy approach has been resisted. The following section outlines more fully the uneasy relationship between citizenship rights and the category 'asylum seeker' within a stratified regime of rights. Here, I make the case for using the concepts 'acts of citizenship' (Isin and Turner 2007; Isin 2008) and 'mobile solidarities' (Squire 2011) in analysing examples of resistance to this stratified regime of rights, and particularly in the case of the LTW campaign. Following this, LTW is introduced more fully and the unfolding of the campaign described in order that the breadth, depth and transformative potential might be demonstrated. The remaining sections address the case study in an analysis of the representations of citizenship and the invocation of mobile solidarities, before finally bringing together the key themes in the conclusion.

This is a campaign which was ultimately unsuccessful, despite broad cross-party support and a mounting weight of evidence that denying asylum seekers the right to work was an ill-advised policy. The question of why it was unsuccessful is a topic for another paper, but it is worth stating here that the fact of its ultimate failure to change the law does not take away from the transformative power of the campaign in terms of potentially building solidarities between citizens and asylum seekers, and in facilitating a rethinking of citizenship amongst those involved beyond the parameters of the exclusionary state regime. Of interest here, then, is not the ultimate success or failure of the campaign, but the reframing of the parameters of citizenship and the blurring of artificially created boundaries between citizens and non-citizens within it.

### *Asylum and work in Britain*

As Morris (2002, 411) has pointed out 'access to employment readily illustrates a stratified system of inclusion and exclusion'. In Britain, the effective exclusion of asylum seekers from employment is used by the government as a policy tool to socially exclude and marginalise asylum seekers (Mayblin 2014a). Successive governments have argued that this deters potential asylum seekers from coming to the country, though there is no evidence to support this assertion. Until 2002, asylum seekers could apply for the right to work if they had been residing in the UK and awaiting a decision on their claim for six months or more. The 2002 Immigration and Asylum Act took away the right to work, but in 2005 the UK opted in

to a European Union Directive on asylum reception conditions (European Commission 2003) and as such the government was forced to re-extend the right to work. Unwilling to fully acquiesce to the aims and scope of the Directive, the UK government allowed asylum seekers to apply for the right to work only 12 months following their initial application for asylum, and only if the delay was not seen to be their fault. From 2010, if granted the right to work, asylum seekers were restricted to jobs on a government's shortage occupations list. This list is so selective that it in effect presents a total barrier to legal employment for the vast majority of asylum seekers (UKBA 2013; Mayblin 2014a).

The governments of most liberal nation states have sought, in recent decades, to exclude asylum seekers as far as possible territorially, socially and economically. Within the context of the stratified regime of rights they stand above only those designated 'illegal immigrants', who have almost no rights at all (Dembour and Kelly 2011). Asylum seeking is linked to welfare support and is therefore seen as an unfair economic burden (Sales 2002). Meanwhile, the response of politicians to suggestions that asylum seekers be allowed to work is that such a policy would act as a pull factor for economic migrants posing as asylum seekers (e.g. see HC 12.10.11. cc44-5WS). There is a large body of work which discredits this claim (e.g. Middleton 2005; Crawley 2010). Equally, if welfare support is too generous, 'bogus' applicants will be attracted, providing a justification for limiting assistance as much as possible (Sales 2002; Dwyer 2005). Within the context of debates around 'deserving' and 'undeserving' welfare recipients more broadly, 'asylum seekers have been cast as the "undeserving", while denied the means (employment) by which to join the "deserving"' (Sales 2002, 459). Anderson (2013) describes this tension in terms of a discourse of 'failed citizens' and 'non-citizens' (such as asylum seekers) who threaten what she terms the 'community of value' made up of 'good citizens'. Measures of control targeting 'failed citizens' and non-citizens seek to marginalise these perceived threats to the community of value from within and without.

This policy targeting both failed citizens and non-citizens for punitive measures of control is nevertheless challenged from within the community of value. In relation to the exclusion of asylum seekers from work, activists have focused their work in two key areas. First, legal channels have been used to challenge particular aspects of the law. These challenges have largely related to access to welfare support for particular groups of asylum seekers who are identified for exclusion (see Morris 2009, 2012 for a detailed discussion on legal challenges to government policy in this area). The second, and the focus of this article, was the launching of a large-scale national campaign in 2008 – 'Let Them Work' (LTW) – which sought to expand the right to work to include asylum seekers awaiting a decision on their claim. Before moving on to a discussion of LTW, the next section addresses the topic of asylum seekers and citizenship with reference to Isin's (2008) work on 'acts of citizenship' and Squire's (2011) on 'mobile solidarities'.

