

Working Paper Series

Linking up?

The different realities of community unionism

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**LINKING UP?
THE DIFFERENT REALITIES OF COMMUNITY
UNIONISM**

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ABSTRACT:

A small number of impressive schemes, such as TELCO, have begun to define a new era for the wider community debate in industrial relations and trade union renewal (Wills, 2004). The move towards a spatial dimension in terms of industrial relations strategies, and the interest in developing community trade unionism is a visible feature of current discussions. Through three in-depth case-studies this paper attempts to show how the theme of community has a variety of different meanings and how community representation, servicing and organisation can vary considerably.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The development of community union approaches has caught the imagination of a range of industrial relations practitioners and academics. The role of trade unions is increasingly discussed in relation to the community dimensions of the workforce. There is a range of initiatives in the United Kingdom and other countries related to the development of community structures and initiatives. In terms of black and minority ethnic (BME) workers it is argued that the nature of their labour market experiences, and the way in which many are excluded and segregated, means that community and spatial structures of union organisation may be more effective in this context. Hence, there is a curious synergy and synthesis between the community union initiative and trade union concerns with black and minority ethnic related strategies. How effective and extensive this is in practice is another issue. The fact is that trade unions are responding to BME and community issues in a variety of ways and this reflects the distinct trade union traditions and contexts of trade union action.

The aim of the paper is to discuss the meaning and significance of community based trade union strategies in relation to BME issues. However, it will focus on three experiences of 'community' initiatives in the North of England. By doing this it will show how there is no single model of community unionism *per se*. Instead, the paper will outline three different initiatives and formats of community union engagement in relation to ethnicity and race issues. Each case will show a different facet of this new form of engagement. It will argue that the decision to embark on such strategies is not a singular choice, i.e. a one-off and coherent response to the issues at hand. There is no stable way or method of developing community-oriented strategies. Instead, we find, for example, initiatives on minimum wage issues, the development of ethnically based networks, and community-learning centre initiatives. These illustrate different aspects of the trade union engagement with communities. The paper will show there is no stable language or meaning underpinning such developments. In fact, it shows that the choice for unions is not just between partnership with employers or partnership with communities, but between different types of community approaches and politics as well. The paper will discuss these and finish with a discussion of the tensions that emerge with such types of engagement. To assume community unionism is a positive step for trade unions is correct, to assume that there are

no issues related with it is not. The paper will draw attention to the way community unionism depends on the state in its many faces, so bringing a variety of issues to the fore. It will argue that we need to understand the variety of community initiatives in terms of the nature of strategy and how it fits union renewal, the way communities are conceptualised and engaged with, and the way other actors such as the state are brought into the process and with what costs.

2. DEBATES ON COMMUNITY UNIONISM AND ON BLACK AND MINORITY ETHNIC WORKERS

The failure of trade unions to represent the broad canvass of groups that constitutes the black and minority ethnic community is a common theme in much of the literature. If anything, key aspects of the literature have emphasised the role of organised labour in processes of exclusion and segregation through a variety of systems (Jenkins *et al*, 2004). Ambivalent and racist attitudes towards ethnic minorities have been a common feature of trade union attitudes and activities (see Bhavnani and Bhavnani, 1985; Mayhew and Addison, 1983); and ambivalence amongst members and leaders about race and ethnicity issues - and even racist attitudes - has been a subject of concern and academic study. Trade unions developed, during the 20th century, a politics of solidarity which was always constrained by established, ethnic understandings of the workforce and by labour market regulatory mechanisms (internal and external) which supported groups of workers vis-à-vis both employers and 'outsiders'. The current vogue for studying the unions in relation to migration issues remains ambivalent and sanguine in its attitudes of trade union progress. Yet, support within migrant communities for unions can be high in some cases (Modood, 1997).

The debate has normally focused on key episodes of trade union intervention. There are many episodes of trade union support for black and minority ethnic workers being mistreated by employers, usually around recognition and restructuring issues. However, this area is studied in terms of concrete episodes such as disputes. It dovetails with the way industrial relations as a discipline has been intellectually focused around the study of conflict and bargaining without recourse to a broader understanding of spatial factors although recent interventions are trying to counter this 'industrial' approach (Holgate, 2005). The tendency is to see how trade unions can mobilise within migrant communities and connect within them during moments of conflict within

the employment relation. There are also debates about how trade union renewal (for a discussion see Frege and Kelly, 2004) has emerged as a strategy based on re-connecting with labour market constituencies and creating new modes of action, e.g. through community unionism. Yet even then, it is of 'coalition building' (Heery, 1998): of re-launching trade unionism through a new alignment of interests and strategies. This tends to downplay the internal impact of such re-alignments and the relation between them. In effect, if we are to study the role of unions in relation to race and ethnicity issues then we must be sensitive (a) to the various actors, (b) the varied needs and demands of social groups, and (c) the manner in which responses vary. The British trade union movement is steadily becoming alert to such issues. Davis *et al* (2006) have argued that unions need to address racism in terms of an array of strategies that are not just bargaining oriented but focused on self-organisation and organisational monitoring, amongst others. This study between the London Metropolitan University and the Trades Union Congress begins to map such approaches. There has recently been a tendency to develop a more sophisticated analysis of the challenges of organising ethnic minorities by looking at the nature of work organisation and the racial character of trade unions (Healy *et al*, 2004a and 2004b; Holgate, 2004a, 2004b, and 2005; Virdee and Grint 1994). Debates driven by Healy *et al* (2004) have tried to sensitise readers to the broader question of collectivism and its gender and ethnic character.

