Evaluating Union Organising in the United Kingdom

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Abstract

The paper[1] evaluates the increasing focus on organizing activity within British trade union movement and its main purpose is to draw attention to the wider reasons why organizing is important. Contrary to a dominant the authors claim that organizing is more than simply recruiting members; it is about mobilizing members so that they have greater influence over their working lives. Outcomes of organizing campaigns can only be understood within a much broader evaluation of the purpose, strategies and context in which they take place. in the paper the authors evaluate the impact of the 'turn' to organizing in the United Kingdom trade union movement, especially after launching of the Organising Academy in 1998. While there are a lot of accomplishments resulting from organizing activities, they cannot overshadow less optimistic phenomena within the union movement such as stagnation in membership, failed attempts to reach new sectors of the economy, and worsening climate around organized labour since the outbreak of the financial crisis in 2008.

Key Words: trade unions, union organizing, organizing campaigns, collective bargaining

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Introduction

This paper argues that the outcome of organizing in the United Kingdom is fundamentally linked to the way in which ideas and practices about organizing transferred in the mid-1990s. The early years of the New Labour governments led by Tony Blair (1997–2010) saw the introduction of legislation that compels employers to recognize trade unions where the majority of workers want it. Unions, led by the umbrella organization, the TUC, were keen to develop tactics to take advantage of this important change in legislation and looked to the development of organizing campaigns and the Organizing Institute in the USA (see Simms and Holgate 2010 for more lengthy discussion). A particular innovation was to train a cadre of specialist organizers to promote organizing activity within their employing unions.

Since then, individual unions have developed very different approaches and tactics to organize in their sectors (Simms and Holgate 2010). In this regard, we argue that it is unhelpful to think about a single 'organizing model' in the UK context. Rather, the way in which the TUC led the transfer of organizing activity meant that they had no remit to impose any single idea about how organizing can be implemented in different unions. So very different ideas and practices have emerged which both vary between UK unions and mean that organizing ideas 'mean' very different things in the UK context than in the USA.

This makes the task of evaluating organizing initiatives very challenging. Nonetheless, we think it is very important to do so. This paper therefore aims to evaluate what we see as a consequence of nearly 15 years of heavy investment in organizing activities in the UK union movement. We argue that although there are important stories of innovation and success, the picture is less optimistic if we look at aggregate level. In general, there is little evidence of the kind of renewal that was hoped for in the mid-1990s. Of course, the situation may well have been much worse had unions not invested. And it is undeniably the case that the wider context of financialisation and neo-liberalism make it very difficult for unions to organize effectively. But the period we are evaluating ran from the election of the New Labour government in 1997 to the period of the great financial and economic crisis. This was a relatively stable economic and political period for UK unions and still they were largely unable to make any widespread gains across new sectors of the economy and the reasons for this seem, in part, to lie within the unions themselves. The objective of

this paper is to argue that the tensions inherent in organizing initiatives have proven to be, in part, a constraint on the effectiveness of organizing initiatives.

Throughout the decade of the development of specialist organizing activity, we have noted a marked change in approach to British unions. The early years of organizing activity prompted many comments and stories from organizers and senior policy makers about the lack of overarching strategic direction to much of the organizing activity taking place. A fairly typical example was of a so-called 'hot shop' campaign followed in detail for part of this research where workers in a call center were dissatisfied about their working conditions and discussed by Simms (2006, 2007). In brief, the union involved was approached primarily because the husband of one of the most vocal workers was a member and the organizing department took on the campaign because they were keen to expand into new territory and the call center had links with one of the main employers organized by the union. Although the campaign was successful in gaining recognition for collective bargaining, the long-term sustainability of the campaign was called into question for a number of reasons. First, the union's resources and expertise in supporting members outside the main areas of membership and activism were extremely limited. Second, the union's leverage in the wider labour and service markets within which the targeted employer operated was extremely limited and this constrained their ability to secure bargaining outcomes. Third, the fact that the workers were outside the core membership meant that they found it difficult to engage in the wider activities of the union that limited their influence and access to resources to support the union within the workplace. This example illustrates some of the challenges of deciding – and evaluating – the purpose and outcomes of organizing work. It illustrates the need to evaluate a broad range of organizing outcomes. Simply increasing membership, activism, representativeness and participation does not necessarily ensure sustainable organizing outcomes. In this example, the structure of the union in representing and engaging new membership groups was a barrier to ensuring sustainable success and the engagement and activism seen during the pre-recognition organizing phase of this campaign eventually withered. Arguably, these workers are in a more advantageous position now that they have union bargaining and representation rights, but the hoped for revitalization was not sustained.

However, the example above highlights two importantly different ways of evaluating organizing activity. The first is against the objectives set by the union itself. In the case above, the key objective was to secure collective bargaining rights in this organization. In this regard, the union was remarkably successful. But a broader evaluation must surely ask questions about how the establishment of collective

bargaining in this organization strengthens the union in this sector and whether the interests of these members can be promoted more widely within the union and society.

