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**Varieties of collectivism among Britain's low-paid unorganised workers
with problems at work***

Anna Pollert

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**Centre for Employment Studies Research
Bristol Business School
University of the West of England
Anna.Pollert@uwe.ac.uk**

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Introduction

Workplace collectivism, together with wider social solidarities are at the heart of trade unionism (Hyman 2002: 7). For Turner, the roots of textile unionism were “the persistence of certain reiterated collective pressures, of consistent tendencies to collective actions. It is perhaps to these, rather than in particular institutional forms, that the essence of trade unionism consists” (Turner 1962: 78). At the same time, there has historically been a tension between grass-roots, informal workplace collectivism and the trade union function of ‘the management of discontent’ (Mills 1948) or the ‘ambivalence inherent in trade unionism’ as the maintenance of order in ‘antagonistic co-operation’ (Hyman 1971: 43, 1975: xxiv).

In the context of continuing union decline in 21st Century Britain, it is important to investigate whether informal collectivism exists among the unorganised, particularly the lower-paid among these in secondary labour markets. These workers have been central to the ‘organising’ model of trade union revival, adapted from its U.S. origins by the TUC’s New Unionism Task Groups. This began in 1996 and followed in 1998 with its Organising Academy, and was followed by some trade unions sympathetic to a ‘new unionism’ approach (Heery *et al.* 2001: 43; O’Grady and Nowak 2004). Most research on union revitalisation has been on union strategies and organising campaigns (Hyman 1994; Heery *et al.* 2000, 2001; Kelly and Willman 2004; Frege and Kelly 2003; Kelly and Badigannavar 2004; Badigannavar and Kelly 2005; Conley 2005). There has been little research on the experience, and potential for collectivism, among the almost three-quarters of Britain’s workers who are non-unionised. Research shows that workers join unions to help them with problems at work (Waddington and Whitston 1997). A further question is: how far do experiences of individual workplace problems among the non-unionised foment informal collective responses? If individual grievances are experienced collectively, targeting union assistance to the non-unionised on individual grievances may be an organising

opportunity and not just a diversion from the business of servicing the unionised (Heery *et al.* 2001: 60; Colling 2006). If collective identity is found to exist among the unorganised, does this add anything to attitudinal evidence on non-unionised workers' views on collective voice at work?

Mobilisation theory provides a framework for analysing how individuals coalesce into collectivities in response to grievances at work. For collective identity to develop workers must experience a sense of dissatisfaction, of injustice; have an awareness of whom to target to rectify the problem, and a sense of collective identity (Kelly 1998). The *Unorganised Worker Survey* (URWS), conducted in 2004, examined how 501 non-unionised, lower paid workers who had experienced grievances at work dealt with them. While its focus was on the problems themselves, strategies for resolution, and outcomes to action (Pollert and Charlwood 2009), it also yielded information on spontaneous, informal collectivism and views on unions.

The paper begins by establishing the continuing decline in trade unionism in Britain. It then re-visits the longstanding debate on the alleged rise of individualism in the late 20th Century and argues that, while there is considerable case study evidence demonstrating the continuity of workplace collectivism, surveys have focused on *attitudes* towards collective representation, not on collective *behaviour*. However, collectivist orientations to work depend on the situation in which they arise and cannot be assessed by *attitudes*. The broadest circumstances for fomenting such collective orientation are experiences of dissatisfaction or problems at work.

The paper first presents secondary evidence on the extent to which problems are experienced at work in contemporary Britain, and trends over time. At a national level some data suggests dissatisfaction at work has remained static over recent years, but other evidence points to substantial and growing numbers of workers experiencing grievances at work. How far such dissatisfaction leads to rectifying

action, and how far this is collective, remains under-researched and is addressed here. The URWS focused on actual problems experienced and was able to explore how individual concerns and identities developed into collective identities and actions in concrete situations (Kelly 1998: 27).

Decollectivised employment relations – ‘individualism’ and ‘collectivism’ re-visited

For the past thirty years, decollectivisation of the employment relationship in Britain has occurred both for structural reasons, with declines in organised sectors, and as a result of employer and state policies (Smith and Morton 1993, 2001; Dickens and Hall 2003). The majority of employees – 73 per cent – are now non-unionised and union density continues to decline, from 28 per cent in 2007 to 27.4 per cent of employees in 2008. In the private sector, which comprises 79 per cent of employment (Labour Force Survey 2009) membership fell by 0.6 percentage points to 15.5 per cent (Barratt 2009: 2). Meanwhile, the increase in ‘never-members’ from 45 to 49 per cent of employees between 1998 and 2004 (Kersley *et al.* 2006: 109) continues the trend in never-membership identified in British Social Attitudes (BSA) surveys from 1983 to 2001, from 28 to 48 per cent of employees (Bryson and Gomez 2005). Between 1998 and 2004, workplaces with no union members increased from 57 to 64 per cent (Kersley *et al.* 2006: 110). While 30 per cent of workplaces had union recognition, this was only 16 per cent in the private sector, although 90 per cent in the public (Kersley *et al.* 2006: 119) and decline in recognition since 1998 was primarily due to non-recognition in new, private sector workplaces (Blanchflower *et al.* 2007: 288). The contrast between the public and private sectors is growing: between 1998 and 2004 collective bargaining coverage rose from 66 to 75 per cent of public sector employees, but in private sector manufacturing declined from 43 to 34 per cent, and in private services from a low base of 20 to 18 per cent (Kersley *et al.* 2006: 187). The narrowing in *scope* of agreements (Brown *et al.* 1998) or ‘hollow shell’ phenomenon of bargaining continued in 2004 (Blanchflower *et al.* 2007: 289): 39 per cent of workplaces with bargaining coverage did *not* negotiate over pay and

only half negotiated on hours and holidays, 36 per cent on pensions and 28 per cent on grievances and discipline (Kersley *et al.* 2006: 194). De-collectivisation is further shown by the steep drop in organised collective disputes from 1,400 in 1980 to 116 in 2005 – ‘the lowest on a record stretching back to 1930’ (DTI 2006: 5).

The dominance of non-unionism, weakening of collective organisation and individualised industrial relations is clear. But what is happening on the ground? Is collectivism dead? Among the *unionised* workforce, recession since 2008 has revealed how collectivism can be suddenly mobilised when the inequality of capitalist power relations are made naked as workers take the brunt of economic downturn. In April 2009, at the Ford parts-supplier, Visteon, hundreds of workers occupied factories in Enfield, Basildon and Belfast because of a sense of injustice not only about job loss, but about the summary way in which dismissals were implemented (Guardian 2009a). In February and June 2009, unofficial solidarity strikes spread across thousands of construction workers across Britain, first against exclusive use by an Italian company of its own Italian and Portuguese workforce at the Total oil refinery in Lincolnshire and later, against redundancies and sackings by contractors for the same company (Guardian 2009b, c, d, e).¹ The scale of sympathy action across the power industry forced the contractors to reinstate the dismissed workers (Guardian, 2009f). Such unexpected expressions of collective mobilisation illustrate the volatility of consciousness among workers in a period of labour movement weakness and raise questions about what lies beneath the voicelessness of the non-unionised. Are such workers atomised, or are there hidden forms of collectivity?