There is an argument emerging that considers workplace and bargaining strategies to be one part of any union renewal strategy and attempt to address BME issues. The failure to recast union renewal in spatial terms through communities of workers, be they BME or not, is seen as a major contributor to the isolation of the labour movement in social and political terms. Holgate points to the need to locate the workplace dynamics within the community/spatial dynamics, and to view unions in terms of this panorama. In a study of a recent dispute the role of informal community and ethnicity based links were seen as essential to the way modes of solidarity were constructed (Holgate, 2005). Hence, the tendency to focus on the trade union-worker relations through the prism of the shopfloor within industrial relations studies have begun to be challenged by a concern with the community dimension of industrial relations and the notion of 'other actors'.

Wills and Simms (2004) have seen the community dimension and community actors as a fundamental feature of the employment relation that contextualises the experience and approach to work; it is also suggested that the scope of traditional trade unionism cannot reach beyond the confines of the workplace due to its institutional and strategic focus. Hence, the increasing interest in community unionism within certain unions and academic perspectives: the concept of network unionism built around linkages with social actors (*ibid*; Evans *et al*, 2005; Wills, 2002; Wills, 1998). Recent work on community based Worker's Centres in the USA have shown how immigrant workers are becoming integral to their development; the argument is that we need to rethink the way we view these relations in more dynamic ways (Fine, 2006). Black and ethnic minority workers may have a 'repertoire' of strategies they can follow which do not always dovetail with established industrial relations routines (Cornfield, 2006). This builds on Tilly's (1978) notion of labour repertoires and the possibility of alternative developments and choices. Datta *et al* (2006) have argued that one should not ignore the role of 'Faith Based' organisations, for example, and social networks based around ethnic cleavages in the community organisation of recently arrived migrants in London. Developments in the past five years regarding the living wage campaign in London have been strongly influenced by religious organisations. Heery (1998) therefore outlines the role of coalition building in the logic of trade union renewal in recent years. This dimension has been seen in East London where campaigns amongst, and with, BME communities both socially and collectively have raised the wage levels in such areas as office cleaning (see Evans *et al*, 2005; Wills, 2001). The new community dimension is therefore emerging as a central feature of union response strategies.

The East London Community Organisation project (TELCO) focused on minimum wage issues in the East of London. It brought together academics, faith based organisations and some trade unions in a campaign to develop a more social oriented understanding of the living wage (Wills, 2004). The notion of the living wage took a central element of industrial relations - the wage - and redefined in terms of a language of dignity. Trade unions such as UNISON alongside public bodies and local community groups forged a coalition that mobilised and led a series of campaigns around key employers in the financial quarters of the East End. Much of UNISON's role as the lead

public sector and private utility union in terms of TELCO emerged from its long history of engaging with public sector cutbacks, hospital closures and local community service campaigns (Wills, 2004: 278). It has the history, activists and strategy to fit in with these new types of community initiatives. Their community unionism was their network and facilitating approach towards such local alliances. In this case, there was a strong BME dimension to this project.

This parallels developments in the USA where local community worker centres are emerging to deal with the needs of a less included and new workforce. In a study of worker centres in the USA, Fine (2006: 15) has argued that many of these centres are the outcome of a range of parent organisation: unions are responsible for 14% but faith based organisations are responsible for 22% and Ethnic NGOs 23%. In this respect, there is an issue with community unionism in that it is not about unions solely. This is where the debate on the subject, which sees community unionism as a counter to more conciliatory and business type visions of renewal, have failed to grasp the realities of this development. It is not about unions *per se*; it is about coalitions; and it is about forming alliances around specific campaigns (Sciacchitano, 1998). This is not to say that unions do not have a community dimension - there are many cases of this throughout history where the community dimension in terms of local occupational structures or local political organisation has meant that the spatial and the territorial is central to a union's identity and development (Martinez Lucio, 1988 & 1990). However, the current debate mistakenly uses the notion of community unionism as a structural, organisational phenomena when in fact it is a strategic one - and not very advanced at that as cases such as TELCO are (unfortunately) very limited and UNISON's views are not shared by many other trade unions. The belief in such new strategies is growing although many unions are quite reactive and still unconvinced. Furthermore, re-labelling a union due to the role it may play in setting up local services on training does not really reflect structural shifts in the logic and identity of a union.