These two ways of evaluating organizing activity are important because if we only take the approach of evaluating outcomes against the objectives unions set themselves, there is a risk that we limit our focus to only the objectives that are considered achievable at that moment in time. Unions are unlikely to set themselves objectives that are perceived to be impossible or even improbable, particularly given that organizing is risky and resource intensive. Thus, we take as our starting point the view that the actual objectives set by unions are the outcomes of political and complex judgments about what is desirable and achievable at that moment. While this tells us a great deal about the contemporary political context (both inside and outside the unions), it risks failing to engage with any broader 'vision' of what organizing can and should be about. It is a legitimate criticism (Carter 2006) of some previous evaluation of organizing activity that it has mainly focused on evaluating initiatives against the objectives set by the unions themselves and, thus, risks taking a rather apolitical and ahistorical view of these developments. We therefore take the second approach as well; attempting to evaluate actual organizing outcomes not just against the objectives that were set, but against a wider view of the changes that unions should make in order to (re)establish their roles as strong, independent voices of working people.

This second evaluation is undoubtedly harsher and more contested than the former. But if we do not make any comment on the outcomes of more than a decade of union organizing activity in the UK as evaluated against some of the wider political objectives, we risk taking a very narrow view both of what organizing is and of what it could achieve. In this paper, we therefore comment on the evidence of whether or not unions have made progress set by the TUC in the early 1990s (Heery et al. 2000) before moving on to consider relating to the wider political agenda underpinning (some) ideas about union organizing. With this distinction in mind, we want to consider the evidence relating to a range of different measures of organizing outcomes; increasing membership, collective bargaining, organizing under-represented workers, organizing in new sectors, worker self-organization and union democracy.

Membership

In some respects, the most important outcome of organizing is increasing membership. Undoubtedly part of the rationale for establishing the TUC Organizing Academy, and one of the reasons why we have seen the wider 'turn' to organizing, has been the collapse of union membership in the 1980s and 1990s. This is rational and logical; a large proportion of the income of most UK unions depends on membership subscriptions. Declining membership therefore has important negative impact on the income of most unions. Indeed, in the late 1990s, Michael Crosby, then the head of the Australian Congress of Trade Unions (ACTU) Organising Centre, was famous in Australia and the UK – and probably beyond – for presenting union officers with his 'scary graph' that mapped the point at which union income and expenditure crossed and the financial basis of the union became untenable.

But the argument is not just one of finances. Without members, unions as collective organizations are largely unsustainable. There are some alternatives – the French model of trade unionism, for example, focuses on recruiting activists rather than 'ordinary' members – but these tend to be specific to particular institutional contexts. Australia, the UK and the US all share an important focus on membership recruitment. In these systems, as membership declines, unions lose the legitimacy to speak as the collective voice of workers. Equally, declining membership limits the impact any collective action may have on employers i.e. their coercive power. Declining membership therefore has negative impacts on both the legitimacy power and the coercive power of unions.

Our research shows that individual organizing campaigns are usually very successful in recruiting members. This is not very surprising; organizers are trained to speak to workers and to persuade a considerable proportion of them to join the union. Our early research suggested that Academy organizers typically recruited around 1000 members a year; easily enough to pay their salaries. The evidence in relation to individual unions is, however, a little more mixed. We do see evidence of strong membership growth in some unions and these do tend to be the unions that have recruited organizers, and that have been thinking more strategically about how to integrate organizing into the wider work of the union.

But as many people before us have pointed out, membership in individual workplaces or in individual unions is not a sufficient measure of membership strength. Aggregate union membership has stabilized in the UK over the past 10 years.

Whilst most unions would celebrate this as very good news after the haemorrhage of members between 1979 and 1997, there are two very serious notes of concern. First, this stabilization has taken place in a comparatively benign environment. The Labour governments from 1997 to 2010 implemented key policy changes that have reinforced the legitimacy of unions. These include setting up a Union Modernization Fund to channel money into efforts by unions to modernize their structures and processes, setting up a Union Learning Fund to encourage unions to promote learning in the workplace, introducing the statutory recognition procedures, and recognizing unions as the legitimate voice of workers on a range of advice bodies such as the Low Pay Commission that recommends the rate of the National Minimum Wage. Whilst the Labour governments have consistently adopted the view that they would not repeal the restrictions on industrial action that were implemented by the Conservatives in the 1980s and early 1990s, and have not implemented everything that the unions would have liked, the period from 1997 onwards has undoubtedly been a political and legislative context which is more favorable to unions. It is of concern, therefore, that having invested so much in organizing activity within a benign context, that aggregate union membership has done little more than stabilize. Whilst it is probably true that membership would have declined further without the investment in organizing, against this background, stabilization is less than optimal.

The second note of concern is that the UK labor force grew significantly from 1997 until the financial crisis of 2008 and recession of 2009. So whilst absolute levels of membership have stabilized, the number of union members as a proportion of the total labor force (aggregate union density) has continued to decline (Achur 2010; Bryson and Forth 2010). This indicates that the investment in organizing over the past ten years has largely enabled unions to hold steady, rather than to expand into growing sectors of the economy. Much of the employment growth has been through migration and although there is undoubtedly evidence of innovative practice with some unions taking on the challenge of organizing these workers (Holgate 2009a; Holgate 2009b; Simms and Holgate 2010), evidently there has not been enough of this kind of work to keep pace with the growth in employment. The decline of aggregate union density is of concern because it influences the extent to which both legitimacy and coercive power can be used in collective bargaining and in representing the interests of membership more widely. This is particularly visible in relation to collective bargaining, to which our attention now turns.

