British union renewal: Does salvation really lie beyond-the-workplace?

Abstract

The paper examines a union initiative to recruit among migrant workers through the provision of individual services outside of the workplace. While the initiative is shown to have initially generated new members, questions are raised about the viability of such an approach in the absence of mutually supportive access to workplace representation.

Introduction

The limits of workplace focussed organising as an avenue for union renewal in North America and Britain has constituted an important theme within debates about how unions can reverse longstanding declines in membership, employer recognition and bargaining power. The same is true with regard to the role that various forms of beyond-the-workplace activity can play in supporting such a process of renewal.[1]

An examination of U.S and British union attempts to engage with potential members outside of the workplace reveals the adoption of two broad and distinct approaches. On the one hand, are approaches which embody an explicit and strategic linkage between such engagement and the pursuit of collective organisation at the occupational, sectoral or workplace level. On the other, are those where recruitment is pursued through the provision of individual member services and only loosely linked to its use as a platform from which to develop workplace-based union representation and organisation.

A variety of examples of the former type of approach can be identified in the United States (US), including the 'comprehensive organising' that Bronfenbrenner and colleagues have identified in respect of NLRA election campaigns (see e.g. Bronfenbrenner and Hickey 2004), and a number of successful union campaigns involving the organisation of predominantly migrant workers that have involved joint working with community groups and a focus on regulating occupational labour markets marked by extensive sub-contracting (Erickson et al, 2002; Milkman, 2006). In Britain, there has similarly been some union involvement in community based campaigns around the living wage (see e.g. Wills, 2009), while the Transport and General Workers' Union (TGWU), prior to the 2007 merger that created the Unite union, adopted an (ongoing) sectoral organising approach in certain industries that has at times encompassed engagement with community organisations, perhaps most notably in the case of the Justice for Cleaners campaign (Simms and Holgate, 2010; Tapia and Turner, 2013). However, in general British unions have been hesitant to re-orientate their recruitment and organising activities in this way (Simms et al, 2013). Instead, where attempts have been made to engage with potential members outside of the workplace level, these have largely involved the provision of individual member services(Fitzgerald and Hardy 2010; Heyes 2009; Martinez Lucio and Perrett 2009b).

Currently little evidence exists as to how far initiatives of this last type have served to support member recruitment and the development of workplace representation and negotiation. In a recent paper James and Karmowska (2012) did explore the strategic challenges that British unions face in seeking to recruit and organise among Polish migrant workers at the community or labour market levels, drawing on interview data relating to a range of initiatives undertaken by a number of different unions. For the most part, their analysis,

however, focussed on the general operation of the initiatives concerned, rather than their role – both actual and potential – in facilitating union joining via the supply of individual services. The present paper consequently builds on that by James and Karmowska through the provision of an an in-depth, longitudinal, analysis of one of the initiatives referred to in their paper in order to shed more specific light on the capacity of unions to recruit through the provision of such services at the beyond-the-workplace level. This is the establishment by the GMB union of a (now defunct) migrant workers' branch and associated learning centre in Southampton: a branch that has also been discussed previously by a number of other researchers (see e.g. Fitzgerald and Hardy, 2010: 140; Heyes, 2009: 192; Mustchin, 2012: 957) and which it has been suggested merits further longitudinal research regarding its effectiveness in terms of supporting member recruitment and organisation (Heyes, 2009: 195).[2]

In what follows findings from the study of this initiative are used to explore four issues. First, how far, and in what ways, the branch's operation acted to promote (sustainable) union joining. Secondly, to what extent it prompted those recruited to engage in two aspects of 'union citizenship behaviour' that can be argued to be conducive to the development of self-organisation, namely attendance at branch meetings, and a willingness to take up branch positions (see e.g. Snape and Redman, 2004). Thirdly, how far this beyond-the workplace aided the union in developing workplace representation and recognition. Finally, the way in which these outcomes were shaped by features of the initiative itself, including the wider union dynamics surrounding it, as well as aspects of the surrounding environment.