In fact, research shows that unions have done little in this area and that the hype is often more apparent than the reality. Respondents to a survey of BME community groups in the Northern English region of Yorkshire and the Humber were asked whether a trade union had ever contacted

them to 'involve them in any of their campaigns or for advice or consultation' (Perrett and Martinez Lucio, 2006a and 2006b). All voluntary sector respondents indicated that they had never been contacted by a trade union for advice, consultation or to be involved in their campaigns, similarly all interviewees claimed this to be the case. Just one in ten voluntary sector organisations stated that they had worked with or involved a trade union in promoting the interests of BME communities. Where this was the case, these were typically short-term arrangements centred on anti-fascist campaigns as opposed to long-term partnerships around employment matters. Although TUC and union anti-fascist campaigns were valued by those who had heard of them within the voluntary sector, and they showed unions to be representing BME interests and extending union influence beyond the workplace, many interviewees claimed that this was often not always visible to the communities themselves. In addition, the research showed that such community groups face difficult issues in terms of funding, sustainability, and political links. Whilst not union-oriented groups, this mirrored the research on worker centres in the US which suffer from similar conditions as a consequence of their marginal political status (Ness, 1998).

What the case studies attempt to do is focus on strategic aspects of the community dimension. We use the word dimension because community unionism would imply a greater commitment of a political, strategic **and** structural nature. This does not appear to be currently the case. Instead, the paper surveys a range of initiatives which have various community dimensions and which in effect show some of the positive features of such developments but also some of the tensions and issues as well.

3. RESEARCH METHODS

The research incorporated two qualitative stages undertaken over the 15 month period between March 2005 and May 2006. The first stage incorporated thirty interviews with regional union officials from fourteen different trade unions, as well as TUC officials. Detailed interviews were undertaken in respect of the strategies that they had adopted and developed in respect of BME recruitment; their knowledge and opinions of other strategies; their level of success and future plans. These data greatly informed the second stage of the research and form the basis for a future paper on how unions understand union renewal and BME workers. The second stage of the research forms the basis of this paper.

Following the interviews with regional union officials six innovative union strategies relating to BME representation were identified and developed into in-depth case studies. Three of these, relating to union renewal and the community, are presented in this paper.

Case study one, undertaken over six months from May 2005, analyses a community based minimum wage campaign in the Midlands. Multiple interviews were undertaken with the deputy general secretary of the union involved, the regional secretary for the union, a project worker (trained in employment law) from the council's minimum wage project, two representatives from the council's job services partnership, and a learning centre manager. Case study two, undertaken over the 12 month period to May 2006, analyses a union learning agenda that developed out of the workplace and into the community in a major city in the North of England. Multiple interviews were conducted with the deputy general secretary for the union, two regional organisers for the union, the senior shop steward at the workplace, a union learning representative and a variety of employees as well as the learning centre manager, who was also a trade union member, and the managing director. Furthermore, photographic evidence was also collated. Case study three, undertaken between May 2005 and March 2006, illustrates a network based campaign and the establishment of a BME workers group within a council, linked to external networks, initially independent of any union in a de-industrialised area in Yorkshire. Detailed interviews were undertaken with the Chairman and manager of an external regional BME network that also aided in strategic decisions made by the council, a local councillor, the vice-chair of the democratic and resources scrutiny panel for the council, the equalities, diversity and community cohesion manager for the BME workers' network, a senior cabinet adviser and manager in respect of the multi agency approach to racial incidents initiative, a strategic HR manager for the council and a shop steward and an activist for a large public sector union who were employed at local social services.

The empirical research incorporated mainly semi-structured interviews that were recorded and subsequently transcribed in full. A small number of group interviews and focus groups were also undertaken, and where permitted these were also recorded. Unstructured discussions and observation were also undertaken through attendance at conferences, workshops, public

meetings and regional and branch union meetings.

4. CASES OF COMMUNITY INITIATIVES

Case 1: A community based minimum wage campaign

Background

Campaigns directed at raising awareness of the minimum wage legislation within black and minority ethnic communities is not new (see for example Heyes and Gray, 2003). Studies have shown the challenges of organising and raising the profile of minimum wage legislation and campaigns within BME communities. Low levels of pay and the lack of compliance in relation to such issues meant that there were extreme cases of employers taking advantage of individuals in terms of pay rates. The challenge was the way BME communities, particularly South Asian workers, were marginalised from the core aspects of the local labour market, and how within their communities there were networks of employers who were resistant to apply legislation on pay and related matters such as health and safety.

In this case, the Community trade union, formed through the amalgamation of the steel union ISTC and the textiles union KFAT, developed an initiative based on raising consciousness about the minimum wage within local BME communities and local textile sectors. Community made a particular point of becoming a new style of trade union with new principles: the extent of which is a subject of discussion principally because it is at such an early stage of development. However, one of the activities that were to become a central plank of policy and activism was organising and providing services within the community. Union members would carry their membership with them from job to job. Furthermore, local community support, especially in terms of training, would be at the heart of the strategy as well as helping people through the quagmire of an unstable labour market. For example, their web page (June 2006) states that:

Community believes it is the responsibility of a modern union to serve its members both at work and at home ... To those who say the union should restrict itself to the factory or the office, Community says that our members need allies both at work and at home. The union will organise at work and organise our members as citizens. We do not seek to do it all ourselves. There will be great virtue in working with voluntary organisations, [and other public

bodies] ... We already have good relationships with faith groups and ethnic minority organisations.

