Working Paper 7

**The Unorganised Worker: Problems at Work, Routes to Support and
Views on Representation**

The Unrepresented Worker Survey

**Collectivism and Views on Trade Unions among Unrepresented Workers
with Problems at Work**

Anna Pollert

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Introduction

The 2004 Workplace Employment Relations Survey finds that there has not been a reversal in the decline of unionisation and union recognition (Kersley et al, 2005). There is also evidence that individual conflict at work is substantial and largely unresolved: the 2001 British Worker Representation and Participation (BWRP) survey found 38 per cent of respondents had problems at work, but 50 per cent did not go to anyone for help (Gospel and Willman, 2003: 157). Other research found that 42 per cent of those interviewed about their knowledge of employment rights had experienced a problem at work (Casebourne et al., 2006: 98) – even in a sample which over-represented the better organised public sector (ibid.: 16). The increase in calls to the Acas helpline and voluntary sector bodies, such as the Citizens Advice Bureaux, as well as the rise in the number and complexity of Employment Tribunal cases also testify to the growth in individual problems at work (Pollert, 2005).

There is also substantial consensus that a prime motivation for workers to join a union is to seek support for problems at work. Seventy two per cent of new union members cited this rationale in 1993, and this is likely to be similar for non-members, since research has found no major attitudinal differences between these two groups (Waddington and Whitston, 1997: 518). Bryson, using the BWRP survey similarly finds that 51 per cent of members joined a union because it helped 'get better treatment if you have a problem at work' (2003: 6). Unorganised workers with problems at work should arguably be receptive to union organising activities and research on their characteristics, problems and orientations towards solving problems can open debate about the types of experiences and consciousness which lie beneath the surface of institutional de-collectivisation and how organising activities might relate to them. There is also a need to explore more fully what is meant by 'collectivity': the BWRP survey found that, despite the de-collectivisation of industrial relations, most workers prefer to deal with problems collectively and there is a 'representation gap' (Gospel and Willman, 2003: 157). The BWRP survey shows that the non-unionised prefer collective representation by fellow workers to trade unions. We can take these questions further in the

Unrepresented Worker Survey, since we asked questions about spontaneous forms of collective responses to problems at work as well as about attitudes towards trade unions and a desire for union help in solving workplace problems. For while there has been considerable debate about why workers join unions, there has been little research on how workers without collective representation respond in practice to individual grievances, how far 'individual grievances' are shared and how far propensity to attempt collective solutions is related to propensity to receptiveness to trade unions.

This paper attempts to address these questions in examining collective responses to problems at work and attitudes to trade unions using the results of the Unrepresented Worker Survey (URWS)[1] of 500 'unrepresented workers' with problems at work conducted in 2004. It focuses on two sets of issues: the incidence of and types of *group action* to resolve problems and secondly, views on the utility of trade unions to resolve them and desire to join a trade union. It also explores the relationship between sections of the survey sample who joined together to solve problems and sections who affirmed that unions could help to solve them. Are the most collectively active at work among the unrepresented also the most likely to want to join a union to resolve their difficulties? If so, who and where are they? And where are there anomalies between these two forms of collective orientation? Survey data is largely descriptive and cannot offer explanations. Nevertheless, debate on mobilisation and collectivity can be furthered by evidence on the patterns discerned.

The selection of 500 'unrepresented workers' with problems attempted to capture vulnerability and exclude those who were not unionised, but in a relatively better labour market position with higher pay. Thus, a definition of vulnerability is individual exposure in the labour market by non-unionism and non-coverage by collective bargaining and earning at or below median pay. Actually experiencing a problem at work goes beyond potential vulnerability to vulnerability as concretely requiring support. The sample composition compared to the labour force as a whole and to low paid, non-unionised workers within it is presented in Working Paper 1 (Pollert, 2005a) and the low levels of pay in the sample are shown in the Appendix.

The 'unrepresented' comprised 292 (58 per cent) 'never members'; 172 (34 per cent) previous members; and 32 (6 per cent) of union members who had no collective union recognition or representation at work.[2] There were some gender differences: although current membership was similar (6 per cent male, 7 per cent female), 38 per cent of men compared with 32 per cent of women had been members previously, and fewer men were 'never-members' (55 per cent) than women (60 per cent). Over three-quarters of workers under 40 years were 'never members' (77 per cent) and young workers below 22 years were more than twice as likely to have never been in a union than those over 40 years (94 per cent compared to 40 per cent). 'Never-members' were also over-represented in the bottom pay quartile (69 per cent of this band compared with 58 per cent of the sample) while previous members were more likely to be in the top two pay bands (38 per cent of each compared to the average 34 per cent representation). Previous members were also more likely to work in companies working for the public sector (43 per cent compared with the 34 per cent average), which suggests they may have been former public sector workers whose jobs had been privatised. Public sector workers were both more likely to be current union members (17 per cent) and previous ones (38 per cent) – and the highest percentage of previous members was in the voluntary sector (46 per cent). Our findings on 'never-membership' by gender, age, pay and sector are consistent with findings from the British Social Attitudes surveys (Bryson and Gomez, 2005:76).