### *Asylum seekers and citizenship*

Asylum seekers inhabit an ambivalent space vis-a-vis citizenship. In a legal sense, they are of course external to citizenship, they are non-citizens. Indeed, if we take the view that citizenship is a territorially based set of rights and privileges to which a relatively sedentary and homogenous community has access, we are left with a clear delineation of 'insiders', who have the full suite of rights associated with citizenship, and 'outsiders' who do not. Asylum

seekers thus have formal access to none of the three spheres of rights (civil, political, social) described in Marshall's (1950) developmental account of citizenship. And yet, in reality the human rights conventions and other international agreements (such as free movement of workers within the EU) necessitate a response to international migration which is not wholly exclusionary. The result is a differentiated and hierarchical regime of partial membership in response to the presence of migrants (who have recourse to internationally recognised rights) in territories of settlement (Morris 2002; Sales 2002). What we have, then, is a system of stratified rights.

Asylum seekers, within this context, are neither fully included nor fully excluded from the community of citizens and the rights to which they have access. For example, by their very presence they make demands for privileges which are, partially or wholly, usually reserved for citizens: work and welfare. In the UK, where the vast majority of asylum seekers do not have the right to work, recourse to welfare is necessary for survival, and is granted in order that their human rights are not violated (Morris 2012). In this sense, asylum seekers as mobile subjects are the embodiment of an international web of rights and obligations. They carry 'these webs of rights and obligations with them and further [entangle] them with other webs of rights and obligations' (Isin 2008, 15). This situation makes asylum seekers never fully excludable, though of course many states seek to exclude them as far as is legally possible (Marfleet 2006; Squire 2009).

Yet, listing formal rights – as full, partial or absent – does not get at the full range of activities which make up the experience of citizenship. Nor does it account for the ways in which legal definitions of citizenship might be contested through political struggle for recognition, or through enacting solidarities which breach the insider/outsider divide. There is a growing body of work exploring the political mobilisations of irregular migrants and others of insecure status, as well as activists who campaign on their behalf (e.g. McNevin 2006; Nyers 2010; Darling 2014). This work exposes 'the contradictions and inclusionary/exclusionary dynamics of contemporary modalities of citizenship' (Tyler and Marciniak 2013, 144) at the same time as offering examples of how activists are disarticulating citizen/non-citizen borders in ways which open up spaces for collective resistance (e.g. Rigby and Schlembach 2013). This article contributes to this literature by focusing on asylum seekers, and on an under-researched topic in relation to asylum seekers: the right to work.

The campaign which I focus on was not led from the grass roots as many of those previously studied have, but by two large non-governmental organisations. Asylum seekers were involved, but it was not *their* movement. Nevertheless, what I want to focus on in this article is how we might understand this campaign as entailing 'acts of citizenship' which built solidarity across the citizen/non-citizen divide. Acts of citizenship (Isin 2008) are distinct from, but related to, the status of citizenship and are based on fluid subject positions 'which sit on a spectrum of intensity ranging from hospitality to hostility: citizens, strangers, outsiders and aliens' (ibid., 19). For Isin, 'becoming a subject involves being implicated in this spectrum' (ibid.) and as such the dialogical principle of citizenship always involves otherness. Isin is therefore interested in how beings decide between solidaristic, agonistic and alienating acts towards others and what actualizes those acts.

If citizenship studies often focus on extent (rules/norms of inclusion and exclusion), content (rights and responsibilities) and depth (thickness or thinness of belonging), to look at *acts* of citizenship is to investigate what comes prior to these three spheres, to those acts that produce citizens and their others (Isin 2008). Since citizenship is something

that is periodically (more or less frequently) remade and reimagined, this is an ongoing process rather than a look back to an imagined beginning. As Balibar (2012, 438) points out ‘the history of citizenship ... is a permanent dialectical tension between moments of insurrection and moments of constitution, in the sense of more or less stable, more or less hegemonic relation of social forces’. The focus on acts, then, is interesting because it asks ‘what accounts for subjects refusing, resisting or subverting the orientations, strategies and technologies in which they find themselves implicated, and the solidaristic, agonistic and alienating relationships in which they are caught?’ (Isin 2008, 38) While we are all caught up in formal, historically embedded, modes of inclusion and exclusion, they can guide but do not *determine* our enactments. In contesting, the formal citizenship regime actors engage in modes of being political, and sometimes transform the boundaries of citizenship in law.

Isin (2008) argues that in researching acts of citizenship one needs to investigate how subjects become activist citizens. He contrasts ‘activist citizens’ with ‘active citizens’. While activist citizens ‘engage in writing scripts and creating the scene, active citizens follow scripts and participate in scenes that are already created. While activist citizens are creative, active citizens are not ...’ (Isin 2008, 38). The concept of scripts is helpful in that it draws attention to the discursive – how ideas of citizenship are communicated, and how this may result in social action. Isin further observes that ‘acts produce actors that become answerable to justice against injustice’ (ibid., 39). In the case of LTW, which I describe more fully below, this is certainly the case. In creating actors who come to realise that they are in a relationship with each other and that this relationship is underpinned by injustice, activists are those who choose to become answerable against that injustice. What I want to look at here, then, is a case in which the scope of citizenship rights was/is reimagined and formal rules for inclusion and exclusion were/are challenged from below – an ‘insurrectional moment’ (where hegemonic social forces are challenged) in Balibar’s terms (Balibar 2012). Though the challenge has thus far been unsuccessful, the acts of citizenship involved have reconceived what it means to be citizen and to be ‘other’, or in other words have recreated political subjectivities and social formations, if only in select contexts.