The strategy of minimum wage compliance

In the city in question, the union decided that it was confronting some serious challenges to its role in the regulation of the labour market. The failure of local employers, some of which were in local BME communities, to pay their workers the minimum wage or develop reasonable working conditions was an issue of ongoing concern. The project started in a specific area of the city and was focused on detecting cases of low pay. The project aimed to refer cases of low pay to the Minimum Wage Compliance Team. It covered a range of sectors although textiles were the most significant. Project workers faced a considerable challenge in encouraging effected workers to raise, and subsequently pursue, complaints through Employment Tribunals. Difficulties also emerged from the fact that official records of their employment were usually incorrect as they presented incorrect hours and pay levels. The Employment Tribunals also had difficulty dealing with questions of tax compliance due to the manner in which the guidelines were not clear. Of extreme importance was the sheer informality of the large aspects of the local economy. As the project was rolled out to the whole city then a greater number of community groups and constituencies could be reached.

This project was based on a series of strategic devices. There was a trade union dimension. This covered such activities as the use of union literature in various languages, the monitoring of workers, and the development of union meetings in relevant communities and local venues. There were high profile meetings, which also used government materials such as Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) and Inland Revenue videos on the subject. This raises an interesting point about the coalition building around this project. Which in turn suggest that the shift to a 'community' approach is somewhat more complex than one would at first have in mind and that the notion of 'coalition building' was novel and curious. The initiative brought the union together in a formal alliance with the DTI and the Inland Revenue who funded the project. There was a common objective that paying decent wages was

good for workers but it was also good for the state as it was taxable income. In addition, there was a leading role played by the local state in the form of the local council and various social departments. At the heart of these formal links were informal links and networks within communities. Local activists, local councillor networks in the BME communities³, and local community groups. These played a key part within the local government departments linked to the project. This community initiative was driven by community-based organisers who executed the strategy within specific communities, although ethnic and religious divides within communities did act as a challenge at times. These challenges emerged in terms of how local communities were organised along religious or ethnic based lines. In addition, the fact that the organiser was a woman did allow for greater dialogue with female workers but created some tensions in some of the male dominated constituencies. There was also challenges emerging from local small employers who felt that such interventions were letting down the community and allowing 'outsiders' to intervene into their jobs and lives. There were pressures placed on workers not to collaborate in some instances and ethnic loyalties were mobilised in the face of what was represented as a government intervention. The local organisers of the project had to go to religious places of worship, local employment offices and local community centres in order to try to link up and create as many ties as possible.

What also began to emerge was the growing role of the local press. There was a range of cases that were so bad in terms of wages and conditions that it became reported in the local newspaper. The trade unionists involved felt that the sensitivity of the local city-wide newspaper to the issue allowed for the project's aims and activities to be communicated to a wider audience. The relation was seen as a close and strategic one by the trade unionists.

Although the union dynamics were changing, increasingly it became realised that the absence of reserved positions for women workers and for those from a BME background meant that the union began to reflect the problem of connecting to workers without providing them with a voice in

³ It is a curious fact in discussions of BME communities - especially South East Asian communities - that is the role of local councillors, especially Labour Party councillors. These individuals link the local state into local communities and their relevant family and community groups. They provide an important source of social capital and networks that can also bring workplace politics and issues forward to the political agenda. They can also provide links with unions although union strategies in relation to such groups can be undeveloped at times (Perrett and Martinez Lucio, 2006b).

the union. In turn, the aim was to develop learning centres within communities that would act as some kind of focal point for the local workforce - although a similar set of centres in other areas was mainly for members and their families.

Issues: sustaining and supporting community intervention

The project in question was a highly innovative and focused initiative based on coalition and alliance, which spanned many social and state actors. It raises some interesting issues about the way community initiatives have developed. Not least, is the issue that the trade union was not connected to the community through community union structures but established bureaucratic and organisational processes instead. The problem was that whilst the issue of like-for-like activism could be seen as a way of connecting with local communities, it is very individualistic and based on exposed individuals. The absence of community worker centres with a legitimacy, presence and transparency within local areas and communities meant that the strategy was akin to roaming sales representatives, alone and having to depend on personal resources and networks. The failure to be able to identify local structures and spaces that were not socially enclosed was a major challenge. Learning centres may counter this but they were not linked into this particular project. Moreover, the link with government always raises the issue of the character and identity of community initiatives. In particular, the funding was from the state and this created a degree of dependency especially when funding was terminated. The drivers for this were partly related to the financial restructuring of the civil service but it does highlight the risks that may exist in the nature of such coalition building. A further problem was the role of the press, which in the views of all interviewees had been positive but the highly anti-statist, and sensationalist nature of the local newspaper industry makes for uncertain coalitions: not least, because of the experience of the trade unions within this specific sector. Overall, the project faced serious social challenges but it did yield high profile victories and an awareness of wage related legislation. Nevertheless, this type of community union initiative can be fragmented and isolating if it is not supported by structural change within unions - although signs of the latter were emerging.