Collective Bargaining

In the context of organizing, unions are typically seeking two related objectives: securing collective bargaining gains at the level of the individual workplace and securing bargaining gains across a sector or sub-sector of the economy. In a greenfield campaign it is therefore unsurprising that a central objective will usually be to establish collective bargaining in those workplaces as this gives both legitimacy and a wider range of formal opportunities to use coercive power because in the UK setting a union has to fulfill a range of legal requirements before it can take industrial action.

At the level of individual campaigns, unions are not as successful as one might expect in securing collective bargaining rights from employers, even with the support of the statutory recognition legislation. It is difficult to give any accurate figures because it all depends on how we define 'a campaign'. The start and end points of union organizing campaigns are often very vague and if workers prove not to be engaging with the union, it is very common that a union will divert resources away from that workplace very quickly. Nonetheless, if we look across the economy, Gall (2007) reports, for example, that there were only 131 cases of both statutory and voluntary recognition granted in 2005 of which 27 were granted through the statutory processes and further 9 were cases where the statutory processes were used to secure a voluntary deal. What is perhaps more striking about Gall's data is that the number of recognition deals (both voluntary and statutory) being agreed each year has fallen markedly since a peak in 1999, 2000 and 2001. In these years, 365, 525 and 685 deals were made respectively. This almost undoubtedly reflects anticipation of, and then response to, the introduction of the statutory processes. Although the methodologies and time periods vary between Gall's figures and the figures given by the Central Arbitration Committee (CAC) whose job it is to apply and administer the statutory recognition processes, the data trend is very similar. Of course, the CAC only reports on claims taken through the statutory processes, but in the year ending March 2008 there were only 64 applications made. So there is little evidence that the 'turn to organizing' in the past decade has radically transformed the patterns of new recognition for collective bargaining in the UK. In Gall's period of analysis (1995 to 2005) the 2133 recognition agreements for which he found detailed evidence covered just over 870,000 workers; substantial, but not sufficient to expand collective

bargaining into new sectors of the economy or to keep up with the pace at which the labor force has expanded during that period.

But organizing in the UK context does not only apply to greenfield sites where recognition is being established. It is therefore useful to look at what has been happening to collective bargaining in areas where unions are already established. Here there is a more positive note, Gall (2007) also highlights the extent to which cases of derecognition have fallen to almost nil since 2000; there have been fewer than 10 cases of derecognition in each year since 2000. Over the time period examined, the 126 cases of derecognition covered only marginally more than 40,000 workers, which does indicate that the union movement has been successful in extending bargaining coverage in absolute terms.

We also need to think about *where* recognition for collective bargaining is being strengthened, and here a very interesting story emerges. Our studies of organizing campaigns are supported by data that focuses at an aggregate level which both suggest that unions are relatively cautious about the targeting of their organizing activity. The CAC annual reports consistently show that the sectors that generates the most claims for statutory recognition are the manufacturing, transport and communication sectors which have tended to account for well over half and typically nearer three-quarters of applications for statutory recognition. This is supported by academic evidence that draws on evidence of recognition agreements from the economy more widely and which shows that 'On the one hand, new recognition agreements are increasing. On the other hand, they are concentrated in places where unions have traditionally been strong and unions are not making much headway in getting into the more dynamic firms that are likely to be the leaders of the future' (Blanden et al. 2006: 186). This relatively bleak picture explains why Gall (2007: 78) characterizes the trend data as 'an emerging crisis for trade unions'. But he adds a crucial question mark at the end of this summary. Whilst undoubtedly the aggregate story is one of unions being relatively cautious in their targeting of organizing activity, and in particular focusing on campaigns in sectors where there is already some union presence, it could be argued that this is a logical strategy in relation to consolidating collective bargaining strength.

In our detailed qualitative analysis of five greenfield campaigns that were successful in securing a union presence in the workplace (Simms 2005) we saw clear evidence of the difficulties presented to unions when they gain bargaining rights in a workplace where they have little or no presence in the rest of the sector. These problems include having little experience of the issues and pressures within the sector, having few levers to use in bargaining because competitor employers do not

have to deal with unions and are therefore free to set wages, terms and conditions as they choose, and an inability to demonstrate the effectiveness of collective bargaining because of these difficulties. We know that members and activists are far more likely to walk away from unions they perceive as being ineffective and, predictably, membership and activism collapsed, illustrating the problems of building sustainable unionism when the workplace so isolated within an un-unionized sector.

