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Networks, Communities and the Representation of Black and Minority Ethnic Workers in Employment Relations: The realities of community politics and trade unions

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NETWORKS, COMMUNITIES AND THE REPRESENTATION OF BLACK AND MINORITY ETHNIC WORKERS IN EMPLOYMENT RELATIONS: THE REALITIES OF COMMUNITY POLITICS AND TRADE UNIONS

Robert Perrett and Miguel Martínez Lucio¹

ABSTRACT

Black and minority ethnic (BME) communities incorporate some of most disadvantaged workers within the UK labour market, a sector of the economy that is rapidly increasingly in size and therefore represents a challenge to trade unions in terms of representation. The paper argues that the role of community groups is a missing factor in much of mainstream industrial relations and race and ethnicity debates. There are gaps between unions and organised community groups within BME communities. These are a significant issue, which question some of the more optimistic analysis of the subject of community unionism. The space of BME representation is much more complex and diverse than that discussed in terms of individual worker needs. In addition, the very conceptualisation of industrial relations and the understanding of trade unions is a vital factor in the link between production politics and community politics. Questions of representation need to be addressed not solely in terms of formal representation but broader understandings of relations and perceptions between actors. This dovetails with the increasing debate with the role of other and new actors and the struggle over the occupation of representation. The paper ends with a discussion on how linkages between traditional and new industrial relations actors such as BME community groups and trade unions are constructed in a variety of unanticipated ways which require an understanding of the politics of BME groups, their regional dynamics and trade unions.

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INTRODUCTION

This paper presents selected findings from a wider TUC research project and a broader engagement with the key question of trade unions and BME communities, especially the networks and bodies that constitute such communities. There is a need to understand the collective tapestry of BME communities and their diversity and dynamics if trade unions are to develop a broader view of employment beyond unionised workplaces. Hence, the research focuses, in this instance, on the institutional dimension of ethnicity and employment. The paper seeks to highlight the growing importance of non-traditional IR actors in representing BME employment needs and the extent to which these represent an opportunity for trade unions to increase their profile within BME communities. The extent to which trade unions have already pursued alliances and partnerships with the BME voluntary and community sector (VCS) as well as perceptions of trade unions by BME support organisations are discussed. In addition, the growing interest in community dimensions within industrial relations are increasing, yet definitions and understandings of community groups are absent. The paper argues that the need to see how trade union action is understood and presented is an important factor when discussing relations between actors within industrial relations and its spatial dimension. Unlike much of the extant literature within this area, this research paid more credence to the roles and views of individuals from the BME voluntary sector, rather than focussing specifically on trade unions, as it is these frontline organisations that work with BME communities on a day-to-day basis and represent a rarely tapped resource that might prove invaluable in improving union credibility and allowing access to BME communities.

The paper argues that the role of community groups is a missing factor in much of the mainstream industrial relations and race and ethnicity debates (Holgate is an exception). There are gaps between unions and organised community groups within BME communities. These are a significant issue that also challenges the subject of community unionism. The space of BME representation is much more complex and diverse than that discussed in terms of individual worker needs. In addition, the very conceptualisation of industrial relations and the understanding of trade unions is a vital factor in the link between production politics and community politics. The paper ends with a discussion on how the potential for linkages between traditional and new industrial relations

actors such as BME community groups and trade unions are constructed in a variety of, sometimes unanticipated ways, which require an understanding of the politics of BME groups and trade unions.

LITERATURE REVIEW: FROM PESSIMISM TO OPTIMISM IN TRADE UNION-BME RELATIONS

It is fair to say that the literature on industrial relations issues and ethnicity is not as advanced in theoretical or empirical terms as the debate on gender (Grint, 1998). The debate focuses on three dimensions. Firstly, the failure of trade unions to represent the broad canvass of groups that constitutes the black and minority ethnic community. If anything it has, and quite rightly so, emphasised the role of 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. The development of an approach to industrial relations increasingly premised on notions of rights, the increasing realities and concerns with racism and social inclusion, and the re-orientation of trade union concerns and priorities have meant that trade unions have begun to respond to such issues in a more supportive and strategic manner. However, ethnic minority support for unions, as noted throughout various studies, has usually been quite high (Modood, 1997).