Case 2: A learning campaign - 'out of the factory'

Background

This case is not strictly about community *per se*. However, given the porous boundaries between workplaces and communities it raises very significant issues about a specific dimension of trade union renewal: the learning agenda. Leather Mill Plc was a leather mill and tannery that produced high quality leather for many of the worlds leading brands of luxury leather goods and fashion accessories (high quality bags for example), gloves, footwear, and sports equipment, including footballs and football boots. For as long as anyone could remember, a union had always been present at the Northern site where, at the time of fieldwork, membership was around 90 per cent. Most acknowledged that, although sometimes strained, relations between management and the union were generally pretty good.

The union learning agenda and migrant labour

From possessing an almost exclusively white British workforce, Leather Mill Plc witnessed an influx of Iraqi Kurd workers in 2002. At the time of research interviewees estimated there to be between 14 and 18 Iraqi workers, furthermore a second migration 'influx' in 2005 had added around eight Polish employees to the workforce. It became apparent to management, supervisors, union officials and safety representatives that the lack of English skills possessed by these new workers was creating real health and safety concerns on the shop floor. One senior shop steward explained why these difficulties had emerged:

I was noticing, at committee meetings, that the Iraqis were having a lot of time off because of accidents ... they had to use razor sharp knives to cut the hide you see? ... Obviously these new workers weren't understanding what you were telling them, they were just nodding, saying 'yes, yes, yes', but in reality it wasn't sinking in.

An ex shop-floor worker confirmed this to be the case:

They were really nice guys, but they spoke very little English so would just smile or nod at you which made for very long and boring work days ... in terms of the accidents, there were plenty, the Iraqi workers couldn't understand the health and safety signs or what they were being told which led to obvious problems.

The good relationship that had developed between the company and the union had resulted in the managing director inviting the deputy general secretary to the workplace to view new technologies and computerised auditing and packaging systems that the company had recently invested in. At this meeting the director also highlighted the difficulties they were enduring in respect of the Iraqi workers and health and safety. The deputy general secretary had a keen interest in union renewal within communities and the recruitment of black and minority ethnic workers and he had experience of implementing and operating English as a Second Language (ESOL) courses to, mainly, South Asian workers in other parts of the UK; particular successes included Manchester and Leicester. Furthermore, through the TUC, the senior shop steward had experience of working with a local college in a nearby City. With full cooperation from management, who were grateful of the union's expertise, ESOL courses were introduced at Leather Mill Plc. The work of both national and local union officials was vital in the successful implementation of the courses, which were initially taught in a quiet area of the workplace by a college tutor over a 13 week period for two hours a week.

The union's encouragement of the ESOL course on the shop-floor, predominantly through their union safety reps and senior shop steward as well as the special effort made by union officials to 'help them settle in', resulted in the migrant workers almost immediately joining the union. All the Iraqi workers attended the ESOL course and, according to the senior shop steward and the training manager, accident levels immediately began to fall and morale and attendance rose, along with the level of communication on the shop-floor. Following the obvious success of the ESOL course, the union - again with management's support - began to look at other courses run by the college and as a result the whole workforce, including management, undertook a 'Dignity at Work' course, described by one employee as a course designed to eradicate harassment and bullying. Again, such learning was very well received by employees and further strengthened the working relationship between the union and management in respect of the learning agenda. Moreover, there appeared to be, what was described by management as, 'an unexpected desire for learning' not only by the migrant workers but also by many of the white British workers; most of whom had very few

academic qualifications and little experience of computers as 'most employees' were over 35. This, according to the deputy general secretary, opened the door to more adventurous workplace learning plans, namely a permanent workplace based learning centre.

Beyond grievance - The union and the workplace learning centre

After securing management's commitment to a learning centre, the union approached the regional TUC's Learning Services division for advice on training providers and securing funding for the project. The union's commitment and hard work came to fruition in April 2003 when one of the most applauded workplace learning centres in the UK was established. Funding was given initially for two years by the DfES for courses up to and including level 2 and 12 computers were provided. The intention was to further expand upon ESOL classes and introduce computer classes⁴ and numeracy and literacy courses through Learndirect's 'Skills for Life'. Management contributed by providing a room for the learning centre. According to the new centre manager the centre could support over 400 courses (predominantly Learndirect) which could be undertaken either in the learning centre or from home. Courses were available on-line and the learning centre would provide employees with books or CD ROMS to take away - the centre manager was on hand to take phone enquiries from individuals undertaking course from home. The cost of specific courses were covered by the learning centre, however, costs for other non-work related courses or above level two courses were discounted substantially for employees.

Not only were the courses and facilities available they were also promoted and attempts made to remove barriers to participation. In respect of ownership the centre was very much seen as independent of management which according to employees and union officials alike was very important and contributed to its success. As one employee mentioned:

Because it is through the union, we know it is for our benefit ... If it was management led or we felt it was a means of raising productivity it wouldn't have been half as successful ... Also, the guys wouldn't want management knowing if they had skills needs, particularly basic skills, it might threaten their jobs ... I think

⁴ Including Computer Literacy and IT (CLAIT) and the European Computer Driving Licence (ECDL)

this was important for the Iraqis as well as the British.

Safety reps were seen as the key link between the shop-floor and the learning centre and were viewed as of seminal importance to its success. This was particularly the case in respect of migrant workers who according to a safety representative exhibited less understanding of union functions and benefits and required greater levels of support.