It is therefore not so surprising that unions that have sought to expand over the past decade, have focused on workplaces in sectors where there is already some bargaining presence. Lerner (cited in Crosby 2005: 743) introduces a further argument as to why this is a desirable approach. He stresses that 'If only 10 percent of workers in an industry are unionized, it is impossible to have real union democracy because 90 percent of the workers are excluded'. In other words, Lerner argues that organizing on an industrial or sectoral level is essential not just to secure bargaining leverage and make an effort to take wages out of competition, but to ensure a democratic representation of workers in that sector. Whilst the logic of this view is undeniable, some of the consequences are more contested. Crosby's reading of this argument (Crosby 2005) is that this risks over-riding the views of members within the union, in favor of attempting to engage workers who are not (yet) members. Crosby argues that Lerner fails to differentiate between workers' control over their jobs (linked to union density) and workers' control over their own organizations (through union elections). He argues that both are centrally important and that 'elections matter' (Crosby 2005: 743). We develop our own analysis of this view in our discussion of worker self-organization later in this paper. But for the moment, it is sufficient to acknowledge that there are important, complex and contested links between organizing, collective bargaining, and union democracy.

Before we move on to look at other outcomes, we should also note that there is evidence in the UK that the *scope* of collective bargaining is shrinking considerably. Several important studies (Brown and Nash 2008, Moore and Bewley 2004) have looked at the content of bargaining agreements and concluded that the many collective bargaining rounds cover only 'core' issues such as pay, working time, holidays and training rather than an extended list of issues such as equal opportunities, training, or pensions. This seems to suggest that unions are not succeeding in expanding the scope of joint regulation as an outcome of organizing efforts. This is again of very serious concern when we are seeking to evaluate organizing outcomes against both the objectives that unions set themselves, and any wider view of what organizing might seek to achieve.

In short, these findings signal a potentially very serious problem with the separation of organizing and bargaining. As a consequence of most unions having separated these functions within the union structures, we see a problem in securing bargaining outcomes as a result of investing in organizing activity. Whilst we are not suggesting that collective bargaining is the be all and end all of trade unionism or of organizing work, it is – and always has been – a central pillar of union activity in the UK. Some unions such as the GMB are increasingly thinking about how to integrate the organizing and bargaining functions. But these efforts at integration are by no means seen across the board and very serious questions remain about what role organizing – and organizers – are likely to achieve if those efforts are not focused on securing gains from employers.

Targeting Under-represented Membership Groups

A further element of this argument, frequently presented by those who focus their attention on the importance of unions increasing membership amongst under-represented groups, is that organizing activity can and should target the engagement of specific groups of members in democratic structures. This is particularly seen amongst authors who discuss women's involvement in unions (Colgan and Ledwith 2002b; Greene and Kirton 2003; Kirton and Healy 2004; McBride 2001; Parker and Douglas 2010). Although in the UK women workers are proportionately represented amongst union membership, they are under-represented in the decision-making structures. Thus, there are those who argue that if organizing efforts do not attempt to address inequality, unions are likely to become increasingly irrelevant within contemporary workplaces and labor markets. Other groups such as young workers, and black and minority ethnic workers are under-represented in both the membership and representative structures of most unions (Holgate 2004).

The evidence of organizing outcomes around this is very mixed. Whilst the original objective to target under-represented groups was never as specific as it might have been, there are two major groups that can be considered to be under-represented in UK union membership: those working in sectors and workplaces where unions have traditionally struggled to organize, and those from minority ethnic groups where representation within unions has not been representative of the workforce population. Whilst these groups need to be dealt with as analytically separate, there are important overlaps between them. Overall, minority ethnic workers, for example,

are far more likely to be working in private service sector workplaces where union representation is low. Thus the issue of under-representation is multi-faceted and complex. The intention here is to unpick some of this complexity and evaluate both the strengths and the weaknesses of union activities.

There is only really one group of workers who can be identified in the empirical evidence as having been targeted for membership specifically because of their worker characteristics: migrant workers. Other groups have largely been dealt with as integral to the workplaces selected by unions for organizing activity. Why this group has been dealt with separately is open to question. We suspect it reflects the fact that migrant workers have grown considerably as a feature of the UK labor market in the period under consideration; largely as a consequence of the expansion of EU membership to the eight Eastern European countries in 2004 which gave citizens of those countries the right to travel and (usually) to work in other EU member states. In other words, this is a reflection of unions responding to labour market change.

Others have studied this phenomenon in far greater detail than we can here (see Holgate 2009a; 2011; Martínez Lucio and Perrett 2009; Perrett and Martínez Lucio 2009 for a review of the literature in this area), but it is notable that some separate organizing activity has been targeted at this group. Putting to one side examples of organizing campaigns that have taken place in workplaces or organizations that employ largely migrant workers (see Holgate 2005 for example), there have also been examples of campaigns run to target migrant workers with information about working in the UK which cross workplaces, employers and sectors. Examples include the development of migrant worker branches in the GMB, the development of the Justice for Cleaners campaign in Unite (Holgate 2009b), and Unionlearn projects structured around the provision of English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes (Martínez Lucio and Perrett 2009; Martínez Lucio et al. 2007).

Although these are all important examples of activity, it is important to note that the vast majority of migrant workers work in sectors where formal union representation is absent (Portes and French 2005) and the kinds of campaigns highlighted above are notable for the fact that they are atypical. Thus, perhaps the more significant challenge is to expand union representation to those sectors and workplaces; the focus of the following section where, unfortunately, the assessment is rather pessimistic.