Squire’s (2011) work on ‘mobile solidarities’ is helpful here. She points out that legalistic and culturalist conceptions of citizenship and belonging overlook ‘enactments of solidarity in which cultural categories and legal distinctions disappear or are relatively unimportant’ (292). Mobile solidarities are ‘the creation of collective political subjects through mobilisations that promote the physical movements of people as well as the multiple diversities that such movements bring about’ (ibid.). Squire explores mobile solidarities within the UK-based City of Sanctuary movement and the Strangers into Citizens campaign, and she identifies these as collective engagements ‘through which social hierarchies are disrupted or overturned’ (ibid.). Importantly, the solidarities built around these two campaigns fit neither with the legalistic idea of a political community nor the essentialistic frame of a cultural community. These solidarities, rather, are built on heterogeneity and difference. They are solidaristic in that they entail ‘minor’ acts of citizenship – on the scale of the everyday – which necessitate the blurring, or even disavowal of legally inscribed status labels.

Mobile solidarities, then, are implicated in acts of citizenship. What I want to argue here is that in the example discussed below, mobile solidarities are created and actuated, and acts of citizenship made possible. This concept thus offers analytical purchase for researching acts of citizenship in the case of non-citizens. What is particularly interesting about the LTW example is that citizens, who have often been told by politicians, the media, and other

citizens that they are (or will be) disadvantaged by the expanding of employment rights to migrants, stand in solidarity with asylum seekers. The common rhetoric of migrants 'stealing jobs' is in fact inverted and employment for non-citizens who are present in Britain is framed as beneficial for *everyone*. This is also within the context of deep-rooted historical narratives of Britishness and otherness in which even subjects of the British Empire who had good reasons to claim British citizenship were excluded ideologically and practically from claims of membership (Hampshire 2005). Mobile solidarities in this context take the form of worker solidarity (promoted by trades unions) and human solidarity (promoted by refugee-supporting organisations). Despite some shortcomings, I will argue that the campaign entailed acts of citizenship and through the articulation of mobile solidarities the hierarchical regime of rights is challenged not from above (from international institutions) but from below.

### *Let Them Work*

'Let Them Work' was a campaign, led by the Refugee Council and the Trades Union Congress (TUC)<sup>1</sup> which ran 2008–2010. Below is a brief overview of the timeline of the campaign, which is given to show the breadth, scale and tactics used by campaigners at various levels. The campaign was launched at the TUC Black Workers Conference in April 2008 and introduced by Donna Covey, Chief Executive of the Refugee Council, and Brendan Barber, General Secretary of the TUC. The campaign involved these and many other organisations, including Student Action for Refugees (STAR), Liberty and Refugee Action. This was a campaign with a very focussed aim: to get the law changed so that asylum seekers would again be granted the right to work while they awaited a decision on their claim. The tactics were clear and consistent across organisations: educate people about the issue, persuade them to write to their MP about it, and encourage MPs to sign a pledge to support the right to work.

In May 2008, the TUC Commission on Vulnerable Employment produced a report which suggested that denying asylum seekers the right to work while limiting welfare benefits can force them into informal (illegal) work. In June 2008, the most prominent regional campaign, based in the north-east region of England, was set up. The northern branch of the TUC, led by a refugee, joined with the Regional Refugee Forum (RRF) as part of its strategy to support vulnerable workers, to 'organise a vibrant campaign in the region for the Right to Work for Asylum Seekers' (Northern TUC leaflet, October 2008). In October, this campaign group met with the Chairman of the Asylum Working Group of the Centre for Social Justice to contribute to its report on asylum policy (published in the December) and the campaign had started to appear in the national media, with *The Politics Show* (a BBC's weekly politics programme) airing a 3-min film made by members of the campaign. At the (then in government) Labour Party Conference in September 2008 Jack Dromey, Deputy General Secretary of the UNITE trade union (which represents workers across many sectors) spoke at a fringe meeting on LTW and called on Ministers to take notice of the support of the unions. Jon Cruddas MP said the right to work was 'one of the most important issues to be debated at the conference'.