Secondly, the debate has focused on key episodes of trade union intervention such as Grunwick and, presumably, in the future Gate Gourmet. 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 usually 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 without recourse to a broader understanding of spatial factors although recent interventions are trying to counter this 'industrial' approach (Holgate, 2005).

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). This has taken two directions: the debates driven by Healy et al (2004) have tried to sensitise readers to the broader question of collectivism and its gender and ethnic character: showing how black female activists play multiple roles and are in effect complex actors with links and networks they combine in their work and experience. The link between these dimensions are seen as mutually reinforcing in certain cases and that discussions should not start from the institutions only, but from the views of workers as black, or as women, or as both. Holgate has developed a debate which has strongly influenced the current paper as it points to the need to locate the workplace dynamics to 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 whilst there are other dimensions there is a tendency to focus on the trade union-worker relation through the prism of the shopfloor so industrial relations studies have begun to be challenged by a concern with two new genres of debate within industrial relations in the UK: the community dimension and the notion of 'other actors'.

Wills and Simms (2003) 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 build around linkages with social actors (ibid). The discourse of 'other actors' and 'new actors' is a response to the crisis of representativeness of traditional industrial relations actors and the emergence of distinct players alongside traditional ones. In many respects, this has never been a weakness of the sociological study of regulation which has increasingly focused on the panoply of social actors that intervene in the process of regulation in a variety of ways and through alliances and linkages between them (MacKenzie and Martinez Lucio, 2005), but it has been a serious problem in the industrial relations discipline with its focus on trade unions and formal institutions of regulation. The language is of 'organising' the 'unorganised',

hence assuming a lack of organisational capacity on behalf of ethnic minorities (see Bronfenbrenner et al, 1998 as an example). There is a tendency to see the question of race and unions as one of re-alignment of members' needs and union strategies, as the institution acting over the subject of the former: in effect a question of 'intervention'.

However, 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, 2005). 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 paper is therefore concerned with the need to locate the discussion in terms of an understanding of the broader nature of voice mechanisms within BME communities and the broader activity of community groups with respect to employment relations. Hence, the paper concerns itself with a series of issues. What are some of the characteristics of BME community groups in relation to employment relations issues? The conceptualisation of industrial relations and the understanding of trade unions is a vital factor in this link between production politics and community politics. How are any potential linkages conceptualised by BME community representatives? The paper concerns itself with the realities and dynamics of these spaces and looks at established groups and networks in the face of the current vogue to 'informalise' migrant culture.

RESEARCH METHODS

Following initial piloting and unstructured discussions to identify issues of concern, the methods adopted for this research comprised two primary stages. A questionnaire incorporating 50

questions formed the basis of a survey of (mainly) voluntary sector BME community support groups and networks. The questionnaire was distributed to the 250 affiliates of a strategic BME network within the Yorkshire and the Humber region. Seventy-nine organisations returned the questionnaire giving an overall response rate of almost a third. Nine of the respondents were identified as being from statutory bodies, active within the network because of their BME interest. The views and experiences of these organisations were deemed to be both relevant and important as such institutions engage with BME communities, form part of external BME networks, often operate their own internal BME committees (particularly since the introduction of the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000), fund community projects, and attempt to co-ordinate much of the voluntary sector. The second stage comprised 25 in-depth interviews with representatives from BME networks and umbrella organisations. Additional interviews were undertaken with 'mainstream - white' voluntary sector organisations and a further, twenty-two interviews were conducted with both national and regional union officials and TUC representatives in respect of union renewal strategies; although the empirical evidence presented in this paper is based primarily on the views and experiences of BME voluntary support organisations (there are also a broader set of national interviews which have informed the paper). Our research compliments and further expands upon the work done for the TUC by other researchers, such as Holgate (2004a) and Fitzgerald and Sterling (2004) the main differences are the research methods adopted, some of the themes addressed, the region under investigation, and some of our conclusions.