Organising in Under-represented Sectors

Data from CAC decisions in relation to the statutory recognition procedures, as well as macro-data (Blanden et al. 2006; Gall 2007) persistently show that unions have mainly targeted workplaces in existing strongholds for greenfield organizing activity. As Blanden et al (2006: 183) pointed out '[A]lthough the new recognition agreements have helped 'stop the rot' of secular decline, these firms may not be the ones that can help unions increase aggregate membership substantially'. This 'consolidation' or 'close expansion' activity (Kelly and Heery 1989) is argued to be rational by many union policy makers. Consolidation activity or close expansion typically involves increasing membership density in organizations where unions already have recognition and/or seeking bargaining rights in organizations that are linked to workplaces where recognition already exists. This has the advantage to unions of maximizing the return on their organizing expenditure. Employer resistance is typically less in workplaces where there is already a working relationship. And some unions have invested in expanding recognition agreements to groups of workers in the same organizations, but who have not previously been covered by collective agreements.

There are some examples of particularly innovative practice. The approach of the general union, Unite, is interesting as they have developed a sectoral strategy that involves targeting large employers in a particular sector (low cost airlines, white meat processing, etc.) and then attempting to roll out agreements to smaller employers. This is a challenging strategy in a context where there is no provision for 'extension' of collective bargaining, nor any institutional mechanisms for facilitating sectoral bargaining in these areas. There are also examples of some of the smaller, cash-rich unions seeking to expand. Specifically the ISTC and GPMU, which had strongholds in the declining steel and paper industries respectively, were early supporters of the Academy. They developed slightly different approaches. The ISTC adopted what they called 'community unionism' and sought to organize in the sectors where ex-steelworkers and their families now worked. They argued their stronghold was in communities which had developed to provide labor for steel plants and that now those plants no longer hired large numbers of workers, the union should seek to recruit and organize in the, often service based, workplaces that had taken their place. In 2004, the union merged with several smaller unions and calls itself Community to reflect this strategy and these values. However, in 2010, the union disbanded its

organizing unit reflecting a significant shift of strategy within the union and debates about the extent to which this type of organizing activity had been effective in providing opportunities for renewal.

The GPMU took a similar approach in response to declining employment in the printing industry, but it was more successfully able to use the statutory recognition legislation because although there had been a wave of de-recognition efforts in printing throughout the 1980s and 1990s, many workers had retained either membership or an affiliation to the union despite not having bargaining rights. In practice, this meant that there were pockets of considerable membership density where majority support for the union was comparatively easy to demonstrate, but where employer hostility to union recognition had blocked bargaining for many years. Alongside this approach, the GPMU did attempt to expand beyond printing. This work was largely undertaken by Academy organizers and involved targeting workforces working in similar geographical locations to members in existing firms; for example, workplaces on an industrial estate near a small print shop. Again, this strategy yielded some membership expansion, but little overall membership growth. The union eventually merged with Amicus (later Unite) in 2004.

These examples are also notable because they are atypical. The main picture of union organizing activity over the past decade has been one of consolidation and close expansion rather than expansion into new sectors. Most notably, overall, there has been very little evidence at an aggregate level that expansion into the private service sector. Membership density in the private service sector still hovers around 15.5 per cent reflecting a steady downward trend from around 20 per cent in 1997 (Bryson and Forth 2010). Of course, there is also a significant public sector effect here. Public sector unions make up a large proportion of the Organising Academy sponsors and these unions generally have fewer opportunities to expand their recognition agreements as most public sector workers have union representation rights. Thus, for these unions it seems obvious that consolidation is the main organizing activity that they undertake. However, the public sector has been increasingly privatized over recent decades and it is not unusual for a local Unison branch to have up to 200 employers in its area where it would in the past only have had one local authority employer.

The Public and Commercial Services union (PCS) has also had large numbers of members transferred to the private sector as a result of privatization polices of successive governments over the past 20 years. Many of these members have taken with them their union representation rights as a result of complex European Union legislation that, in principle, protects some of these workers' terms and conditions as they are transferred to the private sector (McMullen 2006). This has given PCS

a foothold in many private sector organizations that had previously been largely un-unionized. Whilst efforts to capitalize on these organizing opportunities have had mixed outcomes, they do at least represent an opportunity – and in many respects a necessity – for some public sector unions to expand into new territories.

In short, while there is evidence that some unions have been seeking to expand into new territories, this is not the only picture. Overall, collective bargaining coverage is now around 32 per cent of workers compared to 36 per cent in 1999, reflecting a slight downward trend in both public and private sectors (Bryson and Forth 2010). It is therefore hard to avoid the conclusion that 13 years of organizing activity has made comparatively little impact on formal, aggregate measures of union power. Of course, it is impossible to know whether decline would have been worse in the absence of such activity. We strongly suspect it would have been and that much of the stabilization of union membership has resulted from the kinds of activities described throughout the book. But on these measures there is comparatively little cause for celebration within the union movement as the UK moves into a period that is likely to be both politically and economically significantly more challenging than the previous 13 years. But as anyone who has ever discussed organizing with a union organizer knows, organizing is not just about numbers. It is also about building strong and (relatively) independent structures of worker representation. We feel that it is important to try to capture this kind of 'cultural' development in our evaluation and, despite the methodological difficulties of evaluating something that is inherently difficult to measure, we feel that our data allows us important insight into the extent to which the UK union movement has developed ideas about worker self-organization, union democracy, and making links beyond the workplace. It is to this that our attention now turns.