Although impossible to quantify financially, all interviewees - management, employees and union officials - claimed that the learning centre was a considerable success. In April 2005, around three quarters of the workforce had undertaken a course through the learning centre, the workplace was a safer place and accidents had decreased, attendance levels of migrant workers had improved, communication with migrant workers was better and union membership of migrant workers had increased. One migrant employee summarised how he felt about the union:

Morale has definitely improved, particularly amongst the Iraqi workers ... originally I thought unions just helped when you get sacked, when you need a cheap solicitor. I wasn't really aware that they could help with learning ... the view we have of the union has improved greatly, they are taking the initiative, doing something different and that is encouraging people to join.

Beyond the workplace - The union and community learning

At the time of research the learning centre had acquired an extension on their funding, however, it was apparent that continued funding was dependant upon the demand for the courses offered through the learning centre and therefore the centre manager and the union would have to address the issue of sustainability. As a means of raising the demand for courses, as well as hopefully increasing union membership, some innovative approaches were devised in line with Community's wider approach to going beyond the workplace and in raising the profile of the union.

The first strategy, only recently implemented at the time of research, was called 'Family and Friends'. As the name suggests, family and close friends of workers employed by the company were offered specific courses either to be undertaken within the learning centre or at home. Although

slow initially, there had been a subsequent take-up of such courses. Three other key initiatives had been planned but not implemented at the time of research designed firstly, to change the overall functions of the learning centre; secondly to extend the influence of the learning centre to the wider business estate where the company was located, and finally, to extend their influence to the wider community which would incorporate a predominantly South Asian community nearby.

Firstly then, the centre manager wanted to expand the function undertaken by the learning centre so that it incorporated a test centre, encouraging individuals from the local area to favour their learning centre instead of having to travel to colleges a distance away for examination; this would also lower costs and bring in additional funding. Secondly, through a variety of means the centre manager and regional and national union officials wanted to develop and expand the role of the centre out to the wider business estate which incorporated mainly manufacturing, businesses. To achieve these goals the centre manager and regional organiser wanted to organise an open day so that managers from other businesses could look around the learning centre and discuss what gains there could be for their workforce. They wanted to forge alliances with other trade unions that represented workers at other companies in the estate so that their members could be provided with training. It was also claimed that they wanted to develop a 'virtual learning centre' online whereby the centre manager and course tutors could provide support via email and the telephone; hence if they could encourage other companies in the estate to buy a few computers, their employees could receive training without having to visit the actual learning centre. The third and final planned initiative was to expand the services provided by the learning centre into local communities, one of which was predominantly South Asian. According to the centre manager, individuals from local communities had been phoning him to enquire as to how they could enrol on courses. Unfortunately, he had to turn them away as, at that time, such initiative had not been implemented or risk assessments undertaken.

Similarly, for the union, expanding their influence (through the learning centre) into local communities rather than being confined to the workplace was likely to raise their profile, remove the view that unions were solely workplace organisations, particularly within communities with little experience of unions such as new

migrant communities or established Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities. What initially started out as a response to the changing composition of the workforce, greater levels of migrant workers and health and safety considerations resulted in a large union led learning initiative, an increase in migrant union membership and the potential to expand well beyond the workplace and further raise the union profile within communities.

Issues - stuck in the workplace

The case raises some important challenges for the development of a workplace-community link in terms of learning. The first is the way such initiatives are locked within the workplace and find themselves connecting to communities through established family links. The attempt to open such a resource to the community was limited by health and safety considerations, management prerogative, the isolation of the workplace, and the lack of any dialogue between the different workplaces. In addition, there was the concern with competition between unions who would lay claim to the idea and who would seek ownership over the centre. Another challenge was the dependency on state funding and support for such initiatives. The government investment in learning centres has been important since 1997 but there was an increasing concern with the long-term viability of such funding and its location. The tendency to change budgets and the lack of regulations regarding employer liability and responsibility meant that the unions were constantly seeking and applying for funding. The real problem came when a decision was made to close the workplace and shift production. It raised the problem of what to do with the equipment and staff of the centre. Proposals for moving it to another site were not clear as it depended on management being supportive in those sites. In addition, the lack of union-coordination on such matters is a further problem. The research is still ongoing as the unions seek a 'home for the centre' but part of the problem is sudden closure of such centres giving state budgetary issues. The case shows how the workplace can be a major focus point for building community initiatives: but, the lack of a settled external trade union and social-public space for such initiatives, coupled with competition between providers, meant that there were limits to this dimension.

Case 3: A network based campaign: linking up with other voices

Background

Increasingly, there is growing interest in the development of black and minority ethnic

communities establishing networks that link workers up in the workplace and in the community. This case illustrates the development of a BME network inside a local council and in the community. It involves trade unions through a coalition approach.