THE CHALLENGE FACING UNIONS IN YORKSHIRE AND THE HUMBER

The 2001 census (see *Region in Figures: Yorkshire and the Humber*; ONS - Winter 2004/05) shows the population of Yorkshire and the Humber to be just over five million. 6.5 per cent of the region was characterised as 'non-white', considerably lower than the UK average of 8.7 per cent. By far the largest proportion of the non-white population within Yorkshire and the Humber was that of Pakistani, representing 45.2 per cent of the non-white population within the region; the corresponding figure for England and Wales as a whole was 15.8 per cent. Although the proportion of non-white population within Yorkshire and the Humber was lower than the proportion for England and Wales as a whole, this varied considerably by sub-region. According to the 2001 census, in the area categorised as the Humber, the average proportion of the population which were from non-white ethnic groups was 1.9 per cent, the corresponding figure for, the largely rural, North Yorkshire was 1.1 per cent, 4.8 per cent for South Yorkshire and 11.4 per cent for West Yorkshire.

Labour force survey statistics have been analysed so as to identify the scale of the challenge facing trade unions within Yorkshire and the Humber. In Autumn 2004 (LFS - Aug 2005) the proportion of BME employees within Yorkshire and the Humber that were trade union members was just 21.5 per cent in comparison to the national (UK) average of 23.4 per cent. Just the North West, North East and Wales had a lower proportion of BME workers who were trade union members. However, as Table 1 illustrates, this varied considerably between the private and public sectors.

TABLE 1 - WORKING AGE POPULATION IN EMPLOYMENT WHO ARE UNION MEMBERS (YORKSHIRE AND THE HUMBER)

	Private	Public	Total
	<i>% Yes - Union member</i>	<i>% Yes - Union member</i>	<i>% Yes - Union member</i>
1994			
White	22.6	68.6	33.6
BME	21.2	52.0	29.0
Total	22.5	68.2	33.5
2004*			
White	18.3	59.1	28.7
BME	10.9	59.7	21.5
Total	17.9	59.1	28.3

Source: Labour Force Survey August 2005, Office for National Statistics - *figures refer to Autumn 2004
Note: BME does not incorporate 'white Northern Irish' or 'white other'

BME VOLUNTARY SECTOR ACTIVITY

It is well documented that BME communities incorporate some of the most disadvantaged workers within the UK labour market. For example, the Ethnic Minority Employment Task Force (EMETF) first progress report (Autumn, 2004) shows that ethnic minorities were twice as likely as the overall population to be unemployed, they earned on average less per week than the white population, many ethnic minorities did not have the levels of education or skills required for 'employment success' (see also DfES, 2003), and many were concentrated in lower grade employment. Similarly, the vast majority of respondents to the questionnaire, 86 per cent, believed that BME employees were more disadvantaged within the workplace than their white British counterparts. Just five per cent did not believe this to be the case and seven per cent were not sure. When asked what they believed to be the 'greatest difficulties facing BMEs in respect of employment,' the largest proportion of respondents cited racism, discrimination and marginalisation by the employer and other employees. Other frequently cited difficulties included limited promotional and developmental opportunities or unequal pay; lack of qualifications, workplace training and access to skilled employment; limited and inadequate BME support networks; and language barriers. These were all issues that individual BME voluntary sector organisations were trying to address and similarly, these were issues that, to varying degrees, form part of trade union rhetoric and policy agendas. Yet, in recent years, private sector unions have had little success in recruiting black and minority ethnic workers even though they represent a rapidly expanding proportion of the UK workforce (see Census 1991/2001. Kyambi; 2005. EMETF; 2004).

The findings confirm the growing importance of a broader range of actors in industrial relations in respect of BME representation, and the role of intermediary bodies dealing with employment issues appears to be highly significant. Survey respondents were asked to indicate where they thought BME individuals went for advice and support if they were having difficulties at work. As Table 2 illustrates, the majority of suggestions (55 per cent) referred to some form of voluntary sector community support group and nearly a half of these referred specifically to the Citizen's Advice Bureau. This is an emerging theme within industrial relations. Solicitors, law centres and trade unions were mentioned less frequently but were still relatively prominent.