The paper proceeds as follows. In the first, literature based section, attention is initially paid to the rationale advanced to support a greater union focus on beyond-the-workplace recruitment and organisation. The capacity of the type of service-orientated initiatives typically undertaken by British unions to contribute to an expansion of union membership and organisation is then critically examined by reference to the motives that can prompt union joining and the more general ability of unions to expand in the absence of supportive employer policies and institutional environments. Following an outline of the case study methodology employed, the empirical part of the paper subsequently outlines the background to, and nature of, the studied initiative, how far it served to promote union joining and activism, as well as the development of forms of workplace based representation and organisation, and the factors that influenced these outcomes. Finally, the implications of these findings for the further adoption of a beyond-the-workplace approach to renewal are explored.

Unions and beyond-the-workplace renewal

In both the US and Britain it has been argued that the 'worksite unionism' that has dominated in both countries over the post-World War II period is no longer appropriate in an environment where a significant proportion of unorganised workers are hard to reach and organise as a result of their location in small- and medium-sized enterprises and engagement on various non-standard forms of employment (Cobble, 1991; Marchington et al, 2004; Wills, 2004;). Instead it is seen as necessary for unions to engage in a 'back to the future' re-orientation of their strategies towards a great engagement with potential members outside of the workplace level (Milkman, 2013).

Subsequently, substantial literatures have developed on 'social movement' and 'community' unionism in which attention is paid to how unions can attract support by seeking to advance

wider social interests (see e.g. Robinson, 1993; Ross, 2007; Tattersall, 2005). Interest has also grown in the potential for unions to focus greater attention on the regulation of sectoral and occupational labour markets (Heery et al, 2004), and the way in which workplace organising can be productively supported via external engagement with sympathetic political and other constituencies.

While it has been argued that there has been a 'turn' in the British union movement to community organising (and unionism) (Holgate, 2015), it remains the case that British unions have been markedly hesitant in embracing these agenda. This moreover is arguably unsurprising given the current evidence base available to them concerning their efficacy.

The literature that has emerged in relation to community unionism, for example, valuably draws attention to the variable meanings and practices that can be attached to the term and the difficulties that can arise in terms of establishing and maintaining union-community collaborations (Holgate, 2015; Martinez Lucio and Perrett, 2009a; McBride and Greenwood, 2009). In contrast, it generally suffers from a lack of clarity regarding the mechanisms through which such unionism can contribute to union renewal. Thus, discussions frequently are rather unclear as to whether such unionism is primarily seen, to borrow from the well-known distinction drawn by Allan Flanders (1975: 15), as offering unions a means of recruiting and organising workers through advancing their (industrial) 'vested interests' or by demonstrating their 'sword of justice' contribution to more widely based processes of social protection and advancement. Consequently, while a good deal of attention is paid to how community level engagement could enable unions to contribute to the achievement of desirable social and industrial goals, remarkably little attention is paid to how it can support the institutional development of unions (Yu, 2014: 2).

Existing research furthermore sheds little light on how far such activity has in reality stimulated union membership, organisation and activism. It has been noted, for example, that through its (zonal) Justice for Cleaners campaign Unite has been 'successful in gaining union recognition' and ensuring better working conditions for thousands of cleaners while leading to the recruitment of a few thousand new members and the establishment of a branch specifically for them (Adler et al, 2014; Tapia and Turner, 2013: 609 and 615). The motivations underlying this membership expansion and its sustainability, however, remain unclear. Similar observations can be made in respect of how union involvement in a community based living wage campaign in a London hospital led to an expansion of membership in an existing (and already employer recognised) union branch (Wills, 2009: 453). The same is also true of previous reports about how the initiative explored longitudinally in the present paper had led to the recruitment of new members (Fitzgerald and Hardy, 2010: 140; Heyes, 2009: 192; Mustchin, 2012: 957).