The local council was located in a de-industrialised area of England. It once had a strong manufacturing and steel tradition. The town has been subjected to all the consequences of an un-coordinated restructuring. Within the local council, the Labour Party has been a dominant player. However, in the past few years BME employees found themselves increasingly isolated within an environment dominated by white employees and trade union culture, which has in the main been focused on a white workforce within the workplace and a view of trade unionism very much influenced by the politics and identity of the region's industrial heritage. There have been an array of learning and re-training strategies developed in the wake of restructuring within the town and its facilities. The local steel union, now Community (see above), has been very proactive in raising funding and developing centres (Mackenzie *et al*, 2006; Perrett *et al*, 2004; Greenwood *et al*, 2003 and 2004). However, centres often focused on the union's members as well as their families. They have also been 'tucked away' in hard to locate spaces - within office complexes. In this respect, the lack of co-ordination between the local trade unions and the lack of a union led strategic view of the region meant that such initiatives were not developed around a broader view of the workforce. This was compounded by the failure of the local council to address the specific needs of local black and minority ethnic workers.

External political factors contributed to a need to focus on and address the needs of such workers. In the wake of the 9-11 events, behaviour towards Muslim workers was at times racist and discriminatory from various sources. These developments created an awareness amongst specific members of the HR department of the council and key employees, predominantly British Pakistani or of Pakistani origin, that there was a need to establish some kind of voice mechanism for the needs of such workers. In the main, the trade unions were not opposed to such possibilities although internal levels of interest varied. UNISON has developed a black workers section that had begun to raise such issues. The trade union supported this initiative, and we discuss this later. One of the main catalysts for

the development of a more focused strategy of BME support was the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry, prompted by institutional racism within the police force in the wake of the murder of a black youth in London. This began a more detailed process of auditing equality issues within the public sector. Various initiatives were developed, but the development of a black workers network was central.

Networks and activities

Such a network was developed with the support of a range of local white-collar workers, local councillors of Pakistani origin, and various local bodies. This was aimed at developing a range of activities such as training and mentoring within the relevant workforce, and created a structure that allowed concerns and issues to be raised. The trade unions supported this development. At the heart was a series of cultural and consciousness-raising campaigns. The *Positive Images* campaign was focused on highlighting the work of BME workers in a range of council departments and of supporting them. There were also activities focused on increasing recruitment of local youths from BME communities. The HR department was a major supporter and strategic ally of such a development. In this respect, one could argue it was the outcome of a partnership of a variety of players.

The network was linked into a broader town wide BME network which assisted BME community

groups to seek funding and to raise their profile. Increasingly, such a community wide network covered a range of issues and included a range of players. Perrett and Martinez Lucio (2006b) point to the range of activities such networks actually develop and the extent to which these overlap with traditional trade union roles and strategies. Respondents to a questionnaire were asked to outline the objectives of the organisation that they worked for. Responses were wide and varied and covered a range of BME support interests, detailed in Table 1 below.

As illustrated in Table 1, many of the organisational and political objectives of respondents corresponded closely to trade union activities and agendas, raising the potential for joint projects and the development of alliances as well as the competition for traditional trade union roles. The local network under discussion had a similar portfolio to that outline above.

This local government workplace network therefore linked to a broader dynamic in terms of community politics. Although initially criticised for their lack of involvement or even knowledge regarding the BME workers group the main public sector union in the area subsequently became involved with the group and its networks and at the time of fieldwork played an active role in representing BME interests and advising the council BME workers' group. The local Labour Party played a link through local councillors and individuals who in turn linked to

TABLE 1 - BME GROUP ORGANISATIONAL OBJECTIVES

Company objectives	Freq	Company objectives	Freq
Employment related		Community advice	
Assist with education/training	17	General BME/community advice	4
Assist with employment	11	Community/resource centre	3
		Promote recreational activities	3
		Use of arts, music or dance	2
		Drop-in/social inclusion	2
Community needs and cohesion		Provide housing services	2
Bring communities together/cohesion	9	Prevent school exclusion	1
Promote social and economic welfare	9	To prevent criminal offending	1
Promote culture/religion	8	Environmental and geographical issues	1
Raise awareness of needs	5	Domestic violence	1
Promote relations between faith groups	5	BME business advice	1
Assist in integration into community	5		
		Health issues	
		Assist in health issues	11
		Issues surrounding depression	1
Group identities		Social and psychological support	1
Working with disabilities	9		
Work with women	7	Network and VCS support	
Work with the elderly	6	Capacity building/support for (BME) VCS	7
Work with Youth	5	Promote and support available services	6
Work with Travellers	1	Initiate and fund community projects	3
Total number of code-able objectives 138*			

* Respondents frequently gave more than one code-able objective
Source: Perrett and Martinez Lucio, 2006b

national level TUC and government forums. However, trade union activists were not at the centre of such broader and workplace networks although it would be fair to say that many at the centre were trade union members. This development of workplace networks for disadvantaged workers due to discrimination and their links to broader community networks is unstudied within industrial relations. Holgate (2005) has been one of the few academics to study such linkages around workplace issues and the development of mobilisation strategies. However, such autonomous networks within and around workplaces are the subject of little study within industrial relations and labour sociology.