A large proportion of interviewees stressed that being located within a community and being seen and trusted by the community was the only effective way to offer support to that community and to encourage individuals to utilise the service being provided. For example, one interviewee, representing the interests of a mainly Pakistani community stated that:

I can tell you exactly the places they [BME workers] go to. In a lot of areas you have local forums or voluntary community organisations, not just for BME people, they cover the whole community and lots of these types of organisations are springing up ... they could give you general advice and they could signpost people elsewhere [for specialist advice].

It should be noted that voluntary sector support groups, the CAB, and local solicitors and law centres are frequently embedded within local communities in a way that trade unions are not. The research highlighted the importance of links between such bodies and quality policy specialists

TABLE 2 - PROVIDERS OF EMPLOYMENT SUPPORT AND ADVICE

Go for employment support or advice	Frequency	% of total
Voluntary sector community support groups	31	28
Citizen's Advice Bureau	30	27
Solicitors or law centres	15	13
Trade unions	15	13
Don't know	7	6
Statutory bodies including ACAS and Job Centre	5	4
Colleagues or managers where employed	4	4
No where	3	3
Commission for Racial Equality	2	2
Total*	112	100

*Respondents could give more than one response

at the local level. In some cases, South Asian town councillors were important in acting as conduits for information and in lobbying on behalf of such networks.

However, 78 per cent of respondents to the questionnaire did not believe that the level of employment support received by BME workers was adequate and just 3 per cent of respondents believed that BME employment issues were 'represented and engaged with effectively at regional level'. Though many voluntary sector support groups were accepted and trusted by a community, many were seen as not having the expertise or resources to adequately deal with employment enquiries or to be able to represent an individual throughout an employment related grievance. The research identified the cause of such criticisms being as a result of a lack of funding for the sector, intense competition for funds resulting in limited information sharing, few partnership projects and excessive fragmentation, ethnic, political and religious differences, communication and co-ordination deficiencies (see Martinez Lucio and Perrett, 2006). Hence, there are considerable challenges in the development of sustainable and consistent voice mechanisms within BME communities.

BME COMMUNITY GROUPS AND THEIR RELATIONSHIP WITH TRADE UNIONS

The research sought to establish the extent to which unions had pursued alliances with the BME VCS and how BME support groups and BME communities viewed trade unions as a result. The majority of interviewees claimed that for trade unions to increase their representation of BME individuals outside the workplace, they would have to develop a presence and an increased profile in local communities and with frontline voluntary sector community support groups. However, interviewees believed that trade unions had not done enough to raise their profile within BME communities or to forge alliances with support groups and agencies that already offered support and were trusted by their respective communities. The survey asked whether trade unions had a

presence within the local BME communities that respondent organisations represented or engaged with. Sixty per cent of all respondents indicated that unions had either no, or a low presence in these communities, 26 per cent were unsure, 14 per cent believed that unions had a presence in some areas and not others and no respondents believed that unions had a high presence. In-depth interviews compliment these finding. One interviewee, representing the interests of BMEs in a town in North Yorkshire stated that:

The community really hears very little about unions ... just last week I was talking to a Filipino ... who was having some employment problems and I asked her if she was interested in joining a union. She said that she would be very interested but was unaware of whether there was even a union in the area, never mind which union to join.

Similarly, a British born, South Asian council worker stated that:

If you go onto the web site for [name of union] you'll find that it looks really flash and good and that it looks like things are happening. But when you talk to people in the local area, the reality is that nothing is happening and the union is looked at as boring, not understanding, or particularly bothered, what we are about ... and are unaware of many of the issues that affect black workers and are not able to engage with us. On the web site there might be stuff around black workers groups and things like that but locally people just don't know about it.

Similarly, the findings show that unions had done little to forge alliances or communicate with BME support groups. This is illustrated in Table 3.