These questions need to be contextualised in the longstanding debates on the alleged decline in collectivism in the late 20th Century. From the 1980s onwards,

¹ The Visteon workplaces were unionised by Unite. In the case of construction workers, the GMB and Unite s planned to ballot members on official strike action before the dispute in the energy industry was finally settled. However, the extent to which the workers involved were unionised was not analysed in media reports.

a growing body of literature posited that major shifts in capitalism – much in the vein of a ‘post-industrial’ thesis – had destroyed capitalist class conflict and working-class collectivism. For Gorz, the Marxist argument that capitalist collective organisation of labour foments collective labourers in consciousness and action – proletarianisation – was defunct, since capitalist productive processes dominated and deadened workers, removing their potential for self-liberation (1983: 29). Analysis informed by Foucauld’s concern with worker subordination to capital presented individualisation as the constitution of ‘subjectivity’ through the internalisation of management surveillance (Knights 1989; Willmott 1989). For Lash and Urry a multiplicity of changes in ‘disorganized capitalism’ conspired to confuse older forms of social contestation and shift these from the workplace to cultural milieux (Lash and Urry 1987: 7, 15).² Social atomisation was regarded as a condition of (late) modernity, with a breakdown of traditional identities, structures and loyalties (Phelps Brown 1990; Giddens 1990; Beck 1992). With the apparent demise of collectivism came the rise of a new individualism, and trade unions were exhorted to appeal to this by treating potential recruits as consumers (Bassett and Cave 1993; see critique, Kelly and Waddington 1995).

The critiques of the withering of collectivism theses are historical, conceptual, epistemological and empirical. Firstly, they depend “heavily on a mythologized vision of the past: a golden age when workers were spontaneously collective and labour organizations joined ranks in a unifying class project. History of course was never like this” (Hyman 1992: 159). This links to the conceptual over-polarisation of the terms ‘individualism’ and ‘collectivism’, to which Fox (1985) brought clarity in his analysis of the social origins of British industrial relations. He distinguished ‘pure’ or ‘extreme’ individualism as ‘atomistic’, “the form under which individuals not only pursue their own enlightened self-interest (which they

² These changes included the fragmentation of production, decline in the collective regulation of capitalism through globalisation, the growth of the service economy and ‘post-industrialism’, the erosion of social class as a basis for political parties and popular action, cultural fragmentation and a “cultural-ideological configuration of ‘postmodernism’”.

define themselves) but do so with no concerted action between them, each acting as an atomistic, independent self-responsible unit and being treated as such” (Fox 1985: 192). It became the dominant Conservative ideology during the 1980s, and underpinned employment legislation and the model for employment relations (Kessler and Purcell 1995: 340). Such extreme ‘individualism’ might be the antithesis of ‘collectivism’, when the latter, too, is ‘pure’ in being solidaristic or ‘organic’: people ‘may see the collective entity as embodying a cause transcending their own individual interests (Fox 1985: 6). But collectivism and individualism are not necessarily opposites. Much collectivism is ‘instrumental’: ‘individuals, who still perceive self-interest as their criterion of judgement and action, find it expedient to concert with others on those issues where collective action yields better results’ (Fox 1985: 192). Such conditional and instrumental collectivism was historically characteristic of the British labour movement for Fox, and is echoed in recent surveys of workers’ desire for unionisation, which highlight union ‘utility’ to the individual as a key driver for joining, as well as remaining in, a union (Charlwood 2002: 470; Bryson 2003). At the epistemological level, critique of the Foucauldian pre-occupation with individualisation as the internalisation of management control points out that, paradoxically, it channels research and analysis away from the very workers who are the object of concern, towards a pre-occupation with management (Thompson and Ackcroyd 1995; Martinez *et al.* 1997).

Empirical refutations of the individualisation thesis exist in case study analysis of workplace relations, much going back to the 1970s, with later studies examining the alleged effectiveness of human resource management (HRM) strategies aimed at undermining collective worker voice. Attitudinal surveys likewise demonstrate the existence of collectivity as desire for collective representation.

Case-study evidence: the complexity of worker collectivity

During the 1970s and 1980s ethnographic studies explored the perceptions, actions and social negotiations which produce different forms of collective identity, as well as division, at the workplace. Beynon (1973), Nichols and Armstrong (1976) and Nichols and Beynon (1977) examine the solidarities and divisions of shop-floor politics, including factors which inhibit collective mobilisation. Unionised workers may have their own workplace collective identity which is quite separate from that of the 'official' union, and identify with some trade union representatives, but not with others (Nichols and Beynon 1977: 156). Studies bringing out the relationships of gender, class and ethnicity at work describe both divisions and solidarities among workers (Pollert 1981; Westwood 1984; Cavendish 1982). The difference between grass-roots and 'union' collectivism is identified by Pollert (1981: 159 – 202), who found that women workers were marginalised by and alienated from their male dominated union, and developed their own spontaneous collectivity when faced with redundancy.

'New' HRM practices appeared an established feature of industrial relations since the 1980s – although a 'bleak-house' non-unionism scenario of work intensification characterised many workplaces (Sisson 1993: 207). Studies addressed the effect of a combination of individualising approaches to managing labour through practices such as individual communication, individualised payment and incentive schemes (Kessler and Purcell 1995), and appropriating collectivism through management-controlled 'voice' systems, such as direct participation, teamworking and employee involvement (Bacon and Storey 1996). While the raft of practices associated with HRM co-exists with and is more common among unionised workplaces (Cully *et al.* 1999: 110), their intention is to change employee attitudes to shared company values and high commitment (Kessler and Purcell 2003: 326). Reviewing evidence on attitudinal change during the 1980s from a variety of studies, Kelly and Kelly (1991) found that, despite new management initiatives to gain worker loyalty, a 'them and us' attitude persisted among workers. Case studies of teamworking and other HRM practices

have shown how workers can perceive these in their own, collective ways and are not incorporated into participatory rhetoric to win their loyalty (Pollert 1996; Martinez *et al.* 1997: 71). Studies of work relations in 'lean production systems' identify the continuation of three levels of interacting forms of collectivism at the workplace – 'trade union collectivism', 'workplace collectivism' and a 'social collectivism of everyday life' – which may be independent from and oppositional to management, without demonstrating conflict (Stephenson and Stewart 2001: 4). As counter-evidence to the 'Foucauldian' subordination thesis, other studies find organisational 'misbehaviour', or evidence of autonomous worker identity and resistance to management control, although not always collective (Thompson and Ackroyd 1995; Ackroyd and Thompson 1999).