Challenges

The development of such internal and external networks is significant. Nevertheless, they raise some issues. The first is that they allow for a 'community unionism' to be developed inside and outside the workplace without the trade union. In this case, the trade union was involved but in many instances, they may not be. It raises the fact that one cannot see community initiatives as inevitably linked with trade unions. Even in TELCO the unions were not the sole driver (Datta *et al*, 2006). Many of these initiatives can be independent of trade unionism for a variety of reasons: the level of access to social capital in BME communities, failure to realise the significant nature of such developments, and the lack of interest of trade unions generally.

There is another factor, which is that such broader community networks and even internal workplace ones compete for funding. It is conceivable that such networks go beyond a representative function and co-ordinating role and begin to acquire service delivery roles in the community themselves. Areas such as worker training, management training, counselling, family support, linguistic services, and others can be developed by such networks: and in many cases they are. This is an important intervention that can create a new vision of local public service delivery around a more commercialist agenda and our research showed for some individuals this was an option. The relevance of this on the discussion of community unionism is that the community is not the necessary location of radical political strategies. They present a development that can be articulated and developed in a range of ways. They are in effect open to political intervention, the problem is that community unionism beyond the work of Wills *et al* and Holgate rarely even engages with this more political, structural issue.

Then there is the state, once more what we see is the role the local state and national state forums in facilitating such strategies. This can be viewed as a positive or negative factor. However, it can create levels of dependency on political contingencies. This can be problematic in the context of the serious sustainability issues such community networks have (Perrett and Martinez Lucio 2006a).

5. CONCLUSION

There are very impressive developments such as TELCO, which have begun to define a new era and potential for the community dimension in industrial relations and trade union renewal (Wills, 2004). The move towards a spatial dimension in terms of industrial relations strategies, and the interest in developing community trade unionism is a visible feature of current discussions. The paper has tried to show how the theme of community has a variety of different meanings and how community representation, organisation or services can vary. There is no single *definition* of community unionism. Many have worked with a view of community unionism as a kind of counter to the more 'market' driven notion of management-trade union partnership. Community unionism is viewed in terms of links with social and community based stakeholders, not corporate ones: it is, in effect, coalition building from below. However, the notion of community is broad and nebulous: it is difficult to define. The issue is that trade unions develop community initiatives in a variety of ways: they need not be organised on any community-based structure. They can involve direct intervention and representation right through to indirect representation and coalition building. They can address overall campaigns around core issues that bring together a range of constituencies, or be focused around specific services. In this respect, the road to *community unionism* is much more complex.

There is the issue of strategy. The engagement with community initiatives is not just diverse and broad. It can be contentious. A range of issues can emerge when embarking on such strategies. There are questions related to the community, the nature of the strategy, and the role of the state. We have tried to illustrate this in relation to the question of black and minority ethnic communities. In terms of the community, one must take into account what community we are talking about and what traditions, issues and identities exist. In our cases, we saw unions working with established community and

workplace BME networks, union activists intervening in resistant communities linked to small businesses around family networks, and union attempts to further develop BME inspired community learning centres which were flawed due to the spatial location of the initiatives and the displaced nature of the migrant community. The strategy in relation to communities does not give rise to any coherent picture of a community strategy: engagement along such lines is complex and differentiated. Hence, we need to be cautious when engaging with the notion of community unionism. What is more, there is still a tendency for trade unions to locate such strategies within traditional views of trade union action.

Secondly, many community initiatives misinterpret the broader realities and dynamics of communities and are merely nothing more than recruitment drives based on extending bureaucracy and not re-orienting it. Trade unionists are often concerned with extending the logic of organising in ways that remain embedded in established cultural and institutional practices (leaflets, meetings, and officer led initiatives) to BME communities without considering the cultural context of these. There is also a failure in many cases to go beyond established hierarchies and leadership structures within BME community groups. Holgate (2005) makes it clear that links with informal structures and around union campaigns, and during industrial disputes as in the airline caterer Gate Gourmet in 2005, are as important and probably more class oriented than formal links with formal structures of the BME communities. This is likely to be true although one should not underestimate the extensive presence of formal and established bodies within such communities and the role they play.

Finally, the initiatives discussed above were not just developed in coalition with community bodies but a broader range of actors. Whilst these are a selective sample of cases, they nonetheless show the state to be a player. Coalitions may emerge with the state and this provides a challenge. The reality is that community links may even emerge around marketised or more 'professional' links especially when we consider the role of established networks as we outlined above. McCulloch (2004) argued that we could not ignore the emergent neo-liberal dimension to local politics and community activities. So assuming that community links lead to certain political or strategic outcomes is unwise, as political engagement seems to be a major factor.

There can be a reliance on closed circuits of social capital (Bourdieu, 1984) and the development of links with established social circuits. This in turn can lead to a reliance on state support as we discussed earlier in relation to learning strategies, minimum wage strategies or local network strategies in and around the local state. Hence, the engagement with the community is not the clear alternative one would imagine. It creates the possibility of dependency. Furthermore, it may lead to a politics of the community linked around market not political objectives, and may exacerbate issue of sustainability.

The current vogue for trade unions and community unionism is the outcome of a range of concerns with traditional trade unionism, bureaucratic inertia and the fatal attraction of business unionism as a vehicle of union renewal. However, the debate on community unionism will need to be more robust if we are to understand its dimensions and features, and it will also need an appreciation of different and competing political agendas.

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