Respondents were asked whether a trade union had ever contacted them to 'involve them in any of their campaigns or for advice or consultation'.

TABLE 3 - ORGANISATIONS' CONTACT WITH TRADE UNIONS

Experiences of unions		Yes (%)	No (%)	Frequency
Has a union ever contacted you for advice or consultation?	<i>All organisations</i>	4	96	76
	<i>Voluntary sector</i>	0	100	60
	<i>Statutory bodies</i>	22	78	9
Have you involved or worked with unions in promoting the interests of BMEs?	<i>All organisations</i>	15	86	76
	<i>Voluntary sector</i>	10	90	61
	<i>Statutory bodies</i>	25	75	8

Voluntary sector and statutory sector responses do not sum to total responses as some respondents did not give their company status

All voluntary sector respondents indicated that they had never been contacted by a trade union for advice or consultation or to become 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 greatly 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 seen by the communities themselves.²

There also appeared to be representational deficiencies in respect of unions representing the needs of employees within the voluntary sector. Just 18 per cent of voluntary sector respondents believed that trade union members worked at their organisation, 71 per cent claimed that they had no union members and 12 per cent were unsure. In-depth interviews suggested that where union members were present, it was typically one or two individuals who agreed with the principle of collective representation but had very little contact with the union they had joined and felt 'despondent' about the union's ability to adequately represent them. One interviewee who represented a predominantly African Caribbean community within West Yorkshire commented that:

I've never come across a voluntary organisation that has said, 'Our staff have joined a union', or 'a union is helping us do this' ... If trade unions are unable to represent the interests of low paid employees working within the voluntary sector, why should we recommend our affiliates or members of the community consult them.

It appears, therefore, that many BME voluntary sector employees were inadequately represented by unions and so such organisations had little experience of working with unions internally even if the dimension of voluntary sector trade unionism would, one assumes, be a circuit for

some type of communication between organised labour and black and minority ethnic groups.

The questionnaire asked respondents to summarise their views of trade unions in respect of BME communities. Just 16 per cent of comments were complimentary to trade unions. Eighty-four per cent of comments were critical of unions and fell into the three broad categories of, first; lack of BME engagement, second; lack of BME internal representation and third; lack of credibility within the community. Forty-six per cent of comments given related to trade unions' lack of engagement with BME communities. A local authority Councillor and manager of a city-wide BME network gave the following view which closely corresponded to those of other interviewees:

They [trade unions] don't engage with black workers at all and they didn't even have a clue that this black workers group had been set up ... I don't think that this lack of engagement is particularly because they don't want to talk, it is more about them not knowing how to.

Finally, 13 per cent of survey respondent comments referred to the unions' image and failure to establish credibility within BME communities. The director of an influential city-wide BME voluntary sector organisation (VSO) highlighted the difficulties facing unions in respect of their credibility within BME communities.

You know, I'm not sure that even now there's anything really that they [trade unions] can offer me that I can't do myself or get the support from elsewhere ... I would say that they [BME communities] would see unions as a workplace organisation. Unions deal with work at work, you know, they are not seen as campaign groups or able to represent community issues. It is a question of credibility.

This view of unions in terms of their focus on the workplace and related institutions was common: their primary focus was to be that of the workplace and workplace related grievances and conflict. In certain instances unions were seen as a relic of the 1970s having been undermined by

² Nevertheless, the funding for the project that permitted this data to be collated came from the TUC who were becoming aware of such issues and the need for new community strategies within the region.

the Thatcher years and some believed that they still had a very 'old-fashioned/traditional image'. There was a view of trade unions amongst a variety of groups that related to an age of workplace activism and that was seen to be incongruous with contemporary developments. The lack of contact, communication and engagement with either BME communities or support groups has resulted in a subsequent lack of understanding of trade union functions or the benefits they can generate. For example, when asked to what extent trade unions had improved the working conditions of BME groups that they represented or engaged with, the largest proportion, almost 40 per cent, were unsure reflecting the limited amount of experience many organisations had with trade unions. Thirty per cent believed that unions had done nothing to improve BME working conditions, 18 per cent stated that they had done 'just a little' and 13 per cent indicated that unions had done a 'moderate amount'. When asked to what extent trade unions had influenced national employment policy in respect of working conditions for BME groups, again the largest proportion, almost 50 per cent were unsure. Ten per cent believed that unions had not influenced national employment policy but 40 per cent, to varying degrees, believed that they had. Many interviewees admitted that they were completely unaware of how unions viewed BME workers and communities or what their agenda was in respect of BME recruitment because of the lack of contact they had with them. The director of a sub-regional organisation that aimed to promote racial equality stated that:

To be honest, I don't have a clue what unions are doing for the black worker. They are either doing nothing, or they are doing something and not telling anyone about it ... To my knowledge, they don't work with the BME voluntary sector, and I don't think they've ever asked for our advice ... they certainly aren't part of any of the black or Asian networks.

Similarly, a director for the Racial Equalities Council (REC) stated that:

There has been a massive investment by the unions in terms of learning and health and safety and all kinds of stuff but I don't think the TUC and the unions have really grasped how bloody important that is. I don't think that they are spreading this important message enough or engaging communities in their agenda ... it's like

there's a lot of complacency going on in terms of the trade union movement ... I really don't think they've grasped quite how important it is to communicate what they are doing with other people. (REC director).

These findings were curious given that, according to Labour Force Survey statistics (Autumn, 2004) trade union membership within both the private and public sector in Yorkshire and the Humber had a large positive effect on BME salaries in comparison to non-union members. Lack of contact and communication has resulted in union benefits being rendered invisible. The questionnaire asked respondents how they thought trade unions viewed BME communities. A large proportion simply wrote 'don't know'. Other responses included 'too difficult to recruit', 'unions hesitant/fear of approaching', 'BMEs not a priority', 'think BMEs are non-cooperative', 'not much value to unions', 'a tokenistic target'.

The qualitative research indicated that there were links between trade unions and BME groups but that these were not extensive or common. Work on the bus services in the Bradford area showed a highly active Transport and General Workers' Union (TGWU) branch where South Asian officials and steward, alongside their white colleagues, had built strong relations with local religious bodies, anti-fascist campaigns and community groups, even of a cultural nature. The political links of this branch, which in the past twenty years had contributed over half a dozen local city councillors in terms of its membership, were also active. In some respects, this may be due to the particular position of Bradford and the long legacy of trade union-community relations, but overall the links were not that clear across the region.

However, there appears to be a fundamental lack of communication between unions and the BME VCS as well as inadequate dissemination of union objectives in respect of BMEs and the benefits and successes unions can, and already do, generate. So how was the potential for trade unions to increase their profile within BME communities and develop alliances with BME support groups viewed? How was any potential interface understood and in terms of what vision of trade unions?

TABLE 5 - POTENTIAL FOR INCREASED UNION INVOLVEMENT WITH BME SUPPORT GROUPS

Prospects for unions		Yes (%)	No (%)	Don't know (%)	Frequency
Do you think unions have the potential to contribute positively to BME interests?	<i>All organisations</i>	84	3	13	76
	<i>Voluntary sector</i>	84	3	13	62
	<i>Statutory bodies</i>	89	0	11	9
Would you be prepared to work with trade unions in promoting BME interests?	<i>All organisations</i>	72	7	21	75
	<i>Voluntary sector</i>	72	8	20	61
	<i>Statutory bodies</i>	56	0	44	9
Would recommend an individual consult a trade union if they were having difficulties at work?	<i>All organisations</i>	72	4	24	76
	<i>Voluntary sector</i>	73	5	23	62
	<i>Statutory bodies</i>	56	0	44	9
Should BME organisations become associated with trade unions?	<i>All organisations</i>	67	4	29	75
	<i>Voluntary sector</i>	64	5	31	61
	<i>Statutory bodies</i>	67	0	33	9

Voluntary sector and statutory sector responses do not sum to total responses as some respondents did not give their company status

I think that in the absence of many support mechanisms, trade unions are ideally placed to offer support and help minority people ... they are large organisations with expertise that people need.