Evidence of collective self-activity has been particularly clear among marginalised sections of the workforce such as minority ethnic and women workers. Case studies again highlight the importance of exploring informal workplace relations and of prising open the gap between formal union and other forms of collective representation. In a study of organising campaigns among non-unionised, minority-ethnic women workers, Wrench and Virdee (1996) found conflicting strategies between the union and workers' own community representatives (with the union complying with Conservative government laws curtailing legal industrial action). The experience led to disillusion with the union among the workers. On the other hand, recent research on the experience of minority-ethnic women trade unionists found that it was informal workplace collectivism and self-activity which motivated their union involvement (Healy *et al.* 2004). Other research on organising campaigns among low-paid, marginalised workers also point to the potential for self-activity, and the need to explore organisation beyond the workplace to wider social experience (Wills 2001, 2005; Holgate 2005).

This research has been primarily case-study based. Survey evidence tends to focus on attitudes, not lived experience.

Survey Evidence: Worker Attitudes and ‘Instrumental’ Collectivism.

Surveys on collectivism have been primarily about worker attitudes and based either on managers’ views of what these are, as in the Workplace Employment Relations Survey (WERS) series, or on workers themselves. Turning first to the WERS series, two memorable phrases based on analysis of union decline between 1990 and 1998 are ‘a withering of support for [union] membership among the existing workforce’ in unionised workplaces and ‘a reduced propensity among employees to join trade unions, even when encouraged to do so [by management]’ (Millward *et al.* 2000: 92, 151). Such phrases stick. While these interpretations are plausible, given the weakening of union bargaining power and reduction in the union wage premium (Blanchflower and Bryson 2004), they are based on managers’ views, since the WERS longitudinal panel study excluded surveys of employee representatives and employees – the latter starting only in 1998 (Millward *et al.* 2000: 4). The phrases about ‘withering support’ for unions should not be transferred to explain non-membership in non-unionised workplaces, since the trend referred to by Millward *et al.* Occurred in the minority (a quarter) of workplaces with union recognition in 1998 (a drop from 38 per cent in 1990) and not the majority of non-recognised workplaces. In 1998, as in 2004, overall density decline was primarily due to decline in union recognition (Millward *et al.* 2000: 90), particularly in new workplaces (Kersely *et al.* 2006: 120 – 121). What then is the evidence on workers’ views on collectivism in the majority of non-unionised workplaces?

Research on non-unionised workers’ desire for union representation has demonstrated an unmet need (a ‘representation gap’ – Towers 1997). Analysis of both the 1998 and 2005 British Social Attitudes (BSA) surveys found that around 40 per cent of workers without a union would join one if it were available (Charlwood 2002: 464; Bryson 2007: 199). The 2001 British Workplace Representation and Participation Survey (BWRPS) had similar results.

Interestingly, non-members in non-unionised workplaces were more likely to want to join a union than non-members in unionised workplaces: 16 per cent said they were 'very' likely to join and a further 30 per cent said they were 'quite' likely to join in non-unionised workplaces if asked, compared with 10 and 26 per cent respectively in unionised workplaces (Bryson 2003: 24).³

Being a 'snapshot', the BWRPS could not test whether there was a *reduced* appetite for unions in unionised workplaces, as alleged in Millward *et al.* (2000). However, a key finding regarding non-members in unionised workplaces was that 56 per cent were never asked to join a union (Bryson and Freeman 2006a: 10, 2006b: 15), which is reminiscent of TUC polls in the late 1980s, which found that the main reason that non-members had not joined a union was that they had never been asked (Mason and Bain 1993: 333). In the current period, when collective bargaining coverage has dropped to almost the same level as union membership (Brown and Nash 2008: 95), 'free-riders' in unionised workplaces are a diminishing proportion of the non-unionised. Secondary analysis of the 1998 and 2004 WERS shows a drop from 25.7 per cent of non-union workers employed in workplaces covered by collective bargaining or a pay review body in 1998 to 16.9 per cent in 2004 (Pollert and Li 2006). Thus, 83 per cent of the non-unionised are in non-union workplaces.

Workers' desire for unionisation (both satisfaction among existing members and likelihood of joining among non-members) is motivated by grievances and/or dissatisfaction at work, and belief that unions can or have improve(d) working conditions (Waddington and Whitston 1997: 521; Bryson 2003; Bryson and Freeman 2006a). Non-members are 'instrumental' in their propensity to join: the more they think the union would make the workplace a better place to work, the

³Non-members were asked: 'If a group of workers at your workplace formed a union and asked you to join, how likely is it that you would join the union?', which diminishes the difficulties of newly organizing and discounts how many might then 'free-ride' (Bryson 2003: 25). In the unionised workplaces, workers were asked 'If someone from the union at your workplace asked you to join, how likely is it that you would do so?'

more likely they are to say they would join.⁴ However, while desire for unions remains stable at two-fifths of the non-unionised in non-unionised workplaces, unions have not made any advances between 1998 and 2005 in convincing workers that they make a difference to the workplace (Bryson 2007: 190).

The 2004 WERS asked employees whom they preferred for workplace representation: 'myself', 'other representative', 'trade union representative' and 'somebody else'⁵. In both 1998 and 2004, the non-unionised in WERS appear far more individualistic than the unionised on all issues apart from training.⁶ The unionised showed clearest preference for union representation on pay and discipline, with similar proportions wanting individual and union representation when making a complaint. However, among the non-unionised, 58 per cent wanted to represent themselves on pay, and only 17 per cent wanted union representation, with a further 15 per cent desiring another representative, with similar figures for discipline and making a complaint (Kersley *et al.* 2006: 142).

However, while the WERS survey examined desire for individual versus *union* representation, it did not fully explore desire for other forms of collective representation – a problem which might go some way to explaining the conundrum that while 40 per cent of the non-unionised want union representation, unions are failing to convince workers about their potential for improving the workplace. It could be that the non-unionised desire collective

⁴ There are other intervening variables. Previous union members are also significantly more likely to say they would join than never-members, although this is mediated by whether the union has been seen to deliver positively or not (Charlwood 2002), but as recent WERS evidence shows, never-members are increasing (Bryson 2003: 27). Political views as an intervening variable have also taken a new turn. According to the 2005 BSA, *left-leaning* political beliefs are now less associated with union membership than in the past and among non-unionists, the likelihood of joining a union was significantly reduced for those on the *right* of the 'left-right' scale and became more marked between 1998–2005, with a shift towards the right of the scale among non-members in non-union workplaces (Bryson 2007: 199). Yet politics notwithstanding, the key role of problems at work in motivating workers to seek union support is demonstrated by the finding that the greater the number of problems reported, the higher the likelihood of joining a union (Bryson 2007: 199).

⁵ In 1998 WERS simply used 'Other', 'Union' and 'Myself'.

⁶ In 1998, WERS asked about representation on three issues – pay increases, making a complaint and managers wanting to discipline a worker and in 2004, it added training.

representation, but this is not fulfilled by unions. In WERS, the option of choosing 'other representative' is ambiguous and could refer to a member of a management-controlled body, and does not encourage respondents to think about grass-roots collectivism.