Throughout 2009, presentations were made at trades union branch meetings, at the Trades Council and at Student Union meetings (often via STAR). The aim was to raise awareness amongst potentially sympathetic publics. In February 2009, the Church of England Synod joined the campaign (Beckford 2009). Campaign leaders again spoke to the TUC

Black Workers Conference in April 2009. In March 2009, the campaign, with Lynne Jones MP as primary sponsor, brought an Early Day Motion (EDM) to parliament with 105 MP supporters (EDM 2009).

In July 2009, The Refugee Council and the Zimbabwe Association published a report on wasted skills and enforced dependence among Zimbabwean asylum seekers in the UK (Doyle 2009). In the same month, Communities Minister Shahid Malik committed publicly to raise the issue of the right to work for asylum seekers with the Immigration Minister, Phil Woolas. In the September, he spoke at a special debate at the Labour Party conference titled 'is asylum policy damaging community cohesion?' and the TUC staged a rally to help raise union support for LTW. In October, the Churches Regional Commission publicly reiterated their support for the campaign at an event in the North East marking 'World Day for Decent Work' and in December the Bishop of Newcastle also spoke out on the subject. Building up to the May 2010 general election, Lord Morris hosted a reception in the House of Lords in December 2009 on the LTW campaign which included speakers from The Refugee Council, the TUC, the Confederation of British Industry and the Regional Refugee Forum North East.

A second EDM in March 2010 on the topic of asylum seekers and the right to work was brought by Fabian Hamilton MP (EDM 2010). Ahead of a general election it garnered only 40 signatures and the Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition government formed following the May 2010 election did not restore the right to work to asylum seekers and made clear that it was not even considering this policy change (Home Office 2010). Since then, the focus of campaigning has moved on to destitute failed asylum seekers, whose situation is extremely precarious and urgent, and efforts to realise the right to work for asylum seekers have thus been subsumed under a larger umbrella. The LTW campaign disbanded and campaigning on this issue has largely come through Still Human Still Here, a coalition of over 60 organisations whose main focus is ending destitution amongst failed asylum seekers.

What I have briefly laid out here is a large-scale and multifaceted campaign which, though ultimately unsuccessful, did present the opportunity to change the script on asylum seekers and citizenship at a high level of politics. The next section develops an analysis of the campaign focusing on representations of citizenship and invocations of mobile solidarity.

## **The 'Let them Work' campaign: troubling the exclusive privileges of citizenship**

### ***Representations of citizenship***

This section discusses two representations of citizenship that appeared across campaigning materials. The discursive (re)framing of citizenship – as struggle and as an inclusive social project – through texts and speeches entailed acts of citizenship which made it possible to reimagine asylum seekers as citizens.

### ***Citizenship as struggle***

The idea of citizenship as struggle is not new, but it does go against dominant political and policy discourse in the UK and elsewhere that frames citizenship as something to be earned through demonstrating the characteristics of 'the good citizen' (Anderson 2013). The expanding of access to citizenship, and expanding some of the rights and privileges of citizenship, to non-citizens is something which has historically been hard won by marginalised



groups and their advocates. However, this is not the message that dominates public discussion of citizenship.

In the LTW campaign, ‘struggle’ was at the centre of the discursive framing of the issue. The right to work is something to be won in battling injustice, not simply in proving one’s worth. In 2009, a Refugee Council Campaigns Team blog stated

everyone acknowledges that this is a difficult issue to be working on but one we’re all committed to. We’ll be continuing to put pressure on the government to change the rules and give all asylum seekers of working age permission to work. (‘Labour Party Conference Update’ 22nd September 2008)

This idea of the right to work as something to be struggled for is interesting because in the dominant script the modern citizen is often depicted as the ‘worker citizen’, defined by the qualities and moral capacity to ‘work’. Those who fail to fulfil this duty are often represented as ‘failed citizens’ (Anderson 2013). The ‘benefit scrounger’ is one of these failed citizens. However, by drawing attention to the *exclusion* of asylum seekers – non-citizens – from work, they immediately become implicated in a common struggle with other marginalised (citizen) groups. Therefore, as well as being a site for scripting the dominant mode of political subjectivity tied to the ‘good’/rightful citizen, struggles around work can also provide multiple sites of political contestation which bridge the citizen/non-citizen divide.

For LTW campaigners, this struggle follows on from previous struggles for employment rights. For example, in her speech to the TUC Black workers conference in April 2008 Donna Covey (Chief Executive of the Refugee Council) discussed asylum seekers in relation to women, black people and gay people – groups united in the long struggle for justice:

The last time I came to the TUC Black workers conference was in the 1990s. The equality agenda – in the UK and the rest of the world has moved on since then. We live in a world where women sit in Government across Europe, civil partnerships are celebrated, and a black man may become the next president of the United States. But one group of people are still discriminated against in the UK – not just through ignorance, but also as matter of active government policy. Asylum seekers.