Seventy-two per cent of all organisations stated that they would be prepared to work with trade unions in promoting and improving the interests of BME groups. Just seven per cent indicated that they were not prepared to work with unions. This corresponds closely with research by Fitzgerald and Sterling (2004: ii) who found that three-

quarters of their interviewees would welcome contact with trade unions. Almost three-quarters of all respondents indicated that they would recommend an individual consult a union for advice or expertise if they were having difficulties at work. Just four per cent stated that they would not. Signposting BME individuals with employment difficulties can potentially benefit unions in terms of increased membership as well as voluntary sector support groups through a reduced workload.

However, responses have shown that unions must

TABLE 6 - HOW CAN UNIONS BETTER PROMOTE THE BENEFITS OF MEMBERSHIP TO BME GROUPS?

How can unions better promote themselves to BME groups	Frequency
BME engagement and credibility - (50%)	
Communicate with/visit BME groups	29
Greater action/involvement	9
Promote equality in employment	6
Empower BMEs	4
Give greater support to BMEs	4
Better marketing of union services and benefits - (34%)	
Publicise, send info/promote benefits	23
Road shows/workshops	5
Publicity in different languages	4
Highlight previous BME success	3
Internal representation - (16%)	
Improve internal BME representation	10
Give consistent service	3
Reps dedicated to BME issues	2
Reduce subs	1
Total number of comments – 103	Total number of respondents – 56

Note: figures in brackets represent the % of all comments made (i.e. sum 100%) as individuals could give more than one response

first address the criticisms levied against them by the BME support sector if they are to increase their profile, credibility and influence and gain the trust of BME communities. Respondents to the survey were asked how trade unions could better promote themselves, and the benefits of union membership, to BME groups and communities. The 56 respondents to this question generated 103 overlapping suggestions which are documented above in Table 6.

As can be seen from Table 6, suggestions fell into three broad categories. Half of all comments made related to trade unions' increasing their engagement and involvement with BME communities and support groups and so improving their credibility. A representative for a national voluntary sector advice organisation explained how they had attempted to improve their engagement and suggested that unions could potentially do the same.

They should come and meet and talk to the community ... We are encouraging [our officers] to go and make those links and to work in partnership with community organisations, there are loads of occurrences where [our officers] are doing outreach sessions within the communities and delivering the service directly through them ... or we are working with them in terms of training them up to give advice ... when people get to know you on a personal level, within the community, you start getting a huge amount of referrals ... We are aware that partnerships are the way forward.

Other suggestions offered by interviewees included becoming active members of BME networks and information services, establishing joint projects with BME support organisations, assisting with resources and expertise in return for referrals and signposting, part fund a voluntary post within the community, outpost union workers in community advice centres, offer training to support groups to be able to offer basic employment advice, and to expand the union learning agenda into the community. A number of interviewees suggested that unions should offer some kind of free, initial, advisory service before requiring membership so as to raise the union's profile.

Intrinsically linked with issues of BME community engagement highlighted above, are issues relating to how unions market their services and promote

the benefits of membership. Thirty-four per cent of survey suggestions (Table 6 above) related to unions better promoting or marketing their services and membership benefits. A number of interviewees believed that union services needed to be 'more clearly and better sold' to BME communities and support groups. Suggestions included clear guidelines, flyers in appropriate languages, cultural events, presentations in community or religious centres, and spreading their message through existing community organisations and networks. A national officer for a large community advice and information service highlighted how intensely advertising their services and building a good reputation at community level had made them a 'household name' and exponentially increased their profile:

You can't get away from [name of organisation], we are on every poster, on the back of every flyer and leaflet on every sort of advertisements that you get. It is a brand that is well known! ... Yes we are a very well-known brand, and we are happy about that but it is because many different organisations put our information on leaflets, saying 'go to them for advice'.