The BWRPS copes with the possibility that while a desire for collective representation persists this may not mean union representation, by using a split-sample method which investigated workers' preference for individual representation or for two types of collective representation: for half the sample collective representation referred to a union and for the other half, 'a group of fellow workers'⁷. Its main finding, in contrast with WERS, demonstrated *all* workers' preference for collective, as opposed to individual, representation at work (Gospel and Willman 2003: 157). Union members preferred union representation to fellow worker representation for sexual and racial discrimination and bullying, although – worryingly for unions – they preferred a group of fellow workers for negotiating over hours and conditions. Non-unionists also preferred collective to individual representation, but generally favoured fellow workers to unions (Gospel and Willman 2003: 158). This difference indicates the need to further examine collectivism beyond desire for trade union representation. It is to the contribution of survey evidence to the formation of collective identity, in the framework of mobilisation theory, that the paper now turns.

Mobilisation Theory and Worker Dissatisfaction - Macro-level Evidence

A sense of individual dissatisfaction or grievance at work is the initial rudimentary starting point for workers to identify their own interests and develop a sense of collective identity (Klandermands 1988; Kelly 1998: 27). Few surveys have directly addressed the experience of grievances at work, but perceptions of various aspects of work experience which may be indirectly relevant have been studied.

⁷ The issues for representation were sexual or racial harassment, salary negotiations, working hours and conditions, promotion, workplace bullying and training.

Both the WERS and the British Social Attitudes (BSA) surveys examined employees' perceptions of management-employee relations, which are arguably one dimension of satisfaction, or dissatisfaction, at work. While the WERS series indicate poorer assessment by employees than by managers, they nevertheless indicate that over half of employees regarded them as 'very good' or 'good', with slight improvement from 1998 to 2004 (56 and 60 per cent respectively, Kersley *et al.* 2006: 277). The BSA found similar improvements, with 78 per cent of employees judging relations 'very good' or 'quite good' in 1998 and 81 per cent in 2005 (Bryson 2007: 195). Disaggregation between unionised and non-unionised workers showed the change was only statistically significant in the non-union sector, and from a higher base – 83 to 85 per cent, compared to 73 to 77 per cent in the unionised sector (Bryson 2007: 195). Interpretation of greater dissatisfaction in the unionised sector remains unresolved, since the direction of causality is unclear: unions may organise more problematic workplaces, but unionised workers' understanding and expectations of management and working conditions may have been raised by unions.

However, views on management are not the same as views on jobs. The WERS series also asked about individual employee experience in terms of work intensity in 1998 and 2004, and in 2004 about various aspects of 'well-being'. Results show a considerable degree of work intensity in 2004, with 76 per cent of employees agreeing or strongly agreeing that 'my job requires that I work very hard' and 40 per cent that 'I never seem to have enough time to get my work done' (one of the few questions which touches on 'fairness'). Questions on well-being indicated that 69, 67 and 61 per cent of employees felt tense, worried or uneasy respectively, occasionally or some of the time, although fewer than four per cent reported they felt so all of the time (Kersley *et al.* 2006: 102). This suggests a substantial degree of unease for around two-thirds of employees. These figures do not, however, explore whether these experiences are felt as

problematic or not and since there is nothing to compare them with (the questions were not asked in 1998) there is no purchase on trends.

Two inroads into these issues are perceptions on pay and job security. Kelly's review of the BSA from 1984 to 2002 on employees' views on their pay and the pay gap concluded that there appeared only 'muted discontent' (Kelly 2005: 71), with a little under half of the workforce thinking their pay was unreasonable in 1984 and in 2001; with concern over the pay gap rising from the 1980s, peaking in the mid and late 1990s, and then declining. Perceived insecurity seemed to rise in the early 1990s, fall after 1993 as unemployment fell, but remained higher in the early 2000s than in the early 1990s (Kelly 2005: 70). However, perceptions of insecurity, as Kelly notes, and their interpretation as discontent, are very complex (Heery and Salmon 2000; Burchell 2002). Other surveys, however, do indicate that job dissatisfaction has been rising – albeit defining and measuring job quality and satisfaction is complex (Rose 2005; Sengupta *et al.* 2009). There is also evidence that among industrialised economies there has been a decline in job quality (Clark 2005; Brown *et al.* 2007). While work 'pressure' across all of Europe appears not to have risen from the mid-1990s to 2001 (Gallie 2005), in the UK (and Germany) there has been a decline in job satisfaction with a rise in work intensification (Green and Tsitsianis 2005).

Some surveys have asked directly whether workers have *problems* at work. These come closer to probing *grievances* or a sense of *injustice*. The BWRPS found a total of 38 per cent of respondents with current problems on unfair and arbitrary treatment, favouritism and bullying (Gospel and Willman 2003: 157). A government commissioned survey of employees' knowledge of employment rights found that 42 per cent of employees had experienced a problem in the previous five years (Casebourne *et al.* 2006: 98). However, the URWS suggests that half of workers experience grievances at work – a finding which emerged with greater sociological scrutiny of the word 'problem' at work. Like 'satisfaction', 'problem' is sensitive to thresholds of tolerance or norms of treatment at work.

The URWS (2004) cognitively tested its use and found that among some respondents – particularly the young – workplace experiences, such as incorrect or irregular pay, work over-load and long hours were not initially recognised as ‘problems’, since they were considered normal. After further testing, the phrase ‘difficulty, concern or worry at work’, combined with prompted examples of ten areas of potential grievance (such as ‘pay being incorrect’, or ‘too much work without enough time’) was used (Pollert 2005). With this form of questioning, the URWS found a high incidence of sense of grievance among workers. Of 1,971 workers screened for inclusion in the survey (including those later excluded because they were unionised, or earned above the median-pay threshold), 49 per cent had experienced at least one of ten cited difficulties, concerns or worries in the previous three years (Pollert and Charlwood, 2008: 8).

This data demonstrates that a substantial proportion of workers – between two fifths and half – experience workplace grievances. Seeking longitudinal trends on grievances (as opposed to job quality and job satisfaction) is more difficult. The rise in Employment Tribunal (ET) applications from 40,000 in 1980 to 132,577 in 2006/2007 was primarily due to collectively organised, multiple claims in the areas of equal pay and sex discrimination (OUT-LAW 2007; ET and EAT Statistics 2007; Tribunal Services 2008) and does not accurately reflect a rise in individual grievances. Individual ET claims have increased only slowly, since very few workers resolve individual grievances through the statutory system - estimates range from two to 18 per cent of those with grievances (Pollert and Smith 2009: 122; Pollert 2009: 225).

There is, however, other evidence about trends in individual grievances at work. Records of employment problems held by the Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) are a source, although they only reveal the ‘tip of the iceberg’: the URWS found that only nine per cent of non-unionised lower paid workers with problems at work (the main clients for the CAB) seek a CAB (Pollert and Charlwood 2008: 42). Figures on annual employment complaints recorded by the CAB are not a

reliable form of evidence, since they conflate reported problems with availability of bureaux to deal with them. Aggregate data showed a peak of employment problems in 1992/1993 at 900,000 and a decrease to below 600,000 per year after this, which, in the context of a rise in the labour force, suggested a decline in complaints (Kelly 2005: 70).

