Does community organising present trade unions a way of rebuilding the union movement?

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My writings on community organising


Research questions

- Are we witnessing a turn to community-based organising and, if so, in what form/s?
- What does this mean for the unions involved?
- What role are ‘new actor’s playing in the employment relationship?

Research approach

- Critical social science research approach: active participant in community organising initiatives.
- UK data collection ongoing since 2001.
- Drawing on whole range of data – interviews conducted in the UK with trade unionists since February 2011: Unite, Unison, GMB, TSSA, PCS, Trades Union Congress.
Unions and community organising

- Unions organising in the community is not new (Clawson 2003; Holgate 2009; Wills 1996; Wills 2002).
- Strong links between trade union consciousness and community consciousness have been severely weakened (Chase 2000).
- During period of Thatcher governments (and beyond) unions became more inward looking (Kelly and Heery 1994).

A ‘turn’ to community organising?

1. London Citizens’ high profile campaign for a living wage
2. Attracted attention of local and national politician about how community organising can mobilize people into action
3. Unions and political parties realising that this form of organising has the potential to (re)build their own organisations.

Debates on community organising

‘Such a labour metaphysic, I think, is a legacy from Victorian Marxism that is now quite unrealistic…Of course we can’t “write off the working class.” But we must study all that, and freshly. Where labour exists as an agency, of course we must work with it, but we must not treat it as The Necessary Lever’.

C Wright Mills, 1960. Letter to the New Left
Debates on community organising

‘the only really baffling problem with which community unions will have to contend is the problem of tactics; there is no political weapon easily available which can replace the industrial strike, although it may very well be that civil disobedience is the seed from which more effective and appropriate tactics will grow’

O’Connor (1964) ‘Towards a theory of community unions’

Debates on community organising

‘Focusing on the poor meant, inevitably, shifting attention from the sphere of work to the community. In terms of political theory, this involved a shift from production to consumption. It also involved a shift in focus from work to everyday life.’


A ‘turn’ to community organising?

- Definition – trying to conceptualise what is meant by community unionism
- Different types of union/community engagement — whether this is just another form of social movement unionism?
- Different factors influencing union engagement in community organising
- Tensions and constraints on unions working outside the industrial arena
- Role of ‘new actors’ in the employment relationship.

What does this mean for unions?

- TUC’s Active Unions, Active Communities project designed to make the case for why community engagement should be a more comprehensive part of union strategies.
- Unison: London Citizens to successfully organise workers to campaign for a living wage at hospitals in east London in 2001, yet marginal involvement. But more activity in regions. I think that there’s quite a lot that we as a trade union could learn from the tools and techniques that are needed to build broad-based community organisations. We can use those in the workplace and there’s just loads of lessons in there for us, I think. For me that’s now moved up the agenda to what I want Unison to get out of it. (Senior Unison official, Nottingham)
What does this mean for unions?

- **PCS**: tentatively dipped its toes into the realm of community organising in 2010 when they approach London Citizens about the potential of working together.

- **TSSA**: created community organising team in 2011
  
  
  "If we can get passengers, people using those transport services, actually on the same side as rail workers, people working in the transport industry, we will actually have a far more powerful coalition to effect change". (TSSA staff community organiser 3)

What does this mean for unions?

- **GMB**: exploring potential of community organising through UMF funded project.

- **Unite**: created community organising team in Sept 2012: 10 community co-ordinators employed, one in each region, plus 2 staff at national office. Remit: ‘identify, recruit, train and develop community activists who will advance Unite’s community membership within their communities, and to assist community activists with their work in creating community groups and branches and their integration into the structure of Unite’

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Yes a ‘turn’ but should not be overstated

- Firstly, the global economic crisis beginning in 2008 appears to be a major push factor in moving unions in the direction of community organising

- A different form of ‘Big Society’?

- Attempt to tie together a trade union consciousness and a community consciousness

- Recognition of declining worker bargaining power at the workplace.