As people of colour and homosexuals have historically been marginalised and criminalised by the British state, and their achievement of ‘good citizen’ status was hard won (and the struggle in many ways continues), the linking of this with the struggle of asylum seekers bridges the non-citizen/citizen divide. Indeed, the struggles of people of colour in Britain have also been implicated in histories of immigration and successive generations have moved from the status of ‘outsider’ to ‘insider’, making this connection all the more pertinent.

The work of campaigning organisations such as the Refugee Council who work on publicly unpopular issues such as the rights of asylum seekers is always an exercise in struggle. And struggle within this context is discursively associated with the challenges faced by asylum seekers both in their countries of origin and in the UK. Yet, by partnering with the TUC the reference to struggle immediately taps in to another discourse around struggle which involves a history of fighting for the economic, social, civil and political rights of workers. For example, Donna Covey stated:

All of us in this room are used to fighting hard campaigns. For causes we believe in, that others think are pie in the sky [...] Because you have always stood up for the most vulnerable in our society. That’s why the trades unions have campaigned successfully for equal pay and a minimum wage. You know ‘and injury to one is an injury to all’ – that’s why British trade unionists have always been at the forefront of global solidarity (Refugee Council 2008)

In this sense, the act of citizenship is one in which asylum seekers become citizens through speaking of them as *already* in possession of the right to claim economic rights (to paraphrase Hannah Arendt), as already equal to citizens, and the fact of their exclusion from the labour market therefore being one of straightforward injustices. The effect is to create a new script in which already present asylum seekers belong here and are entitled to the same right to work as citizens. The boundary between citizens and non-citizens is not just blurred but is transformed. The asylum seeker is no longer excluded; she is, in effect, a citizen.

### *Citizenship as a liberal social project*

The second representation was of citizenship as a liberal social project. This representation of citizenship at first glance follows the dominant script of the liberal ‘worker citizen’. Indeed, Tyler and Marciniak (2013, 144) have argued that ‘in order to effect material changes, protestors are [often] compelled to make their demands in the idiom of the regime of citizenship they are contesting’. Throughout the campaign asylum seekers were represented as model citizens within a discourse of liberal citizenship which emphasises working to support oneself and one’s family, and not relying on the state, as both morally desirable on an individual basis, and at the level of the collective. This representation relies on the inversion of the notion of the non-citizen as also ‘failed citizen’ (undeserving, workless), but equally the inversion keeps the distinction between asylum seekers and failed citizens alive.

Asylum seekers are, in all campaign materials, speeches and press releases, consistently represented as hard working, highly skilled and keen to work in order to support themselves and their family, as well as to contribute to society through paying taxes. In a sense, then, they are implicitly pitted against ‘failed citizens’. A 2008 TUC leaflet, for example, stated ‘many asylum seekers are well qualified. 57% are educated to A-level standard, and 24% have higher level qualifications’ and later provided the following quote from a Zimbabwean asylum seeker living in Middlesbrough:

I’ve been in the UK for more than 5 years and I’m still waiting for a decision. I’ve not been able to work as I am an asylum seeker. But I have managed to do a lot of volunteering in the community and at my local refugee centre. It is my culture that I work, so instead of wasting time lying around at home doing nothing I volunteer’ (Northern TUC and Regional Refugee Forum North East 2008)

This example is typical of campaign materials and the statistics cited are repeated across genres, and by a diversity of organisations. In their speeches at the campaign launch event Donna Covey and Brendan Barber both spoke of Aisha from Ethiopia, a primary school teacher with eight years’ experience who speaks six languages (Refugee Council 2008; TUC 2008). The denial of Aisha, as a purportedly typical example of an asylum seeker, denies the collective opportunity to benefit from, rather than support, such individuals within society. A LTW leaflet produced by the Regional Refugee Forum North East encapsulated this representation of citizenship as a liberal social project when it stated ‘when people say “I want to work”, they are saying “I want to look after myself” There is dignity to that’ (Regional Refugee Forum North East 2008).

While following the government script by allying asylum seekers with ‘good citizens’ rather than ‘failed citizens’, this model liberal citizen, which is embodied in the asylum seeker (as represented by the campaign), is nevertheless included *within* the collective of society. A Refugee Council blog from December 2009 points out that ‘in times of economic

difficulty, we must allow everyone in society to work and contribute to the economy'. And yet, government policy on the stratified right to work does not include all migrants within the category of 'everyone in society'. It is precisely by excluding asylum seekers from such duties as contributing to the economy if they are able, in times of economic difficulty or otherwise, that the government maintains the distinction between citizen and asylum seeker, and in doing so protects citizenship as a reward and a privilege (Tyler 2010). By including asylum seekers within this national project of liberal subjecthood, then, the campaign performs an act of citizenship when it attempts to elide official distinctions and follow a narrative of 'rightful presence' (Squire and Darling 2013). By their very presence, asylum seekers are thus a part of society, and should be permitted to perform the duties demanded by the collective.