However, these figures need to be contextualised in the declining number of CAB offices: in 2002/03, there were 516 CABx and 560,183 recorded employment problems (an average of 1,085.6 problems per bureau), while in 2005/06 there were only 464 bureaux and 472,000 problems (an average 1,023.8 problems per bureau) (calculated from CAB Annual Reports). In addition, in 2007/2008 there were 1,857 visits to the CAB *Adviceguide* website on employment problems – the highest number for any problem area.⁸ The disappearance of CABx continues: in 2007/08 there were only 448 CABx - a drop of 68 bureaux from 2003. Thus, declining recorded employment complaints largely reflect growing resource problems facing the CABx, forcing some to close, and indicate slight fluctuation, but not decline, in workplace problems.⁹ The numbers also need to be framed in findings from a recent survey of CAB advisers, which showed mounting resource difficulties: 70 per cent of CABx felt they had too few or far too few advisers to provide specialist employment advice and qualitative interviews suggested growing worker demand and inability to cater for all clients with employment problems (Pollert *et al.* 2008). That there is an increase in problems is further suggested by changes in the composition of calls to the Acas helpline: not only has the number of calls been rising, but the percentage of calls made by employees and/or their advisers (as against employers) has also increased from around half of all calls to two thirds between 2001 and 2009 (see Table 1).

⁸ Figures for 2008 combine Annual Report data and 'Introduction to CAB services', p.5 at http://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/index/publications/introduction_citizens_advice.htm accessed July 3rd 2009. Use of *Adviceguide.org.uk* increased by 2.2 million visits from 2006 to 2007 and by 1 million from 2007 to 2008, but trends are not broken down by problem type.

⁹ The CAB is a charity, staffed largely by volunteers, funded by both local authorities and the Legal Service Commission. It is facing increasing staff and financial constraints, forcing reductions in the services it provides and some bureaux closures. See Pollert *et al.* 2009.

Table 1: Calls to Acas Helpline 1990-2000 to 2007-2008

	1999-2000	2001-2002	2003-2004	2004-2005	2007-2008
No. of Calls	715,000	750,000	797,000	881,000	885,353
Calls from employees or employees' advisers	52%	54%	64%	63%	66%

Source: Acas Annual Reports and Accounts

The evidence suggests, therefore, that not only has there been a rise in job dissatisfaction over the past twenty years, but within the past decade, between two-fifths and half of all workers experienced problems or dissatisfaction at work, with suggestions of a growing trend. How far, though, do such experiences of individual grievances develop collective identity among the low paid, unorganised?

The Unrepresented Worker Survey

Mobilisation as a process

Collectivism develops as part of a social process. While workers may demonstrate individual or collective 'orientations' at work, 'orientation' is:

“not a set of attitudes or beliefs, but an approach which influences behaviour within the workplace. And a position...is to be assessed not by means of attitude surveys but by investigation of how work is organized and what activities the workers engage in. In short, it is what people do that is important.” (Edwards 1986: 226)

As Kelly argues, expressions of social identity are contingent on circumstances:

“each person can think and act individually *and* collectively depending on which facet of their identity is currently dominant or 'salient'. Once we conceptualize individualism and collectivism as situationally specific responses to social cues then it becomes almost meaningless to ask whether a particular person is one or the other.” (Kelly 1998: 31)

Social movement theory, which encompasses mobilisation theory, is concerned with how subordinate groups define their interests and can become active in opposing the dominant power. Its framework includes not only agency and consciousness (propensity to act), but structure (power relations). Marxist accounts emphasise the asymmetry of power and work relations:

“the *atomized* form of living labour (that) stands in conflict with the *integrated*, or liquid, form of ‘dead’ labour causes a power relationship: the capital (‘dead’ labour) of each firm is always united from the beginning, whereas living labour is atomized and divided by competition. Workers cannot ‘*merge*’; at best, they can *associate* in order to partly compensate for the power advantage that capital derives from the liquidity of ‘dead’ labour’.” (Offe and Wiesenenthal 1985: 178, emphasis original)

Ability to act collectively is a fluid process. Tilly distinguished between ‘defensive, offensive and preparatory’ mobilisation, which depend on historic circumstances in the balance of power, collective resources and opportunity (as well as motivation) of the powerless to challenge the powerful (Tilly 1978: 73). In the current climate of union decline, it is likely to be defensive. Even for this, individuals need to have a sense of injustice, the ability to identify the agent responsible and develop a collective definition of their interests (Kelly 1998: 24 – 31).

The URWS

The URWS focused on non-unionised workers who had experienced ‘problems’ at work. It aimed to investigate the types of resources that the weakest, most subordinate within this population drew on by focusing on the lower-paid – the half of the non-unionised earning below the median. The survey was conducted by telephone in 2004 of a regionally representative sample of 501 non-unionised, low-paid workers who had experienced at least one of ten ‘problems’ in the previous three years (Pollert and Charlwood 2008). Its focus was the nature of

problems and what workers did about them, supplemented by attitudinal questions on trade union representation.

Unlike the surveys already cited which explored preferences for types of representation on potential problems, the URWS focused on lived experiences. Nevertheless, the survey form is, by definition, a static snapshot and cannot detect workplace *process*. For this, qualitative case studies of informal collective identity, as discussed above, are necessary (Kelly 1998: 29 provides further examples). Yet a survey of 'real-life' behaviour(s) can provide insights into what workers do at a quantitative level, and currently, there is little systematic data of this type. Details of the survey methodology and types of problems experienced are provided elsewhere (Pollert and Charlwood 2008, 2009). The sample was compared to the Labour Force Survey and a sub-sample of low-paid, non-unionised workers within it, and was found to be similar to the latter in a preponderance of women and workers in the private sector and small workplaces – 42 per cent worked in workplaces of below 25 workers (further details, Pollert and Charlwood 2008). The sample is characterised by a majority with no experience of collective representation: 58 per cent had never been union members (compared with 49 per cent in WERS 2004; Kersley *et al.* 2006: 109; Bryson and Gomez 2005), 34 per cent had been members previously and six per cent were members at the time of their problems, but without union recognition. The survey did not yield evidence on workplace unionisation. However, recent national data on the decline among the non-unionised of 'free-riders' (discussed above), together with the high percentage of URWS respondents in small workplaces, suggests few in the sample worked in unionised workplaces.

While the URWS focused on types of problems and actions to resolve them, it engaged with the key components of potential collective mobilisation: a sense of injustice, attribution of the problem to a cause or agent responsible, and collective identity and action regarding resolving the main problem experienced.

Injustice and attribution

Respondents in the URWS had already acknowledged that they had a sense of grievance, since to enter the survey they agreed that they had experienced a 'concern, worry or difficulty' in one of ten grievance areas (Table 2). Furthermore, they felt this sufficiently strongly to be motivated to participate in a 25-minute telephone interview without any material reward. One can narrow this to whether respondents did anything to resolve (or resist) their problems – expressing what 'cognitive liberation' from the legitimacy of the status quo (McAdam 1988: 132). The vast majority (86 per cent) took action about their grievance, so these may be regarded as having a stronger sense of readiness to assert their rights, or a perception of 'personal efficacy' (Kelly 1998: 29). This was even greater in some areas.