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Sydney Alliance

Figure 2. Challenges for and responses by Australian unions 1990–2010

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<th>Interviwer X number of interviews</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Australian Manufacturing Workers Union</td>
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<td>CFMEU Construction</td>
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<td>Finance Services Union</td>
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<td>National Tertiary Education Union</td>
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<td>National Union of Workers</td>
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<td>New South Wales Nurses and Midwives’ Association</td>
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<td>New South Wales Teachers Federation</td>
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<td>Public Service Association</td>
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<td>Rail, Tram and Bus Industry Union</td>
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<td>Unions New South Wales</td>
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<td>United Services Union</td>
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<td>United Voice</td>
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Table 2: List of unions that have been members of the Sydney Alliance

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prior to founding</th>
<th>2009–2011</th>
<th>September 10, 2011</th>
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Motivation for union involvement

- The political environment
- A shift toward community organising: a mix of ideology and instrumentalism
- Building strength through leadership development and organisational and cultural change
- Reframing the message of union organising: bringing in the community
Australian Congress of Trade Unions

- Your Rights @ Work campaign 2005-2007 unions working in the community to defeat the Howard government.
- Largest single campaign in Australia’s political history.
- Massive in scale and highly sophisticated union/community organising.
- Accepted on all sides of political spectrum led to the downfall of the Howard government and significant swings to Labor Party in targeted seats.

The political environment...

'We’d been through the Your Rights at Work campaign to get rid of the last federal government and, [even if] unions hadn’t matured, what they had understood was that there was a real need for them to make different connections with community.

(Ex-union official, interview)

The political environment...

'This idea of building longer-term relationships for our nurses, for our transport unions, for our teachers, for our council unions, for us in our public unions, has really sort of landed at the right time... so, all of this, means that the argument [for joining the Sydney Alliance] resonates. The idea of building and talking to faith leaders and community leaders and talking about what we have in common and running broad-based campaigns actually has a base. The question, the challenge, is what priority is that given?'

[Union leader, UNSW]

A mix of ideology and instrumentalism...

'Before, we never gave people an opportunity to say those things and get involved... Just [allowing them space] to have a debate amongst themselves around something within their local community to me was really powerful... So a lot of issues came through [the listening campaigns] around age care and childcare and it just started to paint this picture of a much broader group. That was exciting.'

(Underground Voice, interviewee 2)
A mix of ideology and instrumentalism...

‘Our union has a stigma attached to it that we’re a male dominated, very blokey union, that we are bovver boys and we’re bullies, and that’s completely untrue...But there’s a lot of propaganda that gets put out there and I think that simply by our involvement with the softer touch, I guess with the faith groups and the community groups and the Sydney Alliance, I think that’s a better outcome for us.’

(CFMEU, interviewee)

Reframing the message of union organising

• Rail, Tram and Bus Union: Sydney Alliance campaign: 400:15:1 SCA²

• Provides opportunity to reframe the union’s message about investment in the transport infrastructure as a community-wide issue.

• Union can develop links with the traveling public and other influential civic society organisations through working in alliance

Lessons learnt from Sydney?

• Opportunity to think about internal cultural change
• Many unions don’t have the capacity or inclination for the type of transformative organisational change necessary.
• institutional sclerosis’
• Needs decisive leadership to support active involvement
• Training essential to facilitate change
• Resource intensive – takes considerable commitment to collaborative working – different culture.

Interrelationship of different spheres

‘To limit analysis to this sphere [workplace industrial relations] is to understate the social embeddedness of capital-labor relations. What should be acknowledged is that the sphere of production – the traditional focus of attention of both traditional and radical industrial relations scholarship extends directly into the spheres of labour reproduction and commodity consumption’.

Whole worker organising

‘So much of the debate around union organising strategy never leaves the realm of jargon and abstraction, it’s important to spell out what organising the ‘whole worker’ means. Life was changing for these people. They were constituting themselves as a class. They were bargaining with their bosses, not begging. They were taking over government meetings and running them themselves. And they were winning everywhere. They were fundamentally building workers power, and it was an experience of class, race, faith, and personal liberation.’


Conclusions

- Significant investments from some unions, but not always sustained – still have to deal with competing demands to represent individual workers
- Has meant questioning traditional tactics and strategies – different ways of organising
- New actors playing an important new role in employment relations.
- Industrial relations should give more thought to the neglected spaces of social reproduction and consumption and the wider communities in which workers live their lives