Worker Self-organization and Union Democracy

One of the central notions within organizing is that it should encourage membership activism so that workers are encouraged to take collective action to address their own problems and issues at work. Through collective action around relevant workplace issues, it is then hoped that workers will come to experience the effectiveness of collective action and join the union. This 'mobilization' approach (Kelly 1998) places at its core workers taking responsibility for addressing their workplace issues, rather than relying on paid officers. As a result, it raises some crucial issues about ideas

of union democracy. Union democracy is a highly contested notion. In previous papers, we have already raised the question of whether union democracy relates to the processes through which members participate in their union, or whether we should take a broader view of what would traditionally have been called 'industrial democracy' i.e. the need to engage workers in the decision making of their employers at both organizational and industrial or sectoral levels.

We take the view that whilst both are important objectives of organizing, 'industrial democracy' in the UK context is largely secured through collective bargaining which has been discussed previously. Unlike, for example, Germany, we have weak institutional mechanisms for industrial democracy to extend beyond collective bargaining (Hall *et al.* 2009), nor are they likely to strengthen in the foreseeable future. As a result, we suggest that arguments about what institutional or legislative frameworks for wider industrial democracy may or may not be desirable are beyond the scope of this book. Of course, if organizing efforts were sufficiently successful to (re)establish unions as powerful actors within the economic and political environment such debates would not only be logical, but essential. But at this point in time, we want to focus on the internal mechanisms available to members to participate in their unions. In doing so, we differentiate between participation at workplace level, and participation in the wider structures of the union.

It is difficult to get aggregate level evidence about what is happening in organizing campaigns in individual workplaces, but we can make some helpful inferences from our in-depth qualitative case studies of campaigns. Although these are mostly greenfield campaigns, we nonetheless get important insight which indicates significant variability both within and between campaigns. Variation within a campaign tends to be related to the individual activists in particular workplaces, and this is where activist training becomes so important. It is important to note that there are increasing opportunities for activists to be trained in organizing techniques and principles. But until relatively recently, activist training in most unions had – at best – a single module on organizing which rather undermined much of the good work done during organizing campaigns, and undoubtedly sent very mixed messages about what role(s) unions want their activists to take on. In 2009, the TUC launched the Activist Academy which is certainly a positive development in this area, and many individual unions are giving serious thought and resources to ways of developing activists more effectively.

Variation between campaigns is largely related to the policies and practices of individual unions and this is perhaps conceptually one of the most interesting issues emerging from our extensive studies of organizing activity. In the earlier section

on collective bargaining, we highlighted the difficulties confronting unions if they pay insufficient attention to the link between organizing and bargaining. There is a serious danger that un-coordinated organizing activity results in individual workplaces being organized, but little opportunity to secure effective collective bargaining gains because of the lack of unionization in the wider industry or sector. But we also argue that the reverse is equally problematic. Organizing that is driven too much from the top or from the center of the union can be just as unsustainable.

We see this in a number of campaigns that have been launched because – and only because – they have been strategically important to the union for some reason. Typically, this might be because of some kind of change of ownership (for example, if an employer sub-contracts or outsources a particular activity which transfers some union members into another employer) or because a union is seeking to expand beyond its core territories. Whilst both kinds of organizing are necessary, there are examples of campaigns that have been pursued even where there is little enthusiasm from workers. Because of the voluntarist nature of British labour relations, it is quite possible that managers may agree to a union presence, or even to collective bargaining, without a strong demand for it from workers. Thus, we have seen cases where unions pursue some of these campaigns and attempt to build membership and activism, but where the membership withers quickly. We argue that this kind of organizing as equally as unsustainable as campaigns where there is membership enthusiasm, but where there is a lack of co-ordination.

Which returns us to important ideas about union democracy. Much previous writing on union democracy tends to focus on membership activism. Indeed Fairbrother (1989, 2000), for example, argues that workplace activism is the key driver of both organizing and of union renewal more widely and Bramble (1995) argues that efforts at co-ordination as 'stifling' renewal opportunities. On the basis of having observed many campaigns, we take a different view. In common with Voss and Sherman (2000) we argue that organizing activity is an area that needs co-ordination if it is to succeed in developing sustainable and effective trade unionism. This is explicitly not the same as arguing that organizing strategy should be driven from 'top down' or 'center out'. Crucially, we see the role of the 'top' or the 'center' as being one of co-ordination and allocation of scarce resources, rather than of control over what happens in the workplace itself. We also argue that, within the UK context, organizing is achieving little without developing strong workplace activism and membership. We are not arguing that this co-ordinated approach produces no tensions. Clearly, any process of allocating scarce resources can create

tensions and we have highlighted that throughout this book. Rather, our argument rests on an analysis of the conditions under which the most effective organizing outcomes emerge and, in our view, our data clearly show a role for both activism and co-ordination.