Table 2 shows the frequency of occurrence of the ten grievances examined, as well as frequency of action on the 'main' problem which respondents were asked to recall. Problems with job description or contract, discrimination and pay were significantly more likely to elicit responses. Workers were also more likely to act the more problems they had: 80 per cent of those with one problem (who comprised two fifths of the sample), 87 per cent of those with two problems (a fifth of the sample) and 97 per cent of those with three problems (13 per cent of the sample) took action (Pollert and Charlwood 2008: 41).

Table 2: Percentage of sample with each problem in one job and percentage taking action on each problem

	% with this problem in one job	% taking action
<i>N</i> =	501	501
Pay	36.1	91.3*
Work relations, such as stress or bullying	34.3	84.2
Workload	28.5	89.1
Working hours	25.3	87.5
Job Security	24.8	84.4
Contract/job description	22.8	100.0*
Health and Safety	21.8	83.3
Taking time-off	21.8	83.3
Opportunities	20.4	88.9
Discrimination	15.2	94.7*

Results rounded to one decimal place.

* = statistically significant at the 10 per cent.

A third approach to gauging sensed injustice was a direct question: ‘*Do you feel your problems were an infringement of your rights?*’ In total, 55 per cent thought that one or more of their problems were an infringement of their rights.

There are thus a number of ways in which the URWS addressed the question of perceived injustice, which provides a spectrum from 100 to 55 per cent of the sample. The most interesting findings, however, were those on action, arguably the most telling evidence of the rudiments of mobilisation. The findings on *types of action* taken indicate multiple strategies and reveal a process of *attribution* to management: most of those who took action (81 per cent) approached their line-manager, and a further half approached a senior manager (Table 3). There was thus a clear target for action.

Table 3: What actions did respondents take?

Type of Action	All Actions Taken		Main Action Taken	
	Types actions as % of all those who took action	Other actions as % of all those who joined with others	Most important actions as % of those who took action	% of those who took an action who regarded it as their most important action
	<i>N=429</i>	<i>N=121</i>	<i>N=429</i>	<i>N=429</i>
Informal approach to line manager	81	87	44	54
Informal approach to senior manager	50	61	25	51
Joined together with other workers	28	100	8	28
Used formal complaints procedure	14	21	3	21
Went to Citizen's Advice Bureau	11	13	4	33
Sought help from friends or family	9	12	3	33
Sought help from a trade union	7	13	3	40
Approach to co-workers responsible for the problem	6	12	4	58
Began Employment Tribunal proceedings	3	2	12	67

Results rounded to whole number

Informal Collective Identity and Action

The data demonstrates a variety of multiple, individual strategies to resolve problems, again underlining the complexity of real behaviour: few used the formal complaints procedure (13.5 per cent), few sought outside help, from the CAB or unions, and just three per cent began legal proceedings. It is to collective responses that the paper now turns.

Respondents were also asked whether they took collective action about their shared problems¹⁰. This was a first probe into collectivity and revealed that 24 per cent of the sample and 28 per cent of those who took action did so collectively (Table 3). The URWS confirmed that collective responses co-existed with individual ones. There were no gender differences in propensity to act collectively, but younger workers appeared less likely than older ones (particularly older women) to do so. Collective action was significantly more likely among the lowest paid than the highest earning quartile and the more problems a respondent had experienced the more likely they were to take informal collective action. These two factors – low pay and number of problems – may reflect degree of perceived injustice and underline the important potential of organising the low paid.

Those who felt that *any* of their problems had ‘infringed their rights’ (as noted, 55 per cent of the sample) were more likely to act collectively than those who did not (28 and 20 per cent respectively). The contrast was less apparent when perceived injustice about the main problem acted upon was considered: 26 per cent of those who thought this problem was an infringement of rights acted collectively, while 22 per cent who did not think so also acted collectively (Pollert 2006a: 43). This suggests that a sense of ‘injustice’ as a collective mobiliser may be a cumulative sense of wrongs, rather than a sense of injustice about one problem acted upon, an interpretation resonant of Goodrich’s (1975: 38) study of the *Frontier of Control*, in which the ‘undercurrent’ of grievances add ‘to the bitterness and determination with which apparently trivial issues are fought’

The URWS found that the social, collective nature of labour in a physical sense facilitated collectivism: the more opportunities there were for communicating, the greater the likelihood of informal collective action. Those who worked in teams

¹⁰ The question asked: did you ‘Join with others in your workplace who share your concerns to get together as a group to pursue your claims?’

and could talk to colleagues were significantly more likely (30 per cent) to take group action, than those who worked in teams and could not talk and those working alone (19 per cent). And those whose working lives were fragmented or intermittent were significantly less likely to join others: 19 per cent of part-timers but 26 per cent of full-timers and nine per cent of non-permanent but 26 per cent of permanent workers acted together (Pollert 2006a: 45; Pollert and Charlwood 2008: 46). These issues of spatial and time fragmentation are familiar barriers to collective organising. It is interesting that part-time work appeared as less of an obstacle to collectivity than the transitory nature of temporary work.

Union background was associated with propensity for joint action: whilst 21 per cent of never-members and 27 per cent of previous members acted jointly, this rose to 38 per cent of the six per cent of the sample who were union members at the time of their problem. Some sectoral patterns are also evident. Those working for subcontractors to the public sector and in the voluntary sector¹¹ were more likely than others to attempt group action (34 and 38 per cent) and those in transport, storage and communication and health and social work were significantly more likely to do so (50 and 34 per cent respectively). Those in finance, construction and wholesale and retail were also more likely (41, 30 and 31 per cent) but cell sizes were too small to test significance (Pollert 2006b:12).

The survey suggested other variations, although by the time variables such as gender, age, sector and type of problem are analysed sample sizes do not permit conclusions in terms of statistical significance. For example, respondents over 50, along with 22-29 year olds, appeared to have an above-average propensity for joining others as a group. Collective responses were most frequent among those whose main problem was over working hours (34 per cent took group action) and workload (33 per cent) and least frequent for opportunities (11 per cent), discrimination (16 per cent) and work-relations (21 per cent). Women with

¹¹ Sample size was small for the voluntary sector (n=24), transport (n=24) and financial intermediation (n=17).

working-hours' problems demonstrated the most collective response of all: 47 per cent attempted group action (Pollert 2006a: 43 – 47).

These variations in propensity for informal collectivism might inform unions about areas of individual grievances in which they can perform a dual function, supporting individual unorganised workers and generalising to explore collective organising. The important point is that informal collectivism, even among never-members, exists everywhere. The need for harnessing this collectivism is demonstrated by the evidence that while it was attempted, it dissipated: when workers were asked which was their 'most important', or final action, group action dropped to eight per cent of those who acted. It was evidently part of a range of strategies which, for the majority, was later subordinated to individual resolution attempts with managers.