There are nevertheless grounds theoretically to believe that the various forms of beyond-the-workplace activity could serve to engender union joining and activism through the various ideological, solidaristic and instrumental motives that have been found to influence them (Badigannavar and Kelly, 2005; Charlwood 2002; Snape and Redman, 2004) . For example, the provision of individualistic services, as well as collectivistic campaigns aimed at securing union recognition or improvements in terms and conditions, could incentivise instrumentally informed joining. Beyond-the-workplace recruitment activity could also more generally act to facilitate contact with non-unionists who are ideologically sympathetic to unions. In addition, through their involvement in wider social campaigning, unions might contribute to, and benefit from, the creation of collective solidarities built on 'non-industrial' concerns.

Indeed, it is in this last area where the potential role of greater community level engagement in contributing to union renewal has been particularly emphasised. Wills, for example, has argued that such engagement offers a means of generating new 'non-industrial' bases of solidarity through recasting workers' issues 'as community-wide concerns' and reading 'class interests……through the lens of community, immigration, 'race' and religion' (Wills, 2008: 320). In a similar vein, both social movement and community unionism have been advocated on the grounds that they provide a means through which unions can 'attract, retain and mobilise members by invoking the importance of moral commitments….' (Robinson, 1993: 21) and generate new platforms for collective solidarity and identity (see e.g. Holgate, 2013). These arguments are in turn arguably reinforced by findings which suggest that normative, value-based forms of commitment are associated with greater member participation in union activities (Snape and Redman, 2004; Tapia, 2013). [3]

There are nevertheless grounds for being cautious about the capacity of the service-orientated approach to beyond-the-workplace activity typically pursued by British unions to yield positive outcomes. This caution reflects doubts relating to three issues: the role of individual services in encouraging union joining; the potential for internal institutional barriers to hinder its effectivity utilisation; and the challenges arising from the surrounding external environment.

In theory, the provision of valued individual services could provide potential members with an instrumental motivation to join (Williams, 1997; Waddington and Whitson, 1997). Existing research has though generally failed to find that such services significantly motivate union joining in Britain (see e.g. Gall, 2003). Moreover, their role in this regard would seem particularly questionable where the services concerned are, like English language classes, of a relatively transient nature and where their recipients may be migrants who themselves have no long-term plans to remain in the country.

Meanwhile, it has long been recognised that the internal governance structures of unions, the composition of their memberships, and the ideological and identity-related beliefs that inform their decision-making can act to endogenously constrain the 'strategic choices' open to them (see e.g. Boxall and Haynes, 1997; Frege and Kelly, 2003; Serrano, 2014; Upchurch et al, 2012). It cannot therefore be simply assumed that unions have the internal willingness and capacity to undertake a major re-orientation away from a focus on workplace recruitment and organising (see Heery, 2005). Thus, even advocates of social movement unionism have acknowledged that it raises a serious cost-benefit dilemma for union leaders (Milkman and Voss, 2004: 4).

This dilemma would appear a very real one for British unions given that certain aspects of their external environment arguably renders recruitment above the workplace level potentially problematic. Doubts have, for example, been expressed about how far the institutional environment is conducive to the type of union – community collaborations that some U.S. developments have involved (Frege et al, 2004). Various features of the British industrial relations system also arguably encourage unions to focus attention on workplace organising. These include, a reliance on decentralised collective bargaining that works to restrict union influence over employers to the enterprise/workplace levels, the limited legal rights that unrecognised unions have to access workplaces for representative purposes and employer resistance to union recognition in a context of limited statutory provisions through which it can be sought (see e.g. Ewing and Hendy, 2013).

Indeed, long-standing lines of analysis suggest that the capacity of unions to expand membership is largely determined by such external factors. In Clegg's classic comparative study of trade unionism under collective bargaining, for example, it is argued that divergences in union membership are explained by 'variations in the extent and depth of collective bargaining and in support for union security either directly from employers or through collective agreements' (Clegg, 1976: 27). In a similar vein, it has been argued that 'union leadership is dependent upon and constrained by the same socio-economic forces which motivate or enable workers to join unions' and as such, it is very much a secondary and derivative determinate of aggregate union growth' (Bain and Elsheikh, 1976: 23).

In short, the difficulties that British unions have faced in undertaking workplace organising render the search for an alternative approach to union renewal understandable. However, it remains questionable whether a largely decollectivized approach to the beyond-the-workplace recruitment of potential members based on the provision of individual member services offers them a viable way forward. Conceptually, there are admittedly grounds for arguing that it could, via several different channels, motivate union joining. Evidence to support its value in this regard is though at present very limited. Furthermore, there are grounds to suggest that key features of the institutional environment of British industrial relations work against unions pursuing such engagement, while also casting doubt on its value as a source of cost-effective and sustainable membership growth.

Methodology

The case study of the Southampton migrant branch was undertaken during the course of a broader study centred on British union initiatives to engage with migrant workers outside of the workplace level. It commenced shortly after the branch's foundation in 2006 and continued until the branch ceased to exist in 2012. Data for it were gathered from secondary, documentary and primary sources.

The first two of these sources included academic and press articles providing coverage of the development and operation of the branch, including those referred to above, union leaflets advertising the branch and its work, and the minutes of a number of project worker and migrant worker strategy meetings, as well as 21 branch ones held over the period from January 2007 to October 2009. They further included the inspection of more than 20 internal reports variously prepared by full-time officers, project workers, and regional learning and migrant worker co-ordinators, which shed light on such matters as trends in branch membership, the number of people drawing on the resources of the learning centre, related workplace organising activities, and events organised for migrant workers more generally. As to the third of the above sources, 14 semi-structured, face-to face interviews were conducted with all the main stakeholders involved in the development and operation of the branch.

The programme of interviews commenced in August 2007 with an interview with the regional education official who had provided the initial impetus behind the branch's establishment through both securing union approval for the initiative and subsequently obtaining external funding to support it. This interview was followed over the course of the next year by others with various individuals suggested by this official, including project workers involved in the operation of the branch, the branch chair, and regional officers and organisers serving members of the branch. These interviews in turn served to identify further

potential interviewees. Subsequently, further rounds of interviews were conducted in 2010 and in 2011-12, as the life of the branch was coming to an end. Ultimately the interview data gathered comprised two interviews with the official responsible for setting up the branch, seven interviews with regional full-time officers/organisers, a branch chair, the regional learning co-ordinator, and three Polish project workers, one of whom served for a period as branch secretary and was interviewed three times.

Taken together, this programme of interviews enabled the researchers to trace, the rather improvisational, way in which the branch evolved over the period from its establishment to demise. For example, a striking feature of the interviews was the way in which the perspectives of repeat interviewees varied in the light of changing experiences and developments. These interview data were, in turn, supplemented by the observation of two branch meetings and a range of sessions at which project workers provided advice and guidance to individual members. A branch planning meeting, and three large recruitment events organised in conjunction with community organisations were also attended, where informal conversations were held with members of the Polish community and the branch.

All interviews were transcribed verbatim. Throughout the process of coding ongoing discussions took place between the two researchers so that it proceeded on the basis of joint agreement. In addition, information obtained from individual interviews was cross-checked for validity purposes with that provided in other interviews and by reference to the secondary and documentary sources mentioned above. Where disparities were identified as a result of this cross-checking, an attempt was made to resolve them in subsequent interviews or via ad hoc phone calls. More widely, therefore, the results of the analysis of the interview data were triangulated with the findings arising from the examination of the previously mentioned secondary materials and the various observations undertaken.

Findings

The findings obtained from the study are detailed in what follows through an exploration of three issues. First, the way in which the branch came into being. Secondly, the setting up and activities of the learning centre which was closely linked to its administration and development. Thirdly, how the branch had evolved and operated over the period from its establishment to its eventual demise.

Establishment of branch

The origins of the branch stemmed back to the observation of the union's regional education officer early in 2006 that there had been a large influx of Polish people into the city. Subsequent investigation, according to this official, served to confirm this observation, revealing that at the time there were around 30,000 Polish residents in the city, representing 10% of its total population, and led to the organisation of a number of meetings with members of the Polish community. During these meetings language tuition emerged as a key need among recent migrants and so the union began to organise free English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes, at first on its own and later in conjunction with a local college. A membership form and a leaflet giving information about the union and what it does were also prepared in Polish.

As a result of the holding of these language classes the union began to gain members – although membership was not a requirement to enrol on them. Interest in membership was reported by the regional education office to have further grown as word circulated about several other developments, such as the union getting 10 workers on to a training course that enabled them to get a Security Licence, and the securing of employment for four welders in a local ship building company. Later, in August 2006, a public meeting attended by around 120 Polish workers was organised in conjunction with the leaders of various community organisations at which it was decided to set up the migrant workers' branch, the inaugural meeting of which was held on 6 October and attended by over 70 members; a decision that was informed by a concern that language and wider cultural barriers could act to hinder new recruits participation in meetings. As was reported in each of the three rounds of interviewing, the clear intention from the outset, however, was that the branch would be a temporary 'holding' one and that eventually those recruited would be transferred to existing branches (Fitzgerald and Hardy, 2010; Tapia, 2014).

The branch's establishment was consequently very much driven opportunistically by the regional educational officer on the back of the language courses to both gain access to migrant workers and to motivate them to join the union. From the outset, therefore, there was a focus on recruitment via the provision of individual services that were essentially only indirectly work-related. Nevertheless, it would be wrong to conclude that this focus was an exclusive one. Thus, it was clear from the interviews conducted with this official that recruitment through such means was intended to support the subsequent provision of both individual workplace support the development of collective organisation in local workplaces. At the same time, however, it was apparent from interviewees that little concrete planning had been undertaken to facilitate this linkage between recruitment and organising, one interviewee, for example, observing that 'Where I think things went wrong was the action concentrated on getting them in the union, not what we do when they are members' (Regional Organiser, 2011).

The learning centre

Shortly after the establishment of the migrant workers' branch, a learning centre was established with support from Southampton City Council and the government financed Union Learning Fund. Based in a local Community School, this centre provided administrative support to the branch, and a place where various types of educational courses and events could be provided and migrant workers, whether members or not, could seek advice and assistance on a range of work and non-work related issues.

ESOL tuition formed initially the central focus of the learning centres' educational provision. However, over time, this provision expanded to also encompass computer training, courses in numeracy and literacy, and the provision of NVQs and other programmes. In addition, a range of one-off events were held to make Polish workers aware of local employment opportunities and provide them with various forms of information, including with regard to employment rights, and local health and social services. These events, as well as the educational classes being run, provided union officials with opportunities to meet with both existing and potential members to discuss their concerns and outline the role and benefits of unions in Britain.

During the first two years of its existence, the centre's office was open from Tuesday to Thursday between 10 am and 4 pm. During these periods migrant workers were able to phone or drop in to seek advice and help from the project officer and, sometimes, a full-time official on a range of work and non-work-related matters, including issues around social security benefits, health services, schooling and education more generally, housing and the preparation of curriculum vitas. Demand for such support grew rapidly, from 57 'callers' to the centre during the first half of June 2007 to 330 in March 2008. In total, it is estimated that over the period from April 2007 to mid-2011 some 4,544 migrants were given various forms of information, advice and guidance through classes and other events, including job fairs and an annual community event organised by the learning centre.

Echoing the point made above that developments at Southampton were not informed by a narrow and exclusive focus on the provision of individual services, issues raised through the centre, as well as branch meetings, did feed at times into the union's organising and representational activities. A group of workers from a hotel belonging to a major international chain, for example, complained about a range of issues, including working time flexibility for mothers and work overload, which were reported by several interviewees to have been successfully taken up with the employer. In a similar vein, when several workers from a bakery complained about poor working conditions, they were asked to bring along some work colleagues so that the problems concerned could be explored in more detail. The issues so raised were again successfully taken up with the employer concerned, who eventually granted the union recognition. Yet another example was the case of a company that supplied flowers to some of the major supermarkets, which eventually became the focus of an (unsuccessful) recognition campaign.

Evolution and operation of the branch

When the branch was set up in October 2006 it had around 80 members. Membership subsequently expanded rapidly to reach over 500 at the end of 2007 (see also Heyes, 2009: 192). Subsequently some members were transferred to other branches; a process that in a sense anticipated the implementation of the original intention for the branch be a temporary 'holding' one that would eventually pass its members on to 'permanent' ones (Fitzgerald and Hardy and Hardy, 2014; Tapia, 2014). Meanwhile, new recruitment declined markedly, failing to compensate for membership loss occurring for reasons other than transfers of membership. An organiser interviewed in 2010, for example, estimated that around 50 per cent of those initially recruited were still members.

Monthly branch meetings were initially held and took place in Polish, with the result that translators were needed for the full-time union officers attending. From the minutes inspected, it would seem likely that from the middle of 2007 to early in 2008 attendance at these meetings represented around five per cent of the branch's membership. Attendance, however, thereafter fell significantly, reaching double figures on only a few occasions and sometimes being non-existent, thereby entailing the cancellation of meetings. Interviewees suggested that four main factors had contributed to this low attendance. Two of these were somewhat connected to the vulnerable work situation of the members, namely the way in which shiftwork made attendance difficult and the childcare problems that were experienced by groups of low paid workers who did not have access to wider networks of family support. The others related to the difficulties that such a geographical branch experienced in terms of

creating a sense of common identity among members and more specifically handling their work-related problems: difficulties well captured in the following quote from a Branch Secretary:

> '... in our Migrant Workers Branch, which is a group of 'miscellanies' that is not necessary connected with any workplace nor with any community, it is very difficult. I have tried all the possible ways to attract them and it is very difficult………. So, it is easier to make people active in the workplace. But in a situation like the Southampton Branch it is difficult, as we can only reach these people through the post and, maybe, through meetings with classes when they start the academic year.' (Polish Project Worker, 2007).

The branch similarly experienced difficulties in engendering activism among the newly recruited members, particularly in terms of finding members who would take on branch positions. These difficulties were seen by interviewees to reflect a tendency for members to only be interested in the provision of short-term help, as well as the fact that, in the words of a project officer interviewed in 2010, they rarely '*bought into the ideology of unions and/or wanted to be part of the community*' – views that tended to be confirmed by the informal conversations undertaken with members themselves. This lack of activism was, in turn, compounded by the inability of the branch, because of the size of its membership, to fund a part- or full-time branch secretary. Consequently, as was pointed by a number of others interviewed in the same year, the day-to-day running of the branch largely fell on to the shoulders of the (externally funded) project officers based in the learning centre.

It was consequently decided in October 2008 that meetings would only take place every two months. Subsequently, after October 2009, the branch ceased holding meetings. Meanwhile, largely as a consequence of the learning centre's reliance on short-term external funding, the occupancy of the project officer post underwent a number of changes, which meant that the administration of both the branch and the learning centre suffered periods of disruption. Thus the first project officer, who had played a central role in the establishment of the branch, left during the first part of 2007, her replacement moved to another position in the union towards the end of 2008, and her successor was only in post for a short time before going on long-term sick leave. This sickness absence according to the previous occupant of the role led to her taking care of branch (and learning centre) affairs remotely by phone and post until a new person was appointed in the summer of 2010. In addition, the union officer who had been largely responsible for the creation of the branch, stopped managing the project in September 2009.

Alongside these administrative problems, the union struggled to address the work-related concerns of a membership that was geographically dispersed and mainly working in non-union environments. In part this was a straightforward lack of resources. However, it also reflected the uneasy relationship between such workplace servicing and the union's commitment to self-organising. For example, one official observed that:

> 'They [officers] have spent a lot of their time doing individual grievances and individual disciplinary hearings and stuff like that and, to be honest with you, quite a few of them resented what we were doing because they didn't see that as being their job'. And to be fair, the way we are supposed to be doing things, it is not supposed to be their job. They

> *are supposed to be people within the workplace, but if you have 200 members spread over 100 employers that is what you get.'* (Regional Official, 2011).

These difficulties of representing the work-related problems of members of the migrant workers' branch that led on several occasions to groups of them being transferred to more suitable geographical branches. They were also seen more generally to reduce the incentives that members had to engage with the branch in a context where, as one interviewee put it, '*the possibility of just meeting up to discuss community events or family events was not interesting enough for them*' (Polish project worker, 2011).

Discussion and conclusions

The motives that informed the Southampton branch were not narrowly focussed on the provision of individual services to members. Rather, while the supply of such services was seen to offer a potential way of attracting migrant workers into membership, it was intended, admittedly in a rather imprecise way, that the membership gains achieved would be used to support workplace based organising. The motivations underlying the branch's formation can therefore be seen to have aligned, at least aspirationally, with the more collectivistic beyond— the-workplace approach which has been a feature of some U.S. based initiatives that have combined community-level engagement with the pursuit of workplace organising and collective bargaining rights (see e.g Erickson et al, 2002; Bronfenbrenner and Hickey, 2004; Milkman, 2006). In reality, however, the above linkage proved to be very limited, with the result that the Southampton initiative remained largely focused on the provision of individual services and marked by limited attempts to build upon its engagement with migrant workers to support the advancement of collective work-related representation and bargaining. As a result, it therefore took a form similar to the types of initiatives that have more widely been taken by British unions to engage with migrant and BME workers (Martinez Lucio and Perrett, 2009).

The study's findings show that the branch grew reasonably rapidly from its establishment in October 2006 to the end of 2007, achieving a membership of over 500. Subsequently, however, recruitment declined. As a result, it became insufficient to compensate for membership loss occurring for reasons other than transfers of members to other branches, notwithstanding that between April 2007 and mid-2011 the union had direct contact with over four and a half thousand migrants trough the educational courses, advisory services and other events run by the branch's associated learning centre. This decline also occurred alongside a marked fall off in attendance at branch meetings and a more general lack of activism, as indicated not only by the level of branch attendance but the ongoing difficulties that were experienced in filling branch posts. In effect, therefore, the branch had a relatively short period during which its membership expanded and reasonable levels of attendance were achieved and a longer one in which these features were markedly absent, with the branch effectively ceasing to operate towards the end of 2008 – just two years after its establishment.

With regard to the first three central objectives of the paper, it can therefore be reasonably concluded that (a) while the services offered to potential members did generate a reasonable degree of individually based union joining, much of this membership growth was of a non-sustainable, transitory and short-term nature; (b) those so recruited exhibited little willingness

(after an initial burst of enthusiasm) to attend branch meetings and take up branch positions and hence engage in forms of citizenship behaviour supportive of self-organisation (Snape and Redman, 2004)); and (c) only to a very limited extent did the union use the recruitment at Southampton to support organising within non-recognised workplaces. It can consequently be reasonably argued that developments at Southampton did not to any significant degree provide a platform from which to generate sustainable instrumental based union joining, the type of normative commitment which has been found to be conducive to union activism (Snape and Redman, 2004; Tapia, 2013), or the creation of new community-based collective solidarities of the type identified by Wills (2008) and Holgate (2013).

These conclusions clearly raise real and important doubts about the efficacy of the type of beyond-the-workplace initiatives that have to date been typically pursued by British unions in terms of their capacity to engender member recruitment and support the development or workplace organisation and recognition; as opposed to wider and important social goals. Moreover, these doubts can be seen to receive reinforcement from other sources. Existing evidence has been noted, for example, to show that membership gains from 'beyond-the-workplace community level initiatives in Britain have often been fragile can be seen to reinforce such doubts (Mustchin, 2012). The value of education and training as an avenue for union renewal remains the subject of much debate (Heyes and Rainbird, 2011; McIlroy and Croucher, 2013). And while workers' centres in the U.S. have been easily able to recruit individual workers by 'providing legal services and social and education opportunities', research indicates that they have often it challenging to 'retain those workers as active 'members' once their immediate needs have been met' (Milkman, 2013: 657).

As to the paper's fourth and final objective, the findings revealed these outcomes to be reflective of a number of factors. These included the various administrative problems the branch experienced as a result of the opportunistic manner it developed, and way in which both it and the learning centre were dependent on external funding and not embedded in any wider union strategy at either the national and regional level (Milkman, 2006; Voss, 2010). They also, more fundamentally, encompassed the challenges that the union faced in pursuing the work-related grievances and complaints of members.

Strategic weaknesses surrounding both the development of the Southampton initiative and its subsequent operation therefore played a role in shaping its outcomes. That they did arguably provides a further illustration of how internal institutional dynamics, and the governance, identity and ideological factors that influence them, exert a major influence over only both what unions seek to do and how they go about doing it (see e.g. Boxall and Haynes, 1997; Serrano, 2014; Upchurch et al, 2012)). Given the nature of the data collected, it must remain an open question how far these strategic weaknesses reflected a conservative unwillingness in the wider union to embrace such an alternative approach. It is, however, clear that the difficulties which arose with regard to the representation of the work-related interests of the new recruits mirror the way in which the institutional environment of British industrial relations has more generally limited the ability of unions to access workplaces where they are not recognised and obtain recognition from employers. As a result, and somewhat paradoxically, while the problems associated with 'worksite unionism' may indeed provide unions with an incentive to recruit outside of the workplace, they also act to place limits on

the viability of initiatives of the type undertaken at Southampton (Reference withheld; Cunningham and James, 2010).

The present findings clearly do not necessarily have implications regarding the potential value of British unions productively pursuing the more collectivist approach to the beyond-the-workplace engagement with potential members that has on occasion been used successfully in the U.S. They do though raise serious questions about the capacity of initiatives like that at Southampton to aid union membership growth and organising in the absence of supportive legal reforms that provide unions with an enhanced capacity to support those recruited in respect of work-related issues (Connolly et al, 2013). Insofar as this analysis is correct, it therefore adds weight to the view that 'neither workplace-based nor 'community unionism' models alone can respond to the multiple challenges of organising the highly stratified, temporary and precarious workforces that populate the urban service economies of our global cities (Alberti, 2014: 17). It also points more narrowly to the need for discussions of the potential for recruiting and organising at the beyond-the-workplace level to pay much more attention to the institutional barriers arising from surrounding legal frameworks and the ways in which they might be overcome.[4]

Existing analyses may – perhaps -be right to argue that such activity could facilitate union joining by providing a mechanism for alternative forms of collective identity and normative commitment. However, the viability of unions moving away from 'worksite unionism' also requires attention to be paid to the capacity of unions to harness them within the structural and socio-political environments within which they operate. Unfortunately, the analysis of this paper suggests that when this is done major doubts arise concerning the capacity of the types of beyond-the-workplace initiatives commonly undertaken by unions in Britain to support a significant process of union renewal.

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Notes

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[1] The use of the phrase 'beyond-the-workplace' was adapted from that of 'beyond the enterprise' used by Heery et al (2004).   However, as a reviewer pointed out, it had earlier been used in the title of a book written by Marginson et al (1989).

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[2] It should additionally be noted that each of the three earlier referenced studies were very much undertaken during the early stages of the branch's life, with data collection appearing to have ended sometime during 2008. In contrast, as shall be seen, data collection for the present study continued into 2012.

[3] For a more detailed discussion of the links between union commitment, activism and renewal see Gall and Fiorito (2012).

[4] This argument receives wider support from the way in which recent comparative analyses have highlighted the importance of workplace access (as well as other institutional factors) in explaining levels of unionisation (see Brady, 2007; Schnabel, 2013).