Finally, 16 per cent of recommendations of how unions could better promote themselves related to improving BME representation within trade union structures. A manager of an organisation that assisted, predominantly, black children back into school following exclusion described how, earlier in his career, he had been represented by a union at a grievance hearing:

It was very difficult for me to be in a room being represented by a white person challenging my boss who was white with two other representatives that were white talking about black issues and how I felt. They didn't have anybody within the union that could represent black employees which I found bizarre ... if they want to be taken seriously, unions must sort this out.

Similarly the director of a city-wide organisation that offered advice predominantly to refugees and recent migrants stated that:

I think it's a lot to do with image. There's still the kind of Arthur Scargill image of trade unions, particularly in South Yorkshire and they are still seen as very white organisations which creates a lot of mistrust ... I mean you have key figures

who are black, which is good, but this doesn't seem to be the case at lower levels, but it is at these lower levels where the majority of black workers are located!

This series of views is significant because it shows that any link between trade unions and BME groups has to be understood as a variety of possibilities. It is not a question of links in a singular manner as much of the community union debate suggests implicitly and explicitly. Community groups, be they BME oriented or not, have views and experiences that shape their alliances and their strategies. What emerges in this study is that the link appears to be understood in terms of institutional support strategies, marketing factors, and information-based approaches. Traditional approaches to industrial relations did not appear to be on the agenda. The link between unions and the political did not appear to be significant, although this may be due to the lack of a political strategy beyond the anti-fascist campaign or the nature of BME activists that work within established networks and groups. The role of marketing was seen as important and it was curious how the language of communication was moulded around this view of image and presence.

CONCLUSION

This paper has found that existing black and minority ethnic support and employment representation is inadequate: and what we are seeing is the rise of non-traditional forms of representation and 'other actors' although how effective they can be is another matter. Despite the presence of a large number of BME organisations and networks based within BME communities, trade unions appear to have done very little in terms of forging alliances or building partnerships although there are exceptions. A lack of understanding of union roles and functions and uncertainty in respect of union intentions and the potential benefits they can generate has subsequently emerged within BME interest groups and communities. This may vary by region - and it may vary within a region as our illustration of aspects of Bradford pointed out - so we do not claim that our findings are universal but the point is that assumptions about BME groups or community bodies generally should not be made without an attempt to understand their voices and views. However, this lack of communication and coordination has not resulted in a fundamental aversion to trade unions by BME interest groups. In fact, the findings indicate that BME groups attribute great credibility to the potential role that

trade unions can play within the BME voluntary sector and within their networks.

The need to re-map industrial relations and to think more broadly about regulation is important if we are to understand the relation between unions and BME issues in terms of local labour market and social spaces. This links us back to the issue of the importance of alliances, social and political linkages, and institutional coupling in the representation and community/social dimensions of race and ethnicity issues, let alone regulation matters. This paper illustrates how the social and employment dynamics of BME networks present a significant dimension of regulation and an important challenge to, and possibility for, union renewal. The links between the actors of industrial relations, although who the 'other' is, is another matter, requires a realistic evaluation and alternative mapping of industrial relations. The way industrial relations is visualised, ideologically constructed and understood by broader actors, is something virtually absent from current discussions. Links between actors may vary ideologically and they will be contingent on the way their politics are communicated, perceived and anticipated by a broader range of constituents. The community union debate imposes views of such links in a normative manner, which fail to map the lives and views of BME activists and the legacies of trade unions in specific communities. Holgate has begun to shift this perspective, but this failure to map the collective experiences of black and minority ethnic activists and professionals, let alone workers, means that the debate on industrial relations remains locked in an ethnically blind perspective. 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 there was an emergent neo-liberal dimension to local politics and community activities which should not be ignored so assuming that community links lead to certain outcomes is unwise, as political engagement seems to be a major factor. Given the concern with 'bureaucratisation' in the legacy of industrial relations studies it is remarkable that such concerns are ignored in relation to this debate. In addition, it fails to locate the boundaries of employment relations within a broader perspective in terms of the competition for voice and representation. Rowley and Bhopal (2006) are therefore correct to say that the changing nature of ethnic actors, and how they shift strategies and develop different approaches, is essential to an understanding of the politics of employment relations.

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