



SWORDS OF JUSTICE & CIVIC PILLARS

TUC 

*The case
for greater
engagement
between British
trade unions
and community
organisations*

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Contents

5	Executive summary
9	Introduction
11	Research approach and literature review
	<i>Defining 'community' and 'community engagement'</i>
	<i>Benefits of community engagement for unions</i>
	<i>Requirements for successful community engagement</i>
18	Opportunities for union-community engagement in Britain
	<i>The activities of affiliate unions</i>
	<i>Trades councils</i>
	<i>Unemployed workers' centres</i>
	<i>Working with natural allies</i>
	<i>The learning agenda</i>
27	Case studies
27	Case study 1: Unite – Migrant Workers Project
	<i>Using union-based learning to engage non-unionised workers</i>
	<i>Developing union activists and community networks</i>
	<i>Promoting positive images of trade unionism through the grassroots</i>
32	Case study 2: Scottish Trades Union Congress
	<i>Community engagement to facilitate rep development</i>
	<i>Engaging with voluntary and community sector organisations</i>
	<i>Community engagement as coalition-building</i>
37	Case Study 3: Castleford Community Learning Centre
	<i>Breaking down barriers through community learning</i>
	<i>Reigniting union-community partnership to deliver mutual benefits</i>

Using union learning to improve lives and regenerate local communities

42 Case study 4: Hackney Unites

Building community alliances around common interests

Community organising to engage vulnerable workers

Using coalitions to promote union activity

47 Case study 5: Wallsend People's Centre

Building on a legacy of community engagement

Using community centres to cultivate local networks

Impediments to effective community engagement

52 The lessons for community engagement

56 The way forward

Section one

Executive summary

This report has five purposes: to explain the concept of union-community engagement; to assess the extent to which British unions are active at a community level; to provide illustrations of where and how unions are engaged with the community; to decipher the components of effective community-based strategies; and to make the case for why community engagement should be a more comprehensive part of union strategies. It also makes the case for voluntary and community organisations to engage with trade unions more comprehensively and strategically.

The report examines five case studies where unions have developed community networks to organise vulnerable workers, encourage activism, improve access to learning and employment support, strengthen social cohesion and generally promote the benefits of trade unionism. These cases are analysed to assess the advantages and ingredients of successful community engagement.

The report finds that community-based strategies can yield numerous advantages. They can strengthen community-based strategies to promote active citizenship and community cohesion. This is a win-win situation because shared strategies can benefit trade unions in various ways. Greater community engagement can:

- help unions to engage difficult to organise segments of the workforce, particularly through the learning agenda
- enhance the capacity of unions to achieve their core objectives, most notably around service delivery
- facilitate the recruitment and development of union activists and reps
- project positive images of trade unionism.

It also argues that various factors are required for community engagement to be successful:

- context-appropriate strategies – particularly ones that are appropriate to local circumstances
- trust and flexibility – on the part of both unions and community organisations
- leadership – in providing direction to community-based strategies
- involvement of union reps and activists – whose own networks can serve to create new community links and expand existing ones

Executive summary

- sufficient commitments of time, finance and human resources, and
- a shared genuine mutual interest by partner organisations in the outcomes of community-based strategies.

The time is ripe for greater community engagement and partnership working between voluntary and community organisations and British trade unions. On the one hand, the Big Society agenda encourages third sector organisations to play more active roles in civil society. In particular, it allows unions to promote their unique position between the community and the labour market, which can be further harnessed to help revitalise local economies and improve social cohesion. On the other hand, developing community-based strategies in conjunction with other third sector groups will be crucial to the success of campaigns against imminent public sector cuts, determining whether unions can successfully win the hearts and minds of the broader public at national, regional and local levels.

Section two

Introduction

The Organisation and Services Department of the Trades Union Congress (TUC) commissioned this report as part of its Active Unions Active Communities programme, with the support of Goldsmiths College, University of London and the Economic and Social Research Council's Taking Part? Third Sector Research Cluster. The overall aim of this research cluster is to strengthen research, thereby improving knowledge and understanding – with the objective that this particular report should enