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Organising as a strategy to reach the precarious and marginalised workforce. A review of the debates on the role of the political dimension and the dilemmas of representation and solidarity

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Summary

Organising as a trade union strategy has caught the imagination of the labour movement over the past 20 years or so. The vast possibilities of new forms of organising go hand in hand with concern about its highly constrained and sometimes hierarchical use. This article looks at key aspects of the debate, focusing on the question of how new forms of organising reach out to more vulnerable and precarious workers. Similar to other colleagues in the field, we conclude that there are political and organisational gaps in organising strategies and that new forms of organising can in some instances be bureaucratic and apolitical. Furthermore, it is important to extend our understanding of the role of trade unions in relation to the state, organised working class constituencies, and social rights, especially as, with regard to vulnerable workers and their organisations, questions of regulation are highly sensitive and challenging.

Résumé

Zusammenfassung

Keywords

organising, precarious, regulation, renewal, representation, social rights, trade unions, vulnerable, workers

Introduction

The debate on union revitalisation has assumed great significance, backed by a plethora of material extending beyond the actual extent of trade union change and development. The concept of organising is at the heart of this debate and has generated a range of books and ideas jostling with the reality of organising. On the positive side, this obsession – if we may call it that – is an indication of the political and social relevance attached by academics working in the field of labour and employer relations to the necessity of trade union renewal. This debate has brought forth a range of contributions on the meaning of organising and its development and potential as a central tenet of union renewal, many of which offer advice, prescriptions and warnings as to the way it is, or should be, developed.

A central question in this debate is how trade unions should engage in organising to reach out to an increasingly fragmented workforce vulnerable in terms of workplace politics and exposed to non-standard employment practices. This article focuses particularly on how organising has been seen to connect the labour movement with an increasingly precarious, insecure and diverse – in terms of age, gender, ethnicity and migrant status – workforce (Sennett, 1999; Standing, 2011).

The problem of work becoming more fragmented and decentralised – thereby undermining worker participation – is creating a series of barriers for the labour movement, not just in ‘liberal market economies’. The article argues that much of the literature now points to the need to consider questions of leadership and trade union structure, the way different elements or spheres of trade union strategy are combined and the manner in which issues concerning the purpose of union strategies are relevant to the discussion. The article outlines key aspects of this literature, discussing the choices and issues facing trade unionism when unions use new forms of organising as a way of connecting to the groups of workers outlined above. The article subsequently provides a series of recommendations and points of reflection that need to be considered when developing a more rounded view of what unions do or should do. In particular, we will stress that the main problem characterising the debate is the disconnected manner in which new forms of organising are being used and developed, as if they primarily

concern recruitment and the application of basic working conditions. The article calls for organising to be developed to cover the broad group of unprotected workers, highlighting the need to think about linkage in terms of workplace, social and political strategies. We need to look at how issues are framed and presented by trade unions in different contexts and how these are linked to renewal more generally. Such cross-referencing is essential for organising to become more than just a one-dimensional recruitment tactic. The article reflects and builds on organising debates over the nature of the relationship between broader interests and class-related issues and more specific experiences and identities of marginalised and vulnerable workers. While horizontal and vertical union challenges exist when conducting organising campaigns targeting more vulnerable and precarious workers, there are also questions of interlinking the different dimensions – regulatory, industrial and social – to create a more sustainable and emancipatory long-term strategy.

The fragmentation of work and the workforce

The question of trade union decline is unfortunately an established part of the labour relations teaching curriculum today, as is the timespan this decline covers. Union membership in countries such as the United Kingdom has fallen to about a quarter of the overall workforce, in Spain to about a fifth of the workforce, while in France fewer than one in ten workers are trade union members. Even in Germany there is a sense that the prevailing approach to regulation and representation is under pressure (Doellgast and Greer, 2007). In Central and Eastern European countries, deregulatory drives and the decline in union membership took an even more severe form over a shorter period. In Europe and North America, the political consensus of supporting organised labour has in most cases eroded as a practice and narrative (Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman, 2013: 35). Though not the place to discuss this decline in detail, an acknowledgement of this changing political and institutional consensus and its many contributory factors is necessary. Such changes can be summarised in Table 1 (Martinez Lucio, 2005, 2016) indicating the impact of social, economic and political factors. Despite the decline one can detect various forms of renewal and responses implemented by trade unions. Industrial relations literature has been systematic in studying these various levels of activity (Martinez Lucio, 2005, 2016). Table 1 shows the many different challenges facing organised labour and their various sources. This article focuses on the question of vulnerable and precarious workers, the increase in whose numbers has become a worrying phenomenon in recent years. Such a development is not solely a labour market phenomenon or chance incident but is linked to broader processes, such as the mobility of capital and the –

voluntary and involuntary – mobility of people across countries (Sassen, 1988). In Europe, the free movement of people and services has resulted in an increase in foreign workers, who shoulder many of the burdens of employment uncertainty (Anderson, 2010; Meardi et al., 2012) and endure dangerous working conditions putting health and safety at risk (Woolfson, 2006; Woolfson and Likic-Brboric, 2008). Greater deregulation, the enforcement of alternative ‘regulatory’ instruments such as the use of employment agencies (MacKenzie and Forde, 2006), the ambivalence surrounding posted workers (Greer et al., 2013) and the emergence of complex and hidden employment chains within the hidden economy make it much easier for employers to exploit workers. This increases their vulnerability and makes it even more difficult for trade unions to reach out to what is already a marginalised and/or precarious workforce. Labour market change is thus tied up with a range of economic and political changes which, in turn, are facilitated by the ever-greater numbers of vulnerable and precarious workers. Exclusion from standard work and/or unionised and regulated work is interlinked and embedded with wider structural changes in the labour market and its context in terms of undocumented work, new forms of hidden work, the use of vulnerable workers in specific positions, subcontracting and offshoring, the role of dense and rarely transparent networks of micro employers, and ethnically based systems of recruitment, amongst others. The main issue is that the organising debate often focuses on how trade unions mobilise against a bad or intransigent employer. While highly visible, such action is clearly not part of labour relations exchanges over representation issues or working conditions and wages. This is especially true in relation to vulnerable work possibly involving hidden chains of employers and activities not always structured in clearly identifiable industrial relations, whether due to the size and informal nature of the company or the networks of workers across chains of subcontracts. In addition, vulnerable work also includes workers who may be exposed as a consequence of their position in such employer contexts *and* the specific social characteristics they have as undocumented workers, migrants with specific problems in terms of economic and social marginalisation, younger workers without sufficient social capital to engage with the labour market, or women with specific limitations in terms of labour market access due to social and institutional barriers. In its report on vulnerable workers, the British Trades Union Congress (TUC) speaks of ‘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: 3): ‘Vulnerable work is insecure, low-paid and places workers at high risk of employment rights abuse. Its existence is not inevitable; it is a result

of choices made by political and economic decision-makers. Women, people from minority ethnic groups and disabled people are more likely to be in vulnerable work' (TUC, 2007: 9).

The question of organising: towards new forms of organising and the inclusion of vulnerable workers

The debate on new forms of organising has in part been driven by the realisation that fragmented company structures and the exposed and vulnerable nature of workers in key areas of the labour market have become a major challenge for the labour movement. The debate does not simply involve contrasting the role of well networked, *unionate* workers with fragmented employer structures or vulnerable workers in formalised and structured employing units. The general question of how trade unions respond to the growth in precarious and vulnerable work has been discussed more generally by Keune (2013) who outlines responses ranging from assisting access to employment to qualitative workplace and employment changes (e.g. in the field of health and safety). These in turn determine the ways in which trade unions can respond in support of the affected workers (both those in precarious jobs and those whose stable employment over time is influenced by the presence of precarious workers), targeting the nature of the work, its working conditions and overall stability.

Yet for many, organising has been a central tenet of the emerging strategic response to the challenges faced by trade unions (Gall, 2009). Organising can link strategic and ethical arguments, underpinning its role as a strategy for facing up to and responding to trade union decline and for representing the 'unrepresented'. Definitions of new forms of organising are ambivalent, as trade unions and academics have interpreted them in different ways (Carter 2006; de Turberville, 2004). Whilst technically about reaching out to harder-to-reach workers and workplaces, organising – alongside facilitating access to union services and activity – has an internal feature (Martinez Lucio and Stuart, 2009). In this respect organising is not solely about campaigning for union recognition and giving unions a regulatory role in specific workplaces with little or no trade union activity, but a strategy to reach out to non-unionised workers in recognised environments and sectors such as the public sector which still has a large proportion of non-unionised workers even if they are covered by collective agreements (McCarthy, 2009). For this reason, Gall (2009) clearly argues that a broader approach to organising is needed.

As a concept, organising was originally introduced into the US union movement as 'internal organising', referring to activity within unionised workplaces focused on mobilising

members for union action. The term 'external organising' was used to refer to the recruitment of new members and outreach work. Organising is now however indiscriminately used to refer to both forms (Hurd, 2004). Yet organising in the US is now mainly about reaching out to difficult sectors and new sets of workers such as migrant Hispanic workers (Milkman, 2000), with new forms of organising principally revolving around mobilising campaigns. Such campaigns see union organisers (be they specific project-based organisers or trade union officials or activists) reaching out to unorganised workers with the aim of permanently improving their working conditions and creating a trade union presence within workplaces. Earlier literature also pointed to the way such workers could participate and, in some cases, even lead these campaigns. In this respect it is a narrative of trade union renewal (Martinez Lucio and Stuart, 2009) that utilises notions of managed activism and planned campaigning (Heery et al., 2003). This raises problems since in the UK and the US joint regulation is premised on some type of trade union presence, which is not the case in certain European countries where, at least legally, workplaces may be covered by a collective agreement of some form and have elected worker representatives who need not be (although normally are) union members. This Anglo-Saxon context has thus determined a view of what organising is, although in practice it has become more variable.

However, the reality is that organising now means many things (see Gall, 2009). For the sake of convenience, we can distinguish between the following forms of organising. First, there is 'external organising', which focuses on using campaigning methods and dedicated organisers in one form or another to enhance the working conditions of unorganised workers and to create union representation structures at their workplaces and sometimes even within their communities. These external strategies focus on regulation and/or representation. In the main they are periodic in nature, focusing on raising concerns and issues publicly through non-workplace meetings and activism. Secondly, there has been an extension of this logic into the internal realm (internal organising) of already unionised workplaces, targeting non-union members via information campaigns – normally of an informational nature around specific workplace issues. These internal approaches are referred to as 'organising' even though they vary from a mimicking of the external campaigning approach (for instance through highlighting casualisation at work) to mere servicing or recruitment activities (Martinez Lucio and Stuart, 2009). It is in this second dimension of internal organising where the ambivalence begins. However, even in the first dimension many unions label their standard recruitment campaigns as being about organising. We contend that organising in its new forms is distinctive when it has a campaign-style approach, is mobilisation-driven and

purports to engage workers more actively in terms of participating and even partly leading the process. The work of Simms and Holgate (2010) makes this assumption in order to distinguish this approach from servicing and other more mainstream approaches – not that these do not play an important follow-up role in post-organising scenarios.

The challenges of organising ‘outsiders’

The way in which the debate on organising and the model itself is filtered and recomposed in different national contexts is inevitably influenced by state regulation as well as trade union history and traditions (its repertoires of contentions). For instance, in Spain (see Martinez Lucio, 2016) the question of organising is less apparent, as the focus of trade union activity in terms of extending workplace rights and representation is concentrated on trade union campaigns for works council and worker representatives in mandatory elections held every four years under labour law. The narrative and practice of renewal as stated in Frege and Kelly (2003) is therefore partly due to path dependency and the institutional context but also to the way mobilisation and organising are framed in specific contexts. In this respect, in relation to vulnerable workers, there may be different sensitivities and different understandings of solidarity (Connolly et al., 2014) – looked at in greater detail later on –, while the question of what constitutes vulnerability may also vary. These contextual factors partly determine the way such organising strategies have been developed and framed within trade union organisations (and to what extent they have been primarily centrally determined forms of strategy with formal centrally structured approaches). Yet in general terms, the key issue here is that, where organising has been adopted to reach out to hard-to-reach workers and workplaces, it has been approached in a manner which does not always follow the perceived intentions of its earlier origins (Carter, 2006). Various points of criticism or collegial commentary are outlined below.

There tends to be an increasingly specific company focus related to the emergence of ‘internal organising’ noted earlier. However, these spaces may not always be sensitive to the way in which employment agencies and labour market intermediaries function, and initiatives focus on workers in established and stable workplaces who are not directly employed (see MacKenzie and Forde, 2006). A characteristic of such organising campaigns is their use of office-bound or bureaucratically selected organisers who are brought into the organising environment. One concern is that such a tactic may not allow for broader approaches to be adopted, and much depends on the character, background and social capital of such organisers. Hence unions sometimes use dedicated internal organising structures that are not

always connected with the trade union organisation and its sector-oriented or local-regional units, meaning that they are not engaged in creating common projects with them. This may include a gap or lack of linkage to other relevant union structures dealing with related issues such as equality structures or black and minority ethnic networks. These strategies can often be underpinned by a formal external or internal approach very much driven by membership and formal recruitment issues and not actually broadening the union agenda (Simms et al., 2013).

Furthermore, organising does not always counteract business-oriented approaches to social partnership (Heery, 2002), but is sometimes used as a representation and recruitment mechanism as it may be a precondition for trade union recognition (and in some cases a closer relationship to businesses and employers – see Gallin’s 2014 discussion and critique of the SEIU). Within contexts characterised by an established ‘social partnership’ approach, Vandaele and Leschke (2010) noted different German and Dutch approaches to organising, with the former more concerned with recruitment and extending incumbent systems of representation and established worker rights to non-standard workers, in contrast to the latter’s more experimental and inclusive approach. In the Nordic context, organising campaigns have, in some cases, been legitimated through being developed to limit social dumping, often targeting groups that are at high risk of exploitation – temporary, mobile and/or undocumented workers, or ones working in specific sectors of the economy where competition is higher (Marino et al., forthcoming). This approach focuses on ensuring that established labour standards are not eroded, while not necessarily inferring a rethinking of such regulations in terms of the workers being organised and also not necessarily involving recruitment or inclusionary efforts.

Many have commented on the lack of linkage between different union strategies such as learning and organising strategies, although there are cases where unions attempt to establish links around alternative mobilising agendas (Moore, 20011). Yet looking beyond how specific union activities match up, there appears to be a bureaucratic and disconnected approach to union organising, meaning that the specific issues faced by the most affected and vulnerable workers in terms of the new economic context and social reality are not always at the centre of the campaigns (Alberti et al., 2013). The emergent debates on organising challenges and problems focus on an inability to interconnect issues across different types of vulnerable workers, thereby creating a broader approach to questions of workforce interests (Alberti et al., 2013): ‘Central to this is an understanding of the complexities of social identities and how the adoption of categories (if any) has its own problems and limitations.

Similarly, by placing people into fixed analytical categories, there is a tendency to become too focused on a particular classification, which may neglect or marginalise the impact of other aspects of an individual's identity' (Alberti et al., 2013: 4136). Hence Alberti and colleagues (2013) argue that trade unions need to understand the intersectional aspects of mobilising communities and building bridges, while also remaining sensitive to more complex sets of experiences and identity. Any analysis of organising must build on this important set of insights, understanding that organising precarious or vulnerable workers requires greater sensitivity to difference. At the same time, there is the challenge and even risk of focusing on and legitimising particular diversity-oriented debate which raises issues as to how to then create common alliances and struggles. In this respect, it is not just a question of being alert or sensitive to intersectional issues and the balance between universal and particularistic interests (Alberti et al., 2013), but also of politically managing differences in such a way as to build up *unity in diversity*. It is also important to understand the competing nature of such universality and the dynamics and complexities of representation and its competing spheresⁱ.

This balancing of particular and universal interests is a common challenge partly because of internal bureaucratic inertia and partly because of the way various responses are seen as being fundamentally about services and acting *on* migrants (Martinez Lucio and Perrett, 2009). Furthermore, there are practical challenges involved in building up forms of collective action due to the difficulty of balancing different interests within the workforce without more systematic commitments to justice and fairness – and even then tensions may remain evident. Moreover, the possibility of directly including diverse workers in filtering and prioritizing particular interests to build up universal voice is rarely considered (Hyman, 1997).ⁱⁱ

The key point is that organising has only to a limited extent resulted in an increase of the 'demographic' representativeness or inclusiveness of trade unions (Hyman, 1997). This is due to the fact that organising has not been used as a means of organisational change, as a way to increase 'demographic democracy' and thus to participate unrepresented groups in the governance of trade unions. In this sense, the transformative value of organising as originally understood (Carter, 2006) has resulted in a quite limited set of outcomes. However, it is difficult to measure the effects as one would need to compare these with a virtual scenario of what would have been the case if no organising had been done (Gall, 2009).

The transformative value of organising would also require a move away from a concept of organising as a practice to represent the interests of specific groups of workers towards embracing organising as a way of rebuild workforce unity – or new forms of dialogue and

activism – through the sharing of common experiences and critical moments to create new forms of joint action and dialogue. Hence, the experience of organising vulnerable workers brings a new dynamic of mobilisation – potentially broader and more imaginative, yet not always visible among the many cases of ‘organising’.

Reconnecting organising and the democratisation of trade union strategy

Though by no means universal, this perceived democratic deficit is the outcome of a series of gaps and fissures within the way organising occurs. There are three general points taken from the various debates and discourses on the dimensions of organisational trade union practices that need careful attention when discussing or enacting such strategies of renewal: the vertical, the horizontal and the purposeful.

The first is that there is a vertical set of gaps in the participation of groups of workers and even activists. Comparing the Netherlands and Italy, it has been noted how migrant worker participation within trade unions is very much dependant on the way union inclusion and participation practices are extended to, and embedded in, relations with such groups (Marino, 2015). The literature also underlines the democratic deficit of many trade unions in relation to special groups and the fact that a servicing approach is not always at the centre of discussions on union renewal and labour migration. In one case, it was found that supporting the autonomy of special groups while also integrating their voice into the union played an important role in counterbalancing a ‘top-down’ approach (Marino, 2015). In addition, Wrench (1987, 1992) has noted the importance of the UK tradition of Black Worker sections in certain trade unions in helping to forge a more dynamic link between certain groups of workers and the labour movement. One of the problems with organising and especially new forms thereof has been the uses of a top-down approach and a reliance on pushing for state regulation for limiting the use of temporary agencies and rogue employers, especially in the more regulated Nordic systems (Benassi and Vlandas, 2015). Jiang and Korczynski (2016) argue that many groups of migrants – especially female migrants working in domestic service – have had to mobilise independently or on the fringes of trade unions by creating autonomous spaces, using more political forms and direct participative approaches. Many trade unions have reached out to domestic workers, but the approach has usually been one of picking up issues to represent, as opposed to highlighting inclusion and more novel forms of representation. There is thus a perceived vertical gap: while trade unions have reached out to certain vulnerable groups through servicing or broadening representation, this has been done without creating more systematic forms of dialogue.

Turning to the horizontal dimension of new forms of organising, we need to look at how such strategies fit into the broader union relations and strategies. Research conducted on migration and trade unionism in the Netherlands, Spain and the United Kingdom (Connolly et al., 2014) noted how trade union responses to dealing with social inclusion issues differed markedly. The authors developed Hyman's (2001) notion that trade unions are poised between different positions and spaces: markets, society and class. This triangular model is developed in terms of three similar but slightly different dimensions in the form of class, social rights (in terms of the state's social dimension) and issues linked to the *particularity* of the group to be organised – i.e. issues linked to race/ethnicity and migrant status. In the case of Spain, the union response to migrants tended to coalesce between class and social rights, focusing on a unitary class discourse and the use of state resources and social services to facilitate and assist migrants. In the United Kingdom, the absence of a specific union commitment on the social dimension meant that trade union responses tended to coalesce between class and race/ethnicity, being generally speaking more concerned with class approaches than with new forms of organising and mobilising taking account of black and minority ethnic workers' interests. In the Netherlands, trade unions tended to coalesce between social rights and race/ethnicity, since there was a tendency there to emphasize the state's social role characterised by social dialogue and a greater sensitivity to ethnic communities and diversity and equality discourses at a time when organising around class was less significant, although interest in it has since steadily grown (Connolly et al., in press).

In all three countries, there was evidence of an attempt to develop a response to growing labour migration and to a vulnerable and 'hard-to-reach' workforce, focusing more fully on the three dimensions, albeit with varying effect. Of relevance to this article is the fact that in the Netherlands a number of trade unions attempted to develop organising models centred on wage campaigns due to the more institutionalised nature of the trade union movement (Connolly et al., in press), while in Britain attempts were made to complement organising strategies with a greater attention to learning and (albeit limited) state-serviced strategies. In connection with this article, this triangular logic constitutes one way of illustrating the dilemma of new forms of organising. For them to go beyond periodic or time-specific campaigns focused on specific workers, they need to be more sensitive and responsive to the broader social context vis-à-vis the state and ethnicity in terms of society – and indeed other social groups and minorities. In effect, what emerges in some of the better cases is that such strategies complement a workplace class logic, offering a form of mobilising and campaigning vis-à-vis the state and how it delivers such social services and support in the

form of housing or worker rights for vulnerable groups (see for instance Martínez Lucio et al., 2013). We also have to be sensitive to the way such strategies include local migrant or ethnic communities – and vulnerable ones as well – in terms of their own organisations and forms of representation. As mentioned above, it is not just about being alert or sensitive to intersectional issues (Alberti et al., 2013), but also about politically organising differences in relation to each other. There is therefore a political need to re-engage some of the early US organising debates and advocacy in terms of the breadth of mobilising issues. This is argued in part by McAlevey (2012, 2015), looking at the link between the workplace and the community. This approach, which she terms ‘whole worker organising’, goes beyond the idea of building union and community links to bring community-organising techniques into the workplace while moving union-organising techniques into the community. Its conceptualisation is similar to that of social movement unionism, recognising that organising is a continuous process and that real people do not live two separate lives in and outside work (McAlevey 2012, 2015). Yet we would add that representation is not solely about who you represent, but also in which forums and which other stakeholders (or actors) and interests are targeted by such representation.

This leads to the point argued by Simms and Holgate (2010) on the absence of a political dimension in the debate on organising. There is a need to view organising from a broader perspective, moving away from membership figures or minimal representation agenda. In their studies of the TUC they noted the transformative effects of new approaches to organising, as in the role of the Organising Academy. However, they were concerned with the absence of political and innovative dimensions, especially in those trade unions where organising has become focused on recruitment and the provision of information. Here, the problem is even deeper when confronting vulnerable workers (in terms of ethnicity, gender, ability and age), as there are broader social rights issues and organisational dynamics within these communities. In this respect, merely highlighting specific employment conditions may be an unsustainable strategy.

The gaps identified in many debates and discussions within the labour movement and academia underline the risk of organising becoming technocratic, bureaucratic, routine-focused and disconnected. This might happen due to a campaign’s lack of profile or legitimacy, or the problem of not being able to involve activists and individuals in new forms of organising, relying instead on project-specific trade unionists. The need to enlarge a campaign’s context and nature not just ideologically but also politically and organisationally is very important with regard to vulnerable workers, mainly as they are unlikely to be as

included or engaged in economic, social and political terms. Nevertheless, much depends on the legacy of the group in question and their history.

Clearly, trade unions are not organisations with infinite resources. Furthermore, political traditions, priorities and identity vary enormously. There are also many challenges facing unions in terms of their own legitimacy and ability to represent and contribute to the regulation of work on behalf of their members and the workforce in general. However, part of the emerging problem with new forms of organising is that they are not part of overall approaches to renewal and change.

What is more, there is also the challenge to develop broader strategies using class and workplace resources in a more creative way, sustaining the nature of social and political mobilising while allowing new forms of organising. The latter can also be disconnected from core groups of workers, as acknowledged in organising projects aimed at including organised workers such as the Activist Academy or through distinct forms of worker networks (Simms et al., 2013). The role of networks and workplace activists in traditionally organised workplaces can act as a resource, providing unionists for new forms of organising. However, much is contingent on the political or ideological framework of the trade unions and political networks in question (Cohen, 2006). Whether one agrees with the specific views of Cohen is another matter, but the point is relevant. Somehow class and the organised working class in a general sense need to be linked more clearly or more often to new forms of external organising. The existence of this series of disconnections is a fundamental tenet of the concerns raised by many observers (Simms, 2012), and it also raises questions about how class is viewed in terms of debates on organising: ‘as a result, little attention is paid to building solidarities that pursue the interests of workers as a class *for* itself. Specifically, workers’ interests are largely conceived as being related to the immediate conditions of work in a specific workplace. Little attention is given to pursuing broader interests beyond the immediate workplace. This lack of emphasis on unions’ building class-based solidarities means that in the British context there are considerable limitations in representing an increasingly heterogeneous workforce’ (Simms, 2012: 99). Furthermore, there is no clear possibility of more organised workers directly learning from the vulnerable and precarious workforce and their struggles.

Yet if one – building on Simms’ insights – is to approach the key question of class and its connections across social, workplace and state dimensions, then one needs to think in terms of the different ways this can be done and how connections are made, especially as the political dimension and the space of class representation are more challenging (see Moore,

2011). Moore (2011) argues that there is a need to acknowledge that responses targeting vulnerable workers can take many forms, with sensitivity to questions of regulation and interest being important and needing to be added to the growing sensitivity towards identity: ‘intersectionality is useful to an understanding of lived experience ... , but that social divisions are fundamental to the restructuring of capitalist relations and have to be seen as integral to this system ... Second, I question the emphasis upon social identity and particularly class as an individualised, effective and psychological experience, which can become divorced from class as our collective and political history, legacy and future’ (Moore, 2011: 38). In this respect the intervening role of trade union activists is an important feature in linking such struggles to broader historical factors (Moore, 2011). As stated earlier, this is also important for understanding the stakeholders (or actors) and agencies addressed within the broader political sphere, and the solidarity framing employment regulation and representation.

The question of linkage and dialogue within the labour movement

Much depends on the context of employment regulation and trade union culture and identity in determining whether a more inclusive and social or political approach to organising can emerge. This can vary even within national contexts. However, a range of good practices and examples from the European labour movement serve as a basis for understanding more inclusive approaches to organising not solely based on providing services and not necessarily campaign-/project-specific.

First, there are instances where it is essential to contextualise organisational structures and campaigns more clearly in terms of, for example, equality and inclusion struggles. It is for instance not unknown for women’s departments or secretariats not to be involved in organising campaigns focused specifically on gender issues. In the UK, researchers have found organising departments which have not always been in contact with migrant worker units or projects, even when these are in the same building (Alberti et al., 2013). Similarly in Spain, information services provided to migrant workers have not always been integrated in core trade union organisational or sector strategies. However, building bridges between these areas of struggle is evident in other cases, allowing a politically broader approach to organising.

Secondly, it is important to promote more systematic debates and the involvement of ‘special groups’ (Marino, 2015) and narratives with a view to building ‘unity in diversity’. We need to note the extent to which the grass-roots mobilization of specific groups of workers can be

‘guided’ by trade unions in an attempt to build solidarity among them and reduce the fragmentation of interests by creating links within the workforce and campaigns across the labour relations spectrum. To this effect, the voice of those being organised has to be more systematically heard through networks, forums and structures with a certain decision-making capacity, i.e. the notion of using more open assembly-based and public space approaches – as found in minority unions and movements in Spain and Italy (and the case of *sans papiers* workers in France) – is of key importance (Connolly and Contrepois, 2016).

Thirdly, there should be a greater focus on positioning organising in clearer political mobilising narratives and strategies highlighting exclusion and inclusion issues in broader social terms. There are for example instances where specific wage issues have been linked to residency campaigns. Part of the work of the TUC Activist Academy in the UK involves an attempt to link organising training to political campaigning, even to the point of sending delegates to demonstrations.

Fourthly, with regards to union structure there are cases of developing trade union capacity-building exercises as part of internal officer and activist training, specialist forms of vulnerable worker representation, and new forms of information systems aimed at raising the awareness of organised labour to vulnerable work and social inclusion in general (e.g. race awareness) (Stuart and Martinez Lucio, 2014). This need to look at how modernisation boosts internal awareness to those seen to be on the outside has been picked up in various projects (Stuart et al., 2013) in the UK and the Netherlands.

No strategy or observation can just rely on ideal or desired forms of trade union practice. It is important to understand the barriers and challenges resulting from the weight of tradition and the role of entrenched economic and social interests. The question of renewal requires discussions over union structures and not just strategy, and ultimately the nature of class politics.

Conclusion

Organising is an important litmus test for trade union renewal and change. The wide range of practices and common points of reference found under the heading of organising have become a focus for discussion on how to extend trade union influence and workers’ rights at a moment of social and economic fragmentation and growing employer power. The article has discussed some of the key interventions in the field, calling for greater awareness to be paid to vulnerable, precarious and marginalised workers. Organising is seen as extending action strategies away from the more organised and ‘settled’ spaces of the employment

relationship into the realms of contemporary capitalist malpractice and exploitation. There are common themes emerging in terms of this analysis, based on the need to sensitise trade union action to the fates of those workers most difficult to reach and to a need to use a more embracing and emancipatory political discourse able to capture the support and action of such groups.

What we have tried to add is the observed need to think bottom-up and less in terms of formal recruitment campaigns, drawing on and highlighting the significant debate within the UK.

There is, perhaps, a need to return to some of the more innovative American moments of organising with their social and liberating notions of union purpose. However, it has also been argued that one needs to think and imagine such change in terms of the question of class and the realities of the labour movement. Looking at the vertical internal organisational dimension, there is a need to think in terms of how such mobilisations and campaigns can be led from below or by those being represented. It is also important to think how the different spheres of trade union action and activism such as the state, social and workplace dimensions are combined or at least addressed in the context of campaigns and spaces of activity. The context of representation and regulation need to be thought through, in addition to the identity or politics of those being represented. As Simms, Moore and others have called for: this requires a political U-turn – or a further political turn – and one that is clear on the position of class, although what shape this takes may depend on the previous point. Ironically, the need to differentiate and involve new and different groups needs also to focus on finding new commonalities and new points of reference between these groups: these can be narratives of justice and an inclusive understanding of class and can cover different political relations and institutional structures. The interlinking of questions of regulation, class and social rights – as shown in our approach – is important for organising campaigns to be more than just ways of acquiring minimal representation.

Finally, it is important to understand the organisational barriers existing within trade unions in Europe and beyond. These barriers can impede a more systematic penetration of these new spaces, counteracting the need to renew points of representation. Part of the problem is that it is not always appreciated that the challenges facing trade union structures are the problem of internal organisational traditions. For this reason, the emphasis on education and on coordinating internally across different organisational spaces may be just as important as reaching out beyond those spaces into the harder economy and labour markets.

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Notes

- i As recommended by McBride et al. (2015), as we are not essentialist about certain categories of specific identities and experiences, we must not therefore be essentialist or reductionist about the universal and the general.
- ii An interview with a regional secretary of the Italian metalworker union (FIOM-CGIL) illustrates this: ‘We think that they [migrants] are workers like all the others, but they need to present their problems and to contribute to their incorporation in this union. It is not easy

because problems differ greatly among migrant workers...they are not all the same. There are a lot of different cultures, religions, conditions that create different needs. So they said “Listen, let us try and speak among ourselves, summarizing our ten thousand problems and telling you that, at the end, we have ten real problems”. And this means very strong political participation and presupposes a very high level of political debate’.

Table 1. The dimensions of trade union crisis.

Dimensions of activism	Crisis of organised labour
Workplace	Company and workplace decentralisation through teams, cost centres and outsourcing which fragments labour loyalties and organisation processes
Management and labour utilisation	New forms of labour utilisation through the quality and consumer paradigm which create potentially new forms of loyalties and interests
Social context of work	Workforce fragmentation and individualisation which makes the process of representation through unitary means more challenging
State and regulation	Changing state roles and its decentralisation which undermine collective regulation
The global dimension	Globalisation: the new international dynamic and the gaps in labour in the face of Multinational Corporations (MNCs) which can use mobility across national regimes to undermine national labour regulation and organisations
The communication sphere	New forms of communication and the decline of public space and collectivism which can undermine systematic forms of ongoing communication through union structures

Source: Martinez Lucio, 2005 and 2016.

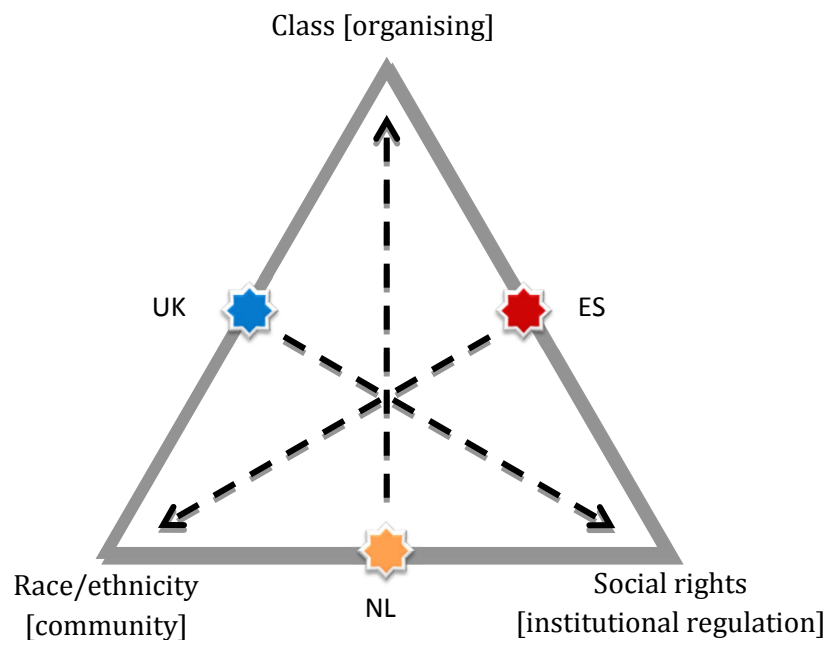


Figure 1. National contexts and strategic renewal. Source: Connolly et al, 2014