Collectivity proved more widespread than initial questioning indicated when it was presented more widely than in terms of 'action'. Later in the questionnaire respondents were asked: 'In the workplace where you had the problems, are/were your problems experienced by other people at work?' Three-quarters of respondents answered positively. These 'collective identifiers' were next asked whether they acted together: 'You mentioned that other people at your workplace shared the concerns. Did you discuss these issues or concerns with these other people or did you do anything together to try to resolve them?' Three-quarters said they did. Again, problems of work intensity proved the greatest collective mobilisers: for workload, 83 per cent and for working-hours problems 81 per cent acted collectively and for health and safety, 81 per cent and contract/job description, 80 per cent. This second approach to examining collective identity showed that 55.8 per cent of the sample took some form of joint action on shared problems, a much higher figure than the 24 per cent of the sample first identified.

For over three-quarters of group actors and two-fifths of the sample, collective action comprised talking to others about shared problems (Table 4). While this

form of collectivism might be regarded as modest, it importantly shows the degree to which 'individual' workplace grievances are in fact shared. Informal collectivism may be limited, muted and fragile; nevertheless, collective mobilisation can start from small beginnings (Stephenson and Stewart 2001: 1). In addition, there was evidence of more organised efforts: 18.9 per cent of group actors organised a group delegation to management, and 12.9 per cent arranged a group meeting. Group delegations to management were twice as frequent for permanent as for non-permanent staff, although there was no difference between full- and part-time workers. However, group meetings were arranged by 14 per cent of full-time, but only eight per cent of part-time workers, and 14 per cent of permanent, but only five per cent of non-permanent workers. As Table 4 shows, other forms of collective actions, including work stoppages, were extremely rare.

Table 4: What did workers do when they joined with others?

Type of action	Percentage of those who took collective action	Percentage of all workers with problems
Informal discussions with other workers	78.6	43.9
Group meeting	12.9	7.2
Went as a group to managers	18.9	10.6
Joined a union as a group	2.1	1.2
Stopped work as a group	0.7	0.4
Wrote a letter of complaint as a group	2.1	1.2
Resigned or accepted redundancy as a group	1.8	1

N=all those who said took group action second probe=280

Outcomes to action and attitudes towards unions

Outcomes to all forms of action (individual and collective) were very poor: 47 per cent of actors had no conclusion, 38 per cent reported that their problem was brought to a conclusion and only 49 per cent of these reported that this was satisfactory. In total, just 16 per cent of low-paid, non-unionised workers who experienced problems at work and 18.6 per cent of those who took action

reached a satisfactory resolution.¹² There were no types of actions which appeared more likely to bring about satisfactory resolutions to problems. The 24 per cent who first stated they attempted informal collective action were more likely than other actions to obtain a conclusion, but not in a satisfactory resolution. Interpretation is speculative, but one possibility is that collective actors are less likely to be ignored than individuals; hence there was some 'conclusion', but the forms of action taken lacked power. Management prerogative prevailed.

Following investigation of outcomes to action, the survey turned to probing views on unions. Asked a series of questions about perceptions of trade unions, respondents generally agreed that unions make a difference to workers, do not agree that unions are too weak, that unions are too concerned with employers' interests, or that unions tend to be 'militant'. Factor analysis showed that respondents were narrowly pro-union (Pollert and Charlwood 2008: 53 – 57). 'Never-members' had not joined a union primarily because they had never worked in a unionised workplace (34 per cent), had not thought they needed one (27 per cent) and did not know much about unions (14 per cent), and none cited 'preferring to talk to management themselves' or 'preferring to use other channels of communication'. Previous members had left the union mainly because of lack of union presence/recognition in the workplace, corroborating broader findings about the importance of lack of union recognition to union membership decline noted in WERS (also Charlwood 2005). However, there was some evidence of disappointed expectations among the latter: over a quarter felt that they did not need a union or felt that there was no point in joining one since unions had done little for them (Tables 5 and 6).

¹² The question of 'exit' and 'voice' is covered in Pollert and Charlwood (2008). Fifty eight per cent of the sample were in their 'problem job' when interviewed and 42 per cent had quit and 86 per cent of both groups had acted. Twenty four per cent of respondents who were in the same job achieved a satisfactory resolution compared to just 12 per cent of those who had quit their 'problem job'. This difference was statistically significant at the one per cent level. Put another way, 29 per cent of those who had achieved a satisfactory resolution had quit, compared to 44 per cent of those who had not reached a satisfactory resolution. This means that quit rates were 65 per cent higher for workers who failed to achieve a satisfactory resolution.

Table 5: Reasons for never having joined a trade union

	Percentage of never members
Never worked in a union workplace	33.6
Union membership might cause trouble with employer	1.4
Never 'felt the need'	27.1
'I don't know much about unions'	13.7
'Unions are too weak to make a difference'	2.1
Don't like the workplace union	1.4
Unions too pro-management interests	0.3
Unions too militant	1.0

Base: Never-members=292, multiple responses were possible, column total does not sum to 100 per cent because not all respondents answered the question

Table 6 Reasons for having left union membership

	Percentage of former members
Present employer does not recognise unions	24.2
Joining a union may cause trouble with employer	3.4
Trade unions are too weak	0.7
The union I was a member of did little or nothing to help me	4.7
I don't need a union in my present job	10.7
Not currently employed	5.4
Too expensive/poor value	3.4
No one has encouraged me to join	2.7

Base: Previous members=149, multiple responses were possible, column total does not sum to 100 per cent because not all respondents answered the question

Asked generally whether they preferred representing themselves, or having a union represent them over grievances, respondents appeared individualistic: just over two-thirds preferred themselves to a union. Yet over half (53 per cent) of respondents thought that a union could have helped them solve their problem (although 37 per cent thought it would not, with ten per cent being undecided). Forty per cent felt that their experience of problems at work made them want to become a member of a trade union, a figure in line with the results for the workforce as a whole (Charlwood 2002, 2003). The greater collectivism in attitudes evinced from questioning about desire for representation for a *real* experience of a problem, compared to a general and more abstract question about preference for representation, demonstrates the important difference between researching reactions to concrete experiences and hypothetical

situations. The latter suggests greater individualism; the former, greater collectivism.

Turning to the relationship between behaviour and attitudes, analysis did not show that those who took informal collective action were significantly more likely than others to be positive about unions and their utility to help resolve problems. While informal collectivism was more likely among those who had some union experience, it appears to exist independently of positive views on unions. For this potential to become a springboard for unionisation, further union action to build support for unionisation would need to be taken.

Conclusion

The majority of British workers are non-unionised, yet little is known about their experience, particularly when they have problems at work. This paper explores the existence of mobilisation and collectivism among the most disadvantaged – unorganised, low-paid workers – in the context of dealing with workplace grievances. Recent survey evidence concerned with the conundrum of worker individualism and collectivism focuses not on workplace behaviour, but on attitudes to representation. Attitudes, however, do not capture the nuanced and complex dimensions of consciousness and action at work: collectivism and individualism are fluid, often co-existing processes, which vary by circumstances. To gain some purchase on collectivism as part of a dynamic process, responses to real problems need to be examined; in short, to complement case study research, survey analysis needs to capture what people do, as well as what they think.