This highlights the paradox of organizing: there is almost no evidence that organizing activity is currently happening spontaneously within UK workplaces so it must be promoted by professional union actors (officials, organizers, policy makers). But if those professionals do manage to create effectively organized workplaces, ultimately, these two loci of activity may well come into conflict with each other. And this is where the structures of union democracy i.e. the internal decision making structures of the union, are so important. If centrally coordinated organizing efforts are successful in creating dynamic workplace organization, this should be seen in workplaces that have high levels of membership: members who participate in the activities of the union (including, but not limited to, bargaining), membership that is representative of the workforce in those workplaces, and – and this is hugely important – the confidence to set a union agenda that is relevant in that workplace. The first three of these objectives are rarely contested by either workplace activists or by union professionals. The latter, which we consider to be a central part of any consideration of any meaningful definition of worker self-organization, is highly contested.

Indeed, it is this point that is really the key difference between the different approaches of different unions that we have described elsewhere (see Simms and Holgate 2010 for a discussion). Many trade unionists, commentators, and academics are very critical of the kind of organizing undertaken by, for example, Usdaw. We use Usdaw as an example here because we have described their approach in more detail than many other unions, and also because they are very clear that a key focus of their organizing activity is about recruitment, not because we think their approach is any more problematic than many other unions with which we have worked. Usdaw's approach fully accepts the importance of increasing membership, of ensuring representativeness, and of developing activists. However, the structure and culture of Usdaw places far less emphasis on building worker self-organization. In part, this is because of the labour markets within which Usdaw organizes. Within retail, workers often work on temporary and/or part-time contracts, and labour turnover is high, which can make these workplaces difficult to organize. Usdaw has taken the view that one way around these challenges is to work with employer support wherever possible. And the politics of that approach cannot be ignored. One consequence of a more 'partnership' oriented approach is that it leaves less scope

for members to build a workplace trade union culture that develops a collective and independent voice around relevant workplace issues than in unions that place less emphasis on working co-operatively with employers. So, whilst Usdaw has undoubtedly been successful in recruiting members and growing the union, and has had some considerable success in identifying workplace activists, there is little emphasis on building worker self-organization. Importantly, it should be noted that many within the union would argue that this is neither a desirable nor an achievable objective and it doesn't therefore matter whether one rejects it because of a political stance, or because of an acceptance that it would be difficult to achieve organizing in these sectors; the end result is the same.

Inevitably, however, unions that do seek to develop strong, self-organizing workplaces are highly likely to find tensions between the central co-ordination of union activities (including organizing) and the aspiration to involve members at workplace level so that they make decisions that are relevant to them. This is a further paradox inherent within organizing. But we argue that it is a paradox that has always been inherent within trade unionism more generally and is not specific to organizing activity. What is different is that some ideas about organizing – although not all as we can see from the Usdaw example above – relate either explicitly or implicitly to an objective of increasing the democratic participation of members.

In practice, most unions – and certainly most organizers – are committed to the objective of increasing the democratic participation of members. And where organizing campaigns are successful in increasing membership and representation structures there are relatively few examples of efforts to control members in a direct manner. Indeed, in some respects our findings show that it can be officers and organizers who are disappointed by the fact that members seem un-enthused about participating in the workplace structures. One officer of a large union that had run both greenfield and in-fill campaigns in large private sector employers stressed at length how hard she tried to encourage members to take on representation and bargaining roles – not always successfully: 'My approach is that they [workplace activists] should be doing this kind of thing for themselves'. She went on to say 'I think they [activists] should have the responsibility for it [the campaign]. It's their workplace, their problems, not mine'.

This is a fairly typical view of many officers and of almost all organizers. Indeed, whilst it is undoubtedly the case that not all union officers share this view, we have yet to come across an organizer who does not broadly share this approach. Where officers do not share this view, it can lead to tensions. Focusing for the moment on campaigns where officers and organizers do share this approach, it is clear even here

in those campaigns that there can be frustrations about getting workplace activists to take on these roles. This is particularly evident in greenfield campaigns where workers often have little previous experience of unions. In some respects this can be an advantage in that their expectations can be shaped throughout the campaigns. But in practice these new union members, activists and representatives often need time and training to build and develop experience and confidence. A further complication is that in greenfield campaigns, our research shows that the range of activities taken on by activists can be very different from the roles adopted once recognition has been granted and the union is more established. These different roles demand different skills and require, we argue, acceptance of the fact that the pre- and post- recognition phases of greenfield organizing are very different, requiring different skills, and sometimes different activists.

The post-recognition phase is, of course, essentially an in-fill campaign. In-fill campaigns are where issues of the relationship between union organizing and union democracy really come to the fore. Here, activists and representatives often have a great deal of experience within their unions, and can often have very strong ideas about how they envisage the relationship and the division of decision-making responsibilities between officers and activists.

Although there can be tensions around this, unions have well-established structures for engaging members and activists which channel those debates into conferences and other decision-making processes. This is how unions operate and what they do – and always have done. There seems little evidence that organizing *per se* presents a serious challenge to those existing processes and structures. Indeed many officers and organizers would like to see greater involvement of members, even if the consequence was to make their role more contested.