Citizenship as a liberal social project is similarly invoked by reference to integration and community cohesion. For example, a TUC leaflet stated 'it is well documented that employment is the best way for a person to integrate into society – yet asylum seekers are denied this chance' (Northern TUC and Regional Refugee Forum North East 2008). Reference was consistently made to 'people in *our society*' (e.g. see TUC 2008), again discursively including asylum seekers within, rather than outside of, the citizen collective. A STAR leaflet suggested that 'engaging in work can help people seeking asylum to improve their English; meet new people; make friends and contribute to the community; helping to instil a feeling of acceptance and inclusion into British society' (STAR, n.d.-b). As noted above, acceptance and inclusion are precisely what the government wants to avoid. This avoidance is undertaken through reinforcing clear distinctions between citizens as rightfully and permanently present (and therefore entitled to work), and particular groups of non-citizens (here, asylum seekers) as (potentially) not rightfully present, as temporary, and therefore not yet (if at all) entitled to integrate.

When Donna Covey stated that 'we would all benefit from giving them [asylum seekers] the right to work', she encapsulates the two arms of this representation of citizenship (Refugee Council 2008). The message being communicated is that it would be good for the collective because full members would not have to pay financially for these non-members, but they would also not have to pay the social costs created by a policy of social exclusion through economic exclusion. If asylum seekers have rights and privileges, they will also have duties, and in fulfilling them it will be good for the community as a whole. Yet, in policing the boundaries of the community, the idea of citizenship as a set of privileges is protected. Asylum seekers have been purposefully *excluded* as undesirable and labelled non-citizens, outsiders or 'others', accordingly. Therefore, in making claims that asylum seekers should have recourse to the privileges of citizenship in order that the whole *community* benefits, the campaign both rhetorically creates a community in which asylum seekers are members, and draws attention to the reality of the situation: asylum seekers are present, they live among us, and in the absence of territorial exclusion every effort is made to exclude them economically, socially and politically. Such a policy is thus made to appear untenable when the idea of citizenship as a collective social project amongst those living in the same place is invoked.

### **Mobile solidarities**

This section describes the two main mobile solidarities that were invoked in campaigning materials and speeches. By conceptualising these invocations of solidarity in terms of

mobility, the intention is to draw attention to the ways in which these discursive strategies elide divisions based on citizenship status. In doing so, they make acts of citizenship possible.

### *As workers*

The involvement of trades unions brought to the campaign a discourse of worker solidarity which is unlikely to otherwise have been present. Much of the evidence of this articulation of mobile solidarity can therefore be found in TUC literature and speeches made to trades unionists. It is interesting that a trades union, whose remit is to work for the rights and protections of workers, would pursue a campaign such as this for a group who are not currently workers. Asylum seekers were, for the TUC, would-be workers, and they came into the organisation's populations of concern through their 'Vulnerable Workers' programme. Vulnerable workers are those in 'precarious work that places people at risk of continuing poverty and injustice resulting from an imbalance of power in the employer-worker relationship' (TUC 2007). This includes workers who do not have a legal right to take paid employment and as such the idea of a worker within this context is something which stands apart from legalistic conceptions of citizenship or immigration status. Trades unionists are well placed, then, to undertake 'enactments of solidarity in which cultural categories and legal distinctions disappear or are relatively unimportant' (Squire 2011, 292) as worker solidarity does not require the *right* to work.

In part, the association between trades union activity and struggle against the government was invoked by drawing attention to these would-be workers as trade unionists. For example, a leaflet for TUC members suggested that 'many asylum seekers have survived war, rape and torture – often as punishment for trade union activity or opposition to oppressive regimes' (Northern TUC and Regional Refugee Forum North East 2008). However, even more pertinent to this article were the solidarities invoked between asylum seekers and citizens as rightful workers in the UK. Asylum seekers were assumed already to be workers, and to be in need of activation. For example, 'it's time to end a situation where skilled people who want to work are forced to live in poverty and destitution' (Regional Refugee Forum North East 2008). Connections were made by Donna Covey in her campaign launch speech between the situation of workers denied employment as a consequence of government policy, and the situation of asylum seekers:

As trades unionists, we know the impact that unemployment has on the lives of individuals, families and communities. We saw the way that mass unemployment under the Tories in the 1980s destroyed our towns and cities and wrecked the self-esteem of a generation (Refugee Council 2008)

Here asylum seekers are not 'other'. Their position is reimagined, they are vulnerable and excluded workers:

I am proud [...] that we can go together to the Government so they know that British workers want asylum seekers to have the right to work [...] Because you have always stood up for the most vulnerable in our society. That's why the trades unions have campaigned successfully for equal pay and a minimum wage (ibid.)