To begin to answer these questions, the URWS examined types of workplace problems and what workers did about them in a national, regionally representative sample of 501 non-unionised, low-paid workers who had experienced at least one of ten possible grievances at work. It put to the test the

proposition that collective labour still foments collectivism, even among the unorganised. The survey is amenable to analysis within the framework of mobilisation theory, in an exploration of collective identity formation – beginning with a sense of injustice, an ability to target responsibility for it, and developing collective action. Its findings are contextualised in terms of secondary, macro-level evidence on dissatisfaction at work, as well as action to resolve problems, such as seeking help with the CAB. This shows that over two fifths of workers in Britain suffer dissatisfaction and problems at work, with indications that these are increasing.

The URWS demonstrates that individual problems among the unorganised are also shared experiences and collective labour does indeed develop collective identity, even without institutions of collective organisation. It demonstrates, too, the complexity of using the survey instrument to detect ‘moments’ in collective mobilisation. It addressed the existence of a sense of grievance and injustice at three levels: a sense of *grievance*, since the survey used a methodology to capture those who had experienced ‘difficulties, concerns or problems’ at work about one or more cited grievances; a sense of *injustice*, which was implied by the 86 per cent of the sample who demonstrated opposition to their problem by taking action and by over half feeling their problems transgressed their rights; and *attributing responsibility* for the problems to management, since seeking resolution with the latter was the main action taken.

The survey importantly demonstrated the existence of collectivity as a major response to individual problems. The complexity of identifying and defining collectivity emerged in terms of the differing responses to different forms of questioning: on collective *identity* (which elicited the greatest degree of collectivity) and on collective *action* (which elicited a substantial minority). The variation of collectivism by situation was demonstrated by variation in collective response according to type of problem. And the importance of understanding

collectivity as part of a nuanced response was shown by the co-existence of collective and individual strategies to grievance resolution (Kelly 1998: 31).

Three-quarters of respondents developed a collective identity in that they felt their individual grievances were shared. Three quarters of these 'collective identifiers' tried to do something jointly about these problems – just over half the sample. For the majority, this was group discussion about solutions, but substantial minorities also engaged in more organised collective activities: just under a fifth went as a group to management, and 13 per cent organised group meetings. Narrower questioning earlier in the questionnaire, about whether respondents took any action to resolve their problems, elicited a smaller percentage citing group action, arguably because at this point in the survey, many did not interpret 'action' as including discussion about what to do. Nevertheless, even this probe found 28 per cent of 'actors' saying they took group action.

These forms of evidence on actual responses to real problems bring to light forms of grass-roots collectivism which are hidden from view: they do not reach advanced stages such as stoppages. Nevertheless, such unreported collective activity clearly shows that, despite the individualisation of the employment relationship, a sense of injustice, of attribution for problems and of collective identity and action does develop through individual experience of grievances at work. The contingent nature of collectivism is demonstrated by its variation by worker, being more marked among the lowest paid and those with more problems. The survey also highlighted well-known barriers to collectivisation: spatial and time fragmentation of work as well as non-permanent contracts are inimical to collective action, while physical proximity and communication, such as in team work, facilitate it. The importance of examining actions in the context of real problems underlines the importance of mobilisation theory for investigating collectivism in terms of concrete situations, and not only abstractly in terms of attitudes.

The URWS also examined unorganised workers' attitudes to trade unions. It found workers to be generally pro-union and confirmed other studies which show positive views on unions as being able to help solve problems at work. However, it did not find that workers who demonstrated spontaneous workplace activism were necessarily any more likely to hold positive views on trade unions than others. There were variations in both forms of collectivism: those in the lowest paid quartile were both more likely to try group action and were more likely to think a union would have helped their problem (58 per cent against 52 per cent). On the other hand, young workers of less than 22 years old were far less likely to attempt group action than other (15 per cent), but had an above average propensity to think a union would have helped them (57 per cent), in spite of the fact that 94 per cent were 'never-members'. The unorganised are thus not an undifferentiated mass, and differing aspects of collective orientations, spontaneous workplace joint action and positive attitudes towards unions exist to differing degrees among them. These findings recall the differing forms of solidarity (some non-union) detected in workplace case studies, as well as BWRPS attitudinal evidence of variation in preferences for different forms of collective representation among the non-unionised – for union and 'fellow worker' representation.

The research complements, at a quantitative level, qualitative research which explores the fluid nature of collectivism. The existence of informal workplace collectivism, and positive attitudes towards trade unions, suggests that both dimensions are important to union revitalisation strategies. Informal collectivism is central to the 'organising' approach to union recovery and the findings of its existence among the low-paid unorganised contribute to the debate about the organising approach in the British context. One aspect of this debate has focused on the revival of 'community' as a viable strategy for British union revitalisation (Wills 2001; Wills and Simms 2004), building on the U.S. experience of organising among marginalised (often first and second generation migrant)

workers in low-waged work (Bronfenbrenner *et al.* 1998). In Britain, some campaigns, such as the 'Living Wage' campaign, have linked workers across workplaces in large cities, such as London (London Citizens 2009), and in these cases the concept of building 'community' is viable. The findings of the URWS are important in terms of informal collectivity among the unorganised, especially the lowest paid, *within* the workplace. For many low-paid, unorganised workers in dispersed, small workplaces, spatial urban or regional 'community' identity may be difficult to use as an organising strategy. For these, the workplace itself is the main locus of collective identity formation. The findings here show that spontaneous workplace collective identity is a substantial response to individual grievances at work, although there is job-type (full and part-time work, permanent and temporary work) and sectoral variation. However, the survey also shows that this rudimentary collectivism is limited: while more organised forms occur for small minorities, in general, collective mobilisation is eventually subordinated to individual strategies. The need for union intervention to develop spontaneous collectivism is evident.

These findings do not deliver any easy answers to the challenges of union revitalisation. There are the barriers of employer counter-mobilisation to unionisation, British unions are 'resource poor' and there remains a need for 'cultural change' to prioritise organising (O'Grady and Nowak 2004: 156). There are major tensions within unions, with resistance to shifts 'in union resources from existing to potential members' among existing members, lay representatives and full-time officers (Heery *et al.* 2001: 63). There are competing pressures on union representatives, between an increasing workload of resolving members' individual grievances, and recruiting new members (O'Grady and Nowak 2004: 155). However, the findings of the URWS should be encouraging: not only do they confirm other attitudinal surveys on positive views on unions among the unorganised, but the new finding, of spontaneous collectivism in response to grievances, offers a further avenue of approach to organising. This could open debate on the possibility, for example, of greater use of help-lines for the

unorganised as a means to gauge how far individual grievances are shared in unorganised workplaces, so that helping an individual could provide wider organising possibilities. The findings that some workers may not be particularly positive about union help, but are collectivist, could stimulate organisers to debate about how to engage these. The finding that others, such as the very young, show a strong need for union help, but may not be very active as collectivists, may suggest different tactics to encourage these to join unions. In short, different aspects of collectivism among the unorganised offer varied approaches to reaching them. It is hoped that the findings of the URWS will provide evidence to stimulate further debate about union revitalisation strategies.

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