Social Movement Unionism

Some authors and commentators have seen the opportunity to broaden debates about organizing to include ideas about the focus of unions more generally. One important strand of this has been an increasingly strong view that unions can and should develop a form of 'social movement unionism' (Clawson 2003). Typically this tends to focus on developing formal and informal links between unions and other social justice campaigns to improve workers' rights. This implicitly accepts a more radical view of the role unions can play in social change and promoting

social justice that may conflict with some of the more institutional and regulationist objectives discussed above. In the UK, there is relatively little evidence of this kind of organizing, although this view has been most closely associated with 'community unionism' (Holgate, 2009c; McBride and Greenwood 2009; Wills and Simms 2004) which focuses on increasing the links between the workplace and the wider community, and on recognizing and building on workers' roles and connections beyond their workplace. What is important here is that the focus of such organizing activity is far beyond any immediate improvements in workers' terms and conditions (although these may accrue from such activity), and thatis the union attempts to become relevant to workers' lives beyond a workplace, industry or sectoral level. Social movement unionism has a far broader view of the role of the union: taking it beyond the workplace and into the wider political sphere.

And, again, we need to be alert to the different national contexts. UK unions have a long history of taking up broadly defined social justice campaigns and issues including anti-racism campaigns, concern with local development issues, and an extremely active engagement in the 'learning agenda' focused on improving basic skills amongst workers such as literacy and numeracy. But the focus on collective bargaining, the separation of the Labour Party and the trade union movement, and the dominance of the idea of incremental rather than revolutionary change, all help to explain why UK unions have tended to prioritize a focus on workplace bargaining rather than see these kinds of wider community activity as central to their approach.

Our research indicates that the interest and investment in organizing activity is still located very much at workplace level, and prioritizes the objective of securing improvements in workers' terms and conditions of employment. This is not the same as saying that unions have no interest in the wider social movement agenda: rather that it is not their central priority. We argue that this does reflect a certain lack of imagination on behalf of unions. Elsewhere, it has been argued that certain labour market conditions such as the employment of large numbers of contingent workers can place a considerable imperative on unions organizing 'beyond the enterprise' (Heery et al. 2004). We do see evidence that particular labour markets can create this kind of union response and there are certainly examples of unions organizing freelance and self-employed workers in this way. But this is by no means the dominant form of union organizing in the UK.

Conclusions

In a broad sense, the evidence of the impact of organizing initiatives is very mixed and not optimistic in relation to questions of a wide-scale union renewal. In large part, we have argued that this is a consequence of the dominant focus of organizing practice targeted at membership development and, occasionally, securing recognition for collective bargaining rather than the wider and more political objectives of promoting worker self-organization or social movement unionism.

Our analysis has allowed a more complex evaluation of the dynamics of particular outcomes in different unions and different sectors than has previously been put forward in much of the UK literature. This has allowed us to develop a more nuanced argument than has been outlined in previous literature and one that can more convincingly account for the diversity of objectives and outcomes identified across the union movement. We argue that whilst at a general level, there has been an interest in increasing membership at the expense of a more radical 'vision' of organizing, there are notable exceptions which have placed considerable emphasis on strengthening membership voice and activism.

Overall though, our analysis has a decidedly pessimistic tone. Returning to the relevance of the wider political and economic context of the period between 1997 and 2010, it is clear that unions largely failed to use the more benign environment to renew themselves in a convincing manner. Whilst membership levels have stabilized, this is against a background of a growing labor market. Although there are examples of innovative projects to attract new and under-represented groups of vulnerable workers (such as migrant workers), but there is considerable evidence that collective bargaining strength during this period has declined in almost all sectors. Equally, but there is little evidence of any sustained development of the kind of social movement unionism discussed in US literature. On all of these measures, the UK union movement is judged to be at least no stronger – and probably weaker – than it was in 1997 despite the changes in the institutional and political context.

Clearly the economic and political contexts in the UK have shifted rapidly since the financial crisis of 2008. The 2010 centre-right UK coalition government has proved largely uninterested in worker and union rights, although they have highlighted that if social unrest were to become more evident, the might seek to tighten further the restrictions on industrial action. In common with much of the European Union,

the UK faces an extended period of economic austerity. The effects of these external factors on unions and on the organizing project remains to be seen. But it is evident that we face a challenging period ahead.

We leave the final word with one of our most senior interviewees whose role is to develop and deliver strategic leadership across the UK union movement. She stressed the need for unions to keep organizing in the current climate.

> *Globally, labour's share of wealth decreases. Globally the neo-liberal cult makes it hard to restrain union-free capital. International policies make it hard in a central way. These are big, big issues. Not just for the trade union movement, but for progressives globally about how do you keep going when it feels like things are stacked against you… It probably means that we need to think even more internationally than we've ever thought before. We need to think longer term than we've thought before, in say not just next year, or five years even. But ten years, twenty years, fifty years where will the trade union movement be? What do we need to have done? We need to be savvy politically.* (Interviewee #15, white female)

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