Based on the assumption that asylum seekers are would-be workers, solidarity was further built through the use of personal narrative and 'imagine if' scenarios. For example:

IMAGINE being told that you can not work for a living. Not because you are not up to the job but because if you do you are breaking the law. This is the situation that many refugees living on Wearside face, having to rely on benefits instead to survive (Foster 2008)

I cannot describe the amount of stress that comes from not being allowed to work. If you expect to spend the rest of your life working and then suddenly you are told 'no just sit there, don't work' it is so stressful (Zimbabwean refugee, Teesside) (Northern TUC and Regional Refugee Forum North East 2008)

These mobile worker solidarities, alluding to the Marxist conceptions of worker solidarity which have traditionally informed trades union debate, thus foreground a common subjecthood at the expense of citizen and asylum seeker distinctions. Once the boundaries are blurred, asylum seekers are no longer 'other'; they are rights-holding individuals who are rightfully present, and the case for excluding them from work is weakened. Of course, this discourse of workers-in-waiting falls foul of similar challenges facing the 'activation' of unemployed citizens: some asylum seekers are elderly, disabled, have health issues which prevent them from working or face other structural barriers to entering employment. Nevertheless, this solidaristic reframing of the issue came at the same time as other voices, including the Prime Minister, were calling for 'British Jobs for British Workers' (Summers 2009). Such a slogan clearly couples citizen and worker and links the right to work with British citizenship. Yet this campaign, co-led by the TUC, elided such distinctions and sought to forge a new politics of citizenship, albeit within the terms of the neoliberal state.

### *As human beings*

If the trades union arm of the campaign largely focussed on mobile solidarities based upon asylum seeker's status as would-be workers, Christian organisations and activists in the migrant and refugee advocacy sector spoke more to a human solidarity which transcends borders, cultures and legalistic distinctions. For example, Martin Wharton, Bishop of Newcastle launched a public attack on the government's treatment of asylum seekers in December 2009, five months before the general election, stating that asylum seekers were treated as 'less than human' (Aitken 2009). He referred to the Parliamentary Committee on Human Rights' finding that the asylum system inflicted 'inhuman and degrading treatment' on asylum seekers and asked 'how can we treat people today in a way which is even less humane than the Victorians and their work-houses'. By using the word 'humane', the Bishop not only draws attention to the fact that asylum seekers are human beings, but also to the mutually degrading effects of treating others as less than human.

Ten months earlier, the Synod (the governing body of the state religion) had voted overwhelmingly in favour of allowing asylum seekers to work. Reverend Ruth Worsley, a priest in the diocese of Southwell and Nottingham who tabled the motion on the subject said,

with the arrival of the credit crunch, the subsequent loss of jobs, the recent call for British jobs for British people, there is a danger that we become inward-looking and even xenophobic. But the Gospel tells us that we are not a tribal nation but a global family (Beckford 2009)

This idea that 'we are not a tribal nation' draws on a religiously inscribed idea of humanity as a family which is at odds with the contemporary system of states, borders and legally distinct categories of people. But this solidarity is also similar to the cosmopolitan virtues of human rights. Indeed, activists drawing on discourses of human solidarity sometimes invoked human rights as a legitimising frame for humanitarian interventions. Bishop Whatron (of Newcastle) said, 'in the UK we have one of the worst human rights records in Europe. This is something of which we should be truly ashamed' (Aitken 2009). The Reverend William Raines, of Manchester diocese, said in February 2009 that 'the asylum system could have been designed by King Herod after reading Kafka' (Beckford 2009). Human rights law aspires

to universal human equality, despite its limitations, which chimes with Bishop Wharton's statement that 'as a Christian [...] I have the basic belief that every single human being is unique and precious'.

Campaigners also invoked human solidarity on a smaller scale. It is common for charities, particularly those who work with vulnerable and marginalised groups who are not necessarily viewed in a positive light by the general public, to use personal narratives to add persuasive value to their messages. Following this approach, stories of individual asylum seekers were invoked in all campaigning materials and TUC representatives were encouraged to invite refugees and asylum seekers to their meetings to talk about their experiences (Northern TUC and Regional Refugee Forum North East 2008). Personal narratives which appear in campaigning materials range from simple statements of circumstance: 'I am living on £41 a week for everything, which is very limiting and at times feels less than human' (STAR, n.d.-a); to more emotive narratives:

but not being able to work is degrading to me. It is something that has been taken away from me, something that I believe is a right nobody should lose. This position is a crippled life. It's a degrading situation. You feel useless in a place that sings democracy.

Humanity was also used to suggest 'normality'. A number of asylum seeker quotes provided in campaign materials sought to persuade their audience that not only are asylum seekers deserving of basic human dignities, but also that they are 'normal people', with 'normal' hopes and aspirations. These ideas of 'normality' are a re-scripting of the dominant heteronormative frame: 'I hope our situation gets better and they let us work and let us get married. We are normal people, nothing different' (Iraqi asylum seeker Hartlepool, Northern TUC and Regional Refugee Forum North East 2008). Yet, as Darling (2014) has argued, it is the art of identification and the making politically visible that accrues through acts of citizenship that are the essence of their power. Indeed, making migrant experiences visible, and perceptible, is a common aim of activism in this field. Tyler and Marciniak (2013, 152) dub these approaches 'affective technologies of the "close up"' and their aim is explicitly to humanise migrant subjects and transform them into subjects who matter.

These enactments of human solidarity therefore problematize both legalistic and culturalist conceptions of citizenship and belonging. Yet, this campaign does not wholly overlook distinctions created by the stratified regime of rights; it challenges them in attempting to affect legislative change within the parameters of existing categories. Nevertheless, divisive legalistic conceptions of citizenship are troubled through mobile solidarities which create collective political subjects outside of the bounds of either a homogenising or an exclusionary discourse of subjecthood. Such collective mobilisations necessitate the blurring, even disavowal, of legally inscribed status labels, and as such entail creative acts of citizenship.

## Conclusion

This article has discussed the 'Let them Work' campaign in order to demonstrate the ways in which the stratified regime of citizenship rights in the UK is contested from marginalised spaces. It has explored how such contestation troubles the exclusive privileges of citizenship by enacting mobile solidarities through acts of citizenship. The actions of the activists involved in the campaigns have bridged the divide between the domestic politics of work and the cosmopolitan ideals necessitated by mobile solidarities. In doing so, two conceptions of citizenship were drawn on: citizenship as a suite of rights which have to be struggled for,

and citizenship as a liberal social project which asylum seekers are well placed to contribute to. The solidarities which are invoked in order to mobilise around more expansive conceptions of citizenship than the state presents are worker solidarity and human solidarity. Two quite distinct groups of activists mobilised around these differing solidarities, which reflect their differing world views and the discursive resources upon which they were able to draw.

Acts of citizenship, to paraphrase Isin (2008) produce citizens and their 'others' and the campaign discussed here sought to make 'others' less 'other'. Processes of exclusion are not accidental and clearly the designation of asylum seekers as a group who are 'other' in the UK is deeply entwined with longer histories of exclusion, not least colonialism (Mayblin 2014b). By looking at acts of citizenship, we draw attention to not only those exclusions, but also attempts to re-inscribe citizenship with new ideas of rights and belonging, to blur existing boundaries between citizens and non-citizens, and ultimately to dismantle established categories of entitlement. What we see, then, is the incorporation of asylum seekers into the worker frame, and the humanity frame, in order that the activists might resist the strategies and technologies of non-citizen exclusion.

Through LTW, activists rethought citizens and their 'others' – here non-citizen asylum seekers – but they also reproduced citizens and others. Legal categories were not ignored; the aim in this campaign was to draw attention to a more expansive understanding of the right to asylum. The central paradox that emerges here is that LTW has to utilise the existing script of 'good citizens' and 'failed citizens' (in Anderson's terms) to claim rights, but this strategy clearly bears the potential for creating further boundaries of exclusion. In other words, if you only demand more inclusion based on the existing script of the rightful 'worker citizen' then what other forms of marginalisation do you re-enact? As Tyler (2013, 146) has pointed out in another context, 'although these forms of legal and political advocacy are necessary, important, and can be effective, they inevitably reproduce the inclusive/exclusive logic of citizenship, which has been designed to fail specific groups and populations'.

If successful, asylum seekers become workers and so they are produced as citizens, or more citizen than before, through what Isin (2008) describes as acts of citizenship. But in the face of failure, the distinction produced by technologies of control between citizens and non-citizens continues. This burst of activism – an insurrectional moment in Balibar's (2012) terms – ended without a positive result. Denied the right to work and living with the consequences of this policy, asylum seekers in the UK today have not reaped the potential benefits, in terms of rights and material betterment, that the acts of citizenship articulated through mobile solidarities in LTW suggested were possible.

The campaigning work continues through, most prominently, the 'Still Human Still Here' campaign. If the acts of citizenship entailed within such activities continue to build solidarities which elide official distinctions between citizens and asylum seekers, then a transformational moment *may* come in the extending of the right to work. Whether successful or not, it is clear that asylum seekers' ambiguous position vis-à-vis citizenship rights will not go unnoticed, and that injustices in this sphere will continue to be challenged from marginal political spaces.

## Note

1. The Refugee Council is the largest national charity working with and on behalf of refugees and asylum seekers in the UK. The TUC is an umbrella organisation for 54 different unions in the UK.

## Acknowledgements

The author would also like to thank Joe Turner, Michael Farrelly and the anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Funding

This work was supported by the research grant from the ESRC [grant number ES/L011468/1].

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