Incidence and Types of Collective Action.

The survey explored both problems experienced by these workers, and what they did about them. Ten areas were examined: pay, job security, job opportunities, discrimination, taking time off, working hours, workload, health and safety, job description/contract and work relations in terms of stress and bullying.[3] Key findings were that *pay* problems were the most frequent (dominated either by a concern that pay was less than what others in the same type of job earned, or being incorrectly paid), followed by *work relations* (chiefly stress or a sense of management 'taking advantage or bullying'),

4

workload, *working hours, job security, contracts* and other problems (Pollert, 2005 b and c for details). While a polarisation between 'voice' and 'exit' is usually discussed in terms of workers' collective union influence versus quitting as alternative responses to workplace disputes (Hirschman, 1970), this survey showed that *non-unionised* workers do not necessarily exit a job in response to problems. On the contrary, in spite of lack of union support, the vast majority (86 per cent) took some action to resolve their problems, leaving only a minority (14 per cent) doing nothing. Most tried several actions. The majority tried to resolve matters with management, 69 per cent with immediate managers and 47 per cent with senior managers. Just 2 per cent made an Employment Tribunal application, and 12 per cent used the formal complaints procedure. However, a significant finding was that, in spite of the high level of problem-solving activity by workers, almost half (47 per cent) of those who tried to solve there difficulties had *no conclusion with their employer*. Of the 38 per cent with an outcome (12 per cent had ongoing negotiations at the time of the survey), only half were satisfied, with a quarter neutral and a quarter dissatisfied. This left only 19 per cent of those who took action with a satisfactory outcome to individual problem resolution. This finding of poor resolution, as well as the low level of formal workplace procedures, among the unorganised raises serious questions for government policy, in view of its recent legislation which purports to improve workplace dispute resolution by creating new statutory grievance, disciplinary and dismissal procedures which aim to reduce the number of Employment Tribunal applications (Employment Act, 2002, discussed in Pollert, 2005). Although the UWS was conducted only shortly after this legislation came into effect (October 2004) the poor outcomes suggest that improving individual dispute resolution for unrepresented workers is unlikely to be met simply by increasing formalisation and forcing solutions to take place in the workplace: it appears that individual 'voice' is not effective – a finding which is of little surprise to the union movement.

While the high level of attempted action was the first significant finding of the UWS, a second – and arguably more surprising one – was that almost a *quarter* of 'actors' tried some type of *group* resolution about shared problems, indicating that *collectivity,* if not effective *voice* is alive. Working

Paper 5 (Pollert, 2006), which examined what workers tried to do about a *main* problem in one job, found that 24 per cent tried action as a group. This figure reaches 26 per cent when group action on *all* problems experienced in one job were considered. Endorsing mobilisation theory, which postulates that a first requirement for any kind of joint mobilisation is a sense of injustice, more workers joined others as a group who thought their problem an infringement of their rights[4] (30 per cent) than those who did not think so (22 per cent).

    While joint action in small groups differs from consolidation into organised power, it nevertheless provides a greater basis for the latter than purely individual responses to individual problems. Certain groups were more likely than others to try *some* group action. Those working for subcontractors to the public sector and in the voluntary sector[5] (34 and 38 per cent) were more likely, but not those in the public sector (22 per cent), while private sector workers had an average 25 per cent propensity. Some industries demonstrated higher than average rates of trying group solutions, including Transport (50 per cent), finance (41 per cent), Health and Social Work (34 per cent) and Wholesale and Retail (31 per cent). Those in small and medium workplaces (below 25 and 50-249 workers) were also more likely (29 per cent) than those in large ones (over 250 workers) (20 per cent) to engage in collective solutions, contrary to arguments that small workplaces are a deterrent to group action (Munro, 1999: 13)[6]. Full-time workers more likely than part-timers to try group action (28 and 20 per cent respectively), which suggests that isolation is a deterrent among the latter. Short length of service is also associated with less joint action, those with less than the year's qualifying period for statutory unfair dismissal protection being substantially less likely to attempt joint action than those with above the minimum (22 per cent compared to 30 per cent). Reasons for *not* attempting group action are discussed further on. Finally, regarding age and gender, women, in spite of their much higher level of part-time working[7] were more likely than men to join with others (28 per cent compared to 24 per cent), as were either young workers between 22 and 29 years old, who had just above the average rate of short tenure and older ones (31 and 28 per cent respectively)[8]. Older females

were the most likely to join others (31 per cent), compared with 22 per cent of older men, 27 per cent of younger men and 24 per cent of younger females.

At a later stage in the questionnaire, we addressed collectivity at the broad level of how far problems were experienced as shared. Among those who did, we examined who took this further in collective attempts at resolution. This second approach to probing collectivity found an even larger number of 'group actors' than the earlier one, which asked about 'joining others as a group' as one of several responses to a problem. In total, 75 per cent of the sample (375 people) felt that their problems were experienced by others. Of these, 75 per cent (280 people) took the step of 'discussing with other people or trying to do something together to try to resolve the problems'. *This raises the proportion of the entire sample who engaged in some group resolution to workplace problems to 55.8 per cent.* The survey entered into greater details among these about the *types* of group activity used.

The major collective activity was 'discussing our common problems among ourselves informally' (79 per cent), although almost a fifth (19 per cent) went as a group to management, and a further 13 per cent arranged a 'group meeting to discuss what we could do'. These last two categories, arguably more organised forms of group action, are further explored below. A further 2 per cent joined a union as a group, but since the total was 6 people, quantitative comment cannot be made.

Group meetings were considerably more frequent for certain kinds of *problems* – for taking time off 25 per cent, for health and safety 23 per cent and for contract or job description problems 20 per cent.[9]. Taking time off, working hours and health and safety concerns also prompted higher than average rates of group approaches to management (44, 29 and 27 per cent of those with these problems did so). Individual pay problems led to just above average rates of group meetings (17 per cent with these problems), but not to delegations to management (11 per cent). Workers' sectors also showed different patterns: public sector workers, although less likely to take group action in general, were more likely to discuss their common problems informally when they did take this route (90 per cent did so), but less likely to arrange a group meeting or go as a group to management (10 and 14 per

cent). Private sector workers were close to the norm. Those working for contractors to the public sector were less prone than average to discuss things as a group, but more likely to arrange a group meeting (67 and 18 per cent respectively). Thus, workers in subcontract companies were both more likely to take group action in general (as found in the first type of question on responses to problems) and to take a more organised form of this than average (as found in the second group of questions on collectivity).

Those in small workplaces (less than 25 workers) were the most likely to arrange a group meeting, while those in large ones (over 250 workers) the least (18 and 5 per cent respectively), a finding which mirrors the differing levels of general group engagement among workers in these workplace sizes. Those in small workplaces were also twice as likely as those in large ones to see their managers as a group (25 and 12 per cent respectively), arguably reflecting the greater proximity of workers to managers in small workplaces. In terms of industry, the most likely to arrange a group meeting were workers in Health and Social Work and in Public administration (25 and 20 per cent). The engagement of these service sector workers in group meetings suggests that the overall low proportion of public sector workers taking this form of group action is confined to certain parts of it. This was indeed so – in education it was only 11 per cent and in other services, 12 per cent. Finally, arguably the most assertive type of group action – going as a group to management – was most likely among public administration and transport workers (40 and 27 per cent).

Although more organised types of group action were usually associated with those who, in general, showed higher rates of collective response, there were some unexpected findings. While full-time workers were predictably almost twice as likely as part-timers to have a group meeting (14 compared with 8 per cent), both had average propensities for group discussions and going as a group to management. Temporary workers were more likely than others to discuss matters as a group (86 per cent), but far less likely to have a group meeting or make a deputation to management (5 and 10 per cent). Tenure made a difference only to group visits to management – only 15 per cent of those with below a year's service did so, compared to 22 per cent of those with above this, possibly reflecting greater

reluctance to 'rock the boat' among the former. Although we saw that women in general were more likely than men to take group action, there was little gender difference in *types* of group action, except that men were more likely to discuss things as a group (82 and 77 per cent) and to see managers as a group (22 and 17 per cent respectively). Both had an average 13 per cent propensity to arrange a group meeting.

There were large age differences in frequencies of arranging group meetings – 9 per cent of those aged below 40 years but 17 per cent of older workers. Those between 40 and 49, and below 22 years somewhat more likely to arrange group meetings to managers than others (24 and 23 per cent respectively did so). The most likely to make a group approach to managers were young men (below 40 years old) – 26 per cent of this section of group actors did so. Thus, older, full-time, permanent workers with over a year's service are the most likely to engage in more organised forms of group action.

Union membership experience made little difference to propensity for informal group discussion, but surprisingly, never-members were slightly more likely than previous members to make a group approach to managers (20 and 16 per cent respectively), but were far less likely to arrange a group meeting (7 compared with 20 per cent). The large difference in the latter raises questions about the possible significance of union experience to types of collectivity, although there may be other intervening variables, such as gender. Types of informal group activity require further research: are group meetings more democratically oriented than group visits to management, for example?

A final question relates to those who felt their problems were shared by others but did *not* attempt some form of group action. This comprised only 95 people – a quarter of those with shared experience. The main reasons for not taking a collective route were: 'I didn't think we would be successful (17 per cent), 'I worried that my employer would take action against me' (14 per cent), 'I didn't think it was worth causing trouble' and 'I feel (felt) isolated from colleagues' (15 per cent). Only 5 per cent said 'Others at work had the same problem and that made me put up with it' and 'I prefer doing things on my own'. The major reasons were thus associated with lack of confidence, fear

and isolation, rather than an individualist, anti-collectivist orientation. Numbers were too small for further sample disaggregation.

Experiences of Problems and Attitudes Towards Trade Unions.

We asked all those who were not union members during their problems whether they thought 'being a union member' could have helped them resolve their difficulties.[10] Over half (52 per cent) thought that this would, 37 per cent thought it would not and 10 per cent did not know. Is there any connection between belief in the utility of being a union member and group action, to suggest collective overall orientation, or do these beliefs and action-types mean different things? On balance there is an overlap only in some areas.

There were similar patterns in terms of the problems experienced and views about these. Those who thought their problems an infringement of rights were much more likely to think union membership would help them (63 per cent) as well as to take group action, compared with those who did not think so (40 per cent). Thus, a sense of injustice predisposes to collectivism both in terms of spontaneous workplace activity and openness to trade union help. Similar problems to those prompting greater levels of group action were also more likely to be associated with positive views on union help: 63 per cent of those having problems with time off, 65 per cent of those with working hours, 63 per cent with health and safety and 63 per cent of those with contract problems thought a union would have helped them.

On the other hand, the most spontaneously active workers in subcontracting companies, were less likely than private sector workers to think a union would have helped them (48 and 57 per cent respectively) and public sector workers the least likely of all (43 per cent). Workers in subcontracting companies to the public sector demonstrated the highest percentage of former union membership (43 per cent, compared with the 34 per cent average) – which suggests that their union experience may have encouraged workplace collectivism, but not confidence in unions. Only slightly more public sector than private sector workers had previous union experience (38 per cent and 31 per cent respectively). In terms of any association with

workplace size, those in small workplaces had an average likelihood of believing a union could have helped (53 per cent of those with fewer than 25 workers, 55 per cent of those in workplaces of 25-49 workers), but those in large workplaces of above 250 workers were substantially less likely to see the utility of a union (47 per cent).

Whereas the transport, finance, health and wholesale and retail sectors had all been prominent for group action, only the last also showed a higher than average propensity to place confidence in unions to help resolve problems (62 per cent), which reinforces the potential benefits of union organising possibilities here. Other sectors which stood out were real estate, manufacturing and to a lesser extent, financial mediation (65, 63 and 56 per cent respectively). If we look at three variables – previous union membership, level of group action and positive views on the utility of a union to solve problems, the higher frequencies for 'unions could help' among manufacturing and real estate/business service workers are associated with higher than average previous union experience, whereas with retail and financial intermediation it is associated with higher levels of group action, but low union experience (Table 1).

Table 1. Union Membership Experience by Sector (Base Sample total) and 'Do you think that being a member of a union could have helped you to resolve your problem(s) in that job? (Base: All who were not in a union at time of problem).

		Industry													
	Total	Agriculture, hunting & forestry	Manufacturing	Construction	Wholesale & retail trade	Hotels & restaurants	Transport, storage & communication	Financial intermediation	Real estate, renting, business activities	Public admin etc	Education	Health & social work	Other service activities	Other	Unclassified
Total	501	7	70	16	91	34	24	17	44	29	39	83	31	1	15
Union membership															
Yes - at some time	204	2	32	7	27	8	14	5	18	15	17	39	15	1	4
	41%	29%	46%	44%	30%	24%	58%	29%	41%	52%	44%	47%	48%	100%	27%
Yes at time of problem	32	-	3	2	3	-	1	1	1	2	5	12	1	-	1
	6%	-%	4%	13%	3%	-%	4%	6%	2%	7%	13%	14%	3%	-%	7%

Yes but not at time of problem	172	2	29	5	24	8	13	4	17	13	12	27	14	1	3
		34%	29%	41%	31%	26%	24%	54%	24%	39%	45%	31%	33%	45%	100%	20%
No never	292	5	38	9	62	26	10	12	26	13	21	44	16	-	10
		58%	71%	54%	56%	68%	76%	42%	71%	59%	45%	54%	53%	52%	-%	67%
Group Action (1)	132	1	16	5	27	6	12	7	9	6	6	28	6	-	3
		26%	14%	23%	31%	30%	18%	50%	41%	20%	21%	15%	34%	19%	-	20%
Union Help Problem?																
Base: all non-union members	465	7	67	14	86	34	23	16	43	27	33	71	30	1	13
Yes	244	3	42	7	53	18	12	9	28	6	13	30	17	-	6
		52%	43%	63%	50%	62%	53%	52%	56%	65%	22%	39%	42%	52%	-	46
No	173	4	16	6	24	11	8	5	12	20	15	33	12	1	6
		37%	57%	24%	43%	28%	32%	35%	31%	28%	74%	45%	46%	40%	100%	46
Unsure	48	-	9	1	9	5	3	2	3	1	5	8	1	-	1
		10%	-	13%	7%	10%	15%	13%	13%	7%	4%	15%	11%	3%	-	-8

(1) This is based on first part of questionnaire on type of response to problems and refers to joint action on *all problems* in screened job.

It is arguable that all these sectors are fruitful for union organising, but that *different forms of collective orientation* among workers can be taken into account in terms of *policy, language and strategy*. There are some sectors which have just average levels of positive views on union utility where there is little group action but higher previous union membership, such as Other Services or higher levels of both group action and previous union membership, such as Transport, Storage and Communication. The latter may be an illustration of the preference, noted in the BWRP survey, for looking towards colleagues rather than unions for representation with problems.

In terms of worker characteristics, there were very small differences in views on union help between full and part-time workers (53 and 50 per cent) and between those with above and below one year's service (54 and 52 per cent respectively), although there were differences between these groups in propensity to act collectively. The most interesting *contrast* in terms of group action and belief in union membership being helpful occurs in terms of *gender*: women were *less likely* than men to think being a union member could have helped with their problems (50 and 57 per cent respectively),

although they were more likely to take group action. Different types of group action are unlikely to contribute towards understanding this, since it was shown above that there were few differences, although men were slightly more likely to go as a group to managers, which suggests greater assertiveness. Women's preference for colleagues, rather than a union, for representation raises the question of how 'never-membership' is gendered (since a greater proportion of women than of men were never members), which may reduce the consciousness of the 'collective' in terms of a union. This raises important questions for unions: if unrepresented women workers with problems at work are more spontaneously collective than men, but do not necessarily connect this with unions in terms of consciousness, how can their collectivity be better be tapped by unions? Progress towards greater female representation in unions has been made, as well advances by unionisation for women's interests (Bewley and Fernie, 2003), but non-union workplace collective identity and action noted two decades ago (Pollert, 1981, Westwood, 1984) still persists (Munro, 1999).

In terms of age, a surprising and important finding is that *younger workers – noted above for their higher level of never-membership,* were more likely than older ones to believe being a union member would have helped them – 59 per of those below 40 years compared with 47 per cent of those aged 40 or over. The 30-39 and below 22 year age groups were especially likely to think so (63 and 57 per cent). Interestingly, these age-groups were not the most likely to try group action: the older of these had an average likelihood (24 per cent) while only 15 per cent of those below 22 years joined others at a group, so there is a reverse pattern to that with gender. Younger males were the most likely to think a union would have helped (61 per cent) although young women follow close behind – an interesting finding, considering they had a very low propensity for group action. Older women, the most likely to try group solutions, were the least likely to think a union would have helped – 42 per cent. For union, these findings suggest that while the news on young workers is encouraging, there appears a lost potential among collectivist older women.

The literature on desire for unionisation among unorganised workers highlights the difference between *general* or *abstract* positive views, from a

concrete decision to join a union (Bryson, 2003: 5). It suggests the concept of 'frustrated demand', where the costs of joining outweigh the benefits. The URWS findings on a specific question, 'Has your experience of your problems made you want to become a member of a trade union?' confirms that fewer workers actually said that they wanted to join than stated that a union would have helped. There is, nevertheless, a large overlap: 52 per cent of respondents felt a union would have helped resolve their problem and 40 per cent answered that they wanted to join a union as a result of their experience of problems, so there is a 'loss' of 12 per cent. Six per cent were unsure.

Importantly, and again confirming mobilisation theory, the contrast between those who thought their problems an infringement of their rights and those who did not remains: 48 per cent of those who thought so would join a union compared with 30 per cent of those who did not. The relationship with issues prompting wanting to join a union is similar to that for views that a union would have helped: problems with working hours, health and safety and contract problems were associated with higher proportions of workers stating that their experience made them want to join a union. Some problems, however, were associated with more discrepant views: 60 per cent with job opportunities problems felt a union would have helped, but a below-average 47 per cent of these would actually join a union as a result of their experience. On the other hand, those with job security problems were 14 percentage points above average in desire to join, compared with 7 percentage points above average in general views on union utility, suggesting a very practical unionisation need. Thus, *the kind of problem* is relevant to general perceptions of union relevance and propensity to join.

In terms of respondents' sector, there is only a small difference between public and private sector workers, with 43 and 40 per cent respectively saying their experience made them want to join a union, but fewer workers in private subcontractors to the public sector (34 per cent) wanted to. In view of their high level of group action, as well as above average previous union experience, this finding requires further analysis. Reflecting the same pattern as that for views on whether unions would have helped, the least likely to want to join a union were those in either very small or very large workplaces (below 25, or above 250 workers – all 37 per cent). These groups

each require different analysis in terms of informal group action: those in small workplaces were shown to have higher levels of group action, average levels of positive views on union help, high levels of never-membership, but low likelihood of joining. In terms of spontaneous joint problem resolution, this suggests lost potential collectivity in terms of unionisation potential. Unrepresented workers in large workplaces showed the lowest levels of all forms of informal group activity, which coheres with a low propensity to wish to join a union in terms of low collectivism in both 'grass-roots' and union-oriented terms. The most likely to want to join a union were those in medium-sized workplaces (50-249 workers) – 46 per cent. Workers in the wholesale and retail trade showed only average propensity to want to join a union (42 per cent) in contrast to their above-average endorsement of union utility. Respondents in transport and storage, real estate/business activities and manufacturing now showed the greatest tendency to say they would join a union (57, 49 and 46 per cent respectively). As shown in Table 1, the former also had high levels of union experience and of informal group action (as gauged by the first question on response to problems).

There was again little difference between full and part time workers (40 and 39 per cent would join a union) and among those with above or below a year's tenure (41 and 39 per cent). Men's greater belief in union help for problems than women's was reflected in stronger likelihood to favour union membership – 44 per cent of men said they would join, but only 37 per cent of women. Young men were by far the most likely to say they would join (54 per cent), compared with young women (42 per cent), older males (34 per cent) and older females (32 per cent).

Taking age on its own, young workers, as well as being more likely than older workers to think a union would have helped them solve their problems, were also more likely to say their experience had made them want to become a member of a trade union. The below 40s had a 47 per cent likelihood to answer positively, compared to 33 per cent of those over 40, with those between 22 and 39 years old the most likely (49 per cent). However, gender enters this picture in being 'unsure'. Women were more likely to be unsure as to whether they wanted to join a union – 7 per cent compared with 4 per cent of men and young women were over three times as likely to be

unsure as young men (10 per cent compared with 3 per cent). While these figures simply use 40 years as the cut-off for 'young' and 'old, the very young (men and women) below 22 years old were the most unsure – 17 per cent, compared to the 6 per cent average.

A key question, of course, is why 54 per cent of those with shared problems did *not* want to join a trade union. This percentage included those who did not think a union would have helped, as well as the 12 per cent who did. Multiple responses were possible as to why people would not want to join a union. Ideological opposition was the reason for 15 per cent, who 'did not want to be represented by a union/felt unions were against their politics or didn't believe in unions'. Ten percent felt 'unions don't/can't do much/are dated/don't see the point', a sceptical view of low union instrumentality in terms of 'delivery' (Charlwood, 2002: 470). However, *the nature of the problem* was a major stumbling block for 15 per cent, who felt their problem(s) were 'not the kind a union could have helped me to resolve', which confirms findings above that attitudes towards union help varied considerably according to the nature of the problem. This adds a further dimension to the general finding that workers join unions to help with difficulties at work (Waddington and Whitston, 1997).

Further reasons for not wanting to join a union were fear among 8 per cent – 'I was worried my manager will take action/union make things worse' – and a sense that there was no appropriate union for their job or at their workplace among 7 per cent. In addition, 4 per cent thought they would not join because they worked in a small company. Only 3 per cent reasoned that membership costs deterred them.

Certain reasons for not wanting to join a union varied substantially by employer type: over twice the average were sceptical, feeling unions were ineffective, among public sector workers (22 per cent), and far more workers in private companies contracted to the public sector were ideologically opposed (24 per cent). Above-average proportions of private sector workers did not want to join because of fear (10 per cent), but below average expressed this among workers in contracting companies to the public sector and the public sector itself (3 and 5 per cent). However, there was little variation from the sample norm in terms of reasons for not wanting to join a

union by sector or employee characteristics. While a higher percentage of women than men were likely not to want to join a union, among these, there were fewer who felt their problem was not relevant to unions than among men (14 per cent of women, 17 per cent of men) and they were slightly less likely to think unions were ineffective (9 per cent compared with 11 per cent of men). There was almost no gender difference in other respects, such as ideological opposition and fear (women 6 per cent, men 9 per cent). The reasons women gave for not wishing to join a union after their problem were very dispersed, and often un-prompted, including: 'I did not feel I worked enough hours' (5 per cent against 2 per cent of men), 'cost/waste of money' (5 per cent against 0 per cent), 'never thought about it' (5 per cent against 2 per cent), 'don't understand/know anything about it' (4 per cent and 1 per cent of men), 'no time/energy' (3 per cent and 1 per cent) and 'don't know' (8 per cent against 2 per cent of men). These disparate reasons reveal that there is no ideological or experiential gender difference, but that a variety of factors coalesce into giving less importance to union membership among those women who do not think they would join a union as a result of their experiences, than among men.

As noted, a high proportion of young respondents in this study reported favourably that they wanted to join a union as a result of their problems. Among those who did not, the reasons varied by age. Those below 40 years old were more likely to think their problem was not the type for a union to resolve (17 per cent compared with 13 per cent of those over 40), with the 30-39 year old group especially prone to this reasoning (22 per cent). The sceptical/cynical response ('union don't/can't do much/are dated/don't see the point) was almost twice as likely among older workers than among younger ones (12 and 7 per cent respectively). Ideological opposition was more likely at either end of the age spectrum – 19 per cent of those under 22 years, and 18 per cent of those over 40 years, but in general, younger workers below 40 were less likely to be ideologically opposed (11 per cent) than older ones. Fear was slightly more likely among older than among younger workers (9 per cent and 6 per cent respectively). Finally, belief that there was no union available for the job or at the workplace was much more likely among under 22 year olds than among anyone else – 14 per cent, while ignorance - 'I never

thought about it/don't understand/know anything about trade unions' was cited by 10 per cent of this age-group – well above the average 6 per cent and the 4 per cent for those over 40 years old. Young workers then, are less cynical or opposed to joining a union than older workers, and lack of information and knowledge about unions, or the appropriateness of their situation for union help (Freeman and Diamond, 2003) are the primary obstacles to their experience of problems at work becoming transformed into an openness to union membership

Attitudes towards Trade Unions among Previous Members and Never Members.

A final variable to be considered is the overall association between likelihood to join a union and union experience. Previous members were far more likely (48 per cent) to say that they would join as a result of their problem, than never-members (35 per cent) and 87 per cent of workers who were unionised at the time of their interview, but not at the time of the problem, said they would. While this shows that union experience increased the likelihood of wanting to join compared with none, 49 per cent of former members did *not* want to join. What were their reasons? They had an average likelihood of reporting that they did not think their problem was one relevant for union help (16 per cent) and had below average ideological opposition (9 per cent compared with 15 per cent). Their other prime reason was scepticism – 'unions can't/don't do much/are dated/don't see the point' - with twice the average citing this as a reason (18 per cent). In addition, a further 6 per cent said they had previous negative union experience (compared to a 3 per cent average). Although these latter statistics lend support to the view that unions are in decline because of growing disfavour among employees (Millward et al., 2000: 92) they should be set in the wider context of other reasons. In addition to those who felt their problem was not of a type amenable to union support, 11 per cent of former members (against an average 8 per cent) were worried their manager would take action against them if they joined. So equal percentages of former members are likely to want to join a union as a result of

their problem as not to want to join, with a considerable proportion of the latter having negative views about unions' instrumentality.

While the foregoing has explored the connection between the experience of having problems at work and whether this encouraged workers to seek union support and/or membership, we also probed union attitudes more widely. Never members' reasons for never joining were primarily because they had 'never worked in a workplace where a trade union existed' (34 per cent), followed by 'I have never felt the need to join a trade union' (27 per cent). These are not mutually exclusive. A further 14 per cent said they did not 'know much about them' and 6 per cent were 'never asked'. There were some gender differences in these three main categories: 38 per cent of men, compared with 31 per cent of women, explained their never-membership in terms of no union at their workplace; 19 per cent of men, compared with 32 per cent of women stated that they had never felt the need to join a trade union; and 16 per cent of men compared with 13 per cent of women cited lack of information about unions. However, twice as many women as men cited never having been asked (8 per cent against 4 per cent). If any conclusion is to be drawn from these sets of gendered data, it is the continuing lack of identification of women never-members with the trade union movement – an observation which underlines the paradox, noted above, of unrepresented women workers' greater propensity for collective action over problems, but lower level of identification of unions' utility to them. However, the fact that far more women had never been asked to join may contribute towards the explanation for low identification. Older workers were more likely than younger ones to explain never-membership in terms of never having worked where there was a union (42 compared with 29 per cent respectively), or never having felt the need to join one (32 per cent compared to 24 per cent respectively for older and younger workers), while young workers in general were far more likely to cite ignorance about unions than older ones (19 per cent compared with 5 per cent).

Other reasons had very low frequencies and were dispersed. Only 1 per cent had not joined because they thought unions caused trouble, or thought that they were too militant and 2 per cent because they thought unions were too weak to make a difference or because they did not

'agree/believe in' unions. In sum, most had never joined because they were in non-unionised workplaces and/or had not felt the necessity and did not know anything about them. None responded that they preferred to talk directly to management, or that they preferred using other channels to talk to management without unions. These reasons all suggest a representation gap and not principled opposition, or preference for individual or non-union channels, among never-members.

Conclusions.

This paper has attempted to throw further light on the propensity for collectivity among lower-paid, unrepresented workers with problems at work. It distinguishes between grass-roots group action and different types of this; a broad support for trade unions as helpful to resolve their problems; and a concrete view that their experience made them want to join a union. While there is no question in the survey to distinguish different forms of desired collective representation comparable to the BWRP survey, which distinguished between 'other colleagues' and a union, the data on group action allows comparison between spontaneous workplace collective responses to problems and desire for union representation. The possibility of comparing instrumental views on unions' ability to help shared problems and views on likelihood to join a union contributes to the debate on non-unionised workers' desire for unionisation.

The evidence shows collectivity among the unorganised with problems at work exists at several levels. When first asked about types of response to problems, a quarter stated they joined with others to try to resolve them. Further questions found that three-quarters of the sample felt their individual problems was shared by others, and among these, three quarters then said they tried to do something about them with others, bringing to a total of 56 per cent those who attempted some form of joint action. While for the majority, this entailed simply talking to others informally about doing something together, substantial minorities also arranged group meetings and group visits to managers. Taken in total, this demonstrates the continuing level of

collective consciousness and informal action in the collective labour process, despite the formal individualisation of the employment relationship.

Analysis also shows that over half the sample (52 per cent) felt a union would have helped resolve their problems, while 40 per cent felt their experience actually made them want to join a union. The lower level of actually wishing to join a union than being generally favourable about the helpfulness of unions supports widespread findings on such a disjunction between more abstract views on union and concrete desire to join, although in the context of the UWS, which relates attitudes to concrete experience of problems, the disjunction is not vast. We also find overlaps between collectivity as expressed by informal group action and by positive views on union help: a sense the problems infringed rights and certain kinds of problems increased group activity and a feeling that a union would have helped resolution. We also found divergences: those in small workplaces and in companies contracted to the public sector showed strong grass-roots collectivism, but average or lower levels of desire for union support. We found an overlap in some industries, such as wholesale and retail, but not in others.

Entering into this picture is previous union experience. In some cases, such as public-sector sub-contracting, high previous union experience and low levels of desire for unionisation suggest union experience is associated with spontaneous activism, but not with union-joining desire, with a higher than average explanation for this lying in scepticism that unions can deliver effectively. The finding of grass-roots collectivism among those in small workplaces contradicts assumptions that dispersion to small workplaces discourages group action. The fact that a higher percentage of these are positive about union assistance than among those in large workplaces should further encourage union organising in small workplaces. The finding of few differences in unionisation desire between full and part-time workers lends further support to unionisation drives among the latter, although their lower levels of group action (20 per cent compared to 28 per cent of full-timers) and of having group meetings (8 per cent compared to 14 per cent) underline the difficulties faced by part-time workers in organising.

Certain other patterns emerge which are important for refining unionisation strategies. Women demonstrate above-average group action, but

below average endorsement of the usefulness of unions, or desire to join a union. This suggests that, despite the advances made by unions in representing women, among the unrepresented there remains a stronger separation between workplace group identity and union-leaning views than among men, and a potential for collective organisation which remains untapped by the organised labour movement. A further surprising and encouraging finding for the union movement is the potential shown for unionisation among young workers. Although they demonstrated lower levels of group action, they were far more likely than older workers to be both generally positive that a union could have helped their problem, and positive in stating that their experience made them want to join a union. The reasons for not wanting to join a union were far more likely to be belief that there was no union available and lack of knowledge about unions, than cynicism or ideological opposition, which highlights the importance for unions of raising their profile and accessibility to young workers.

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Appendix.

Sample Pay levels.
The pay threshold of those earning at or below the median wage was £425 per week for London and the South East and £341 for the rest of the country.[11] Hourly pay was calculated on the basis of information given on working hours and median pay was £5.77 per hour. The hourly pay bands started at an extremely low wage, well below the Minimum Wage. These were: 1: £1.97-£4.92; Band 2: £4.93-£5.76; Band 3: £5.77-£7.20; Band 4: £7.21-£12.00.[12]

Just under half the sample (45 per cent) were full-time workers earning in the top two pay quartiles. Put another way, 96 per cent of the top two pay quartiles were full-time workers (96 per cent). Nevertheless, over a quarter of the sample (26 per cent) were full-time workers earning in the bottom two quartiles – a substantial minority. Interestingly, similar percentages of the sample earning in the bottom quartile, which was close to, or below the minimum wage, were full-time and part-time workers (11 per cent and 12 per cent respectively). The pay distribution showed the predictable disadvantage of part-time workers: 51 per cent of part-time workers (based on self-reporting) were in the lowest pay quartile, 31 per cent in the second to bottom, and only 8 per cent were in the top two. By contrast, 59 per cent of full-time workers were in the top two quartiles, 19 per cent in the second to bottom, and 14 per cent in the bottom one.
Women's earnings disadvantage was apparent: 25 per cent of women were in the bottom quartile band compared with 19 per cent of men.

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[1] This is based on ESRC Project R000 23 9679; 'The Unorganised Worker: Routes to Support and Views on Representation' 2003-2006. Data deposited at ESRC Data Archive.

[2] These figures for a sample of unorganised workers compares with a general distribution of 48 per cent never-members among all workers in 2001, and a stable 20-25 per cent of ex-members between 1983 and 2001 (Bryson and Gomez (2005), based on the British Social Attitudes Survey).

[3] The Sample screening questionnaire and Main Questionnaire are available from the author on request.

[4] This comprised 278 people or 55 per cent of the sample.

[5] Sample size was small for the voluntary sector (n=24), Transport (n=24) and Financial Intermediation (n=17).

[6] This argument is sympathetically used to explain the problems of dispersion into small groups, which isolates many women workers.

[7] Resembling the picture in the wider labour force, 41 per cent of women worked part-time, compared with 10% of men, and 85% of part-time workers in the sample were women. While women were 61% of the sample, they comprised just 53% of full-time workers, and while men were 39% of the sample, they were 47% of full time workers.

[8] We use 40 years as the divide between younger and older. The youngest (under 22 years), however, were much less likely: 15 per cent (n.b these were 9 per cent of the sample, but 15 per cent of those with less than a year's service).

[9] These figures refer to group action on the Main Problem experienced. Note the percentages are of the 280 people who took some group action, not the whole sample of 501.

[10] This was 465 respondents. The 36 people who were members had no recognition or bargaining rights, but we could not ask them the same question about joining a union.

[11] This was calculated as the weighted average of gross median earnings for 2001, 2002 and 2003 (Labour Force Survey). This is because a threshold had to apply to a job in the last 3 years and the survey was conducted in 2004. The question was asked in hourly, weekly and annual terms and calculated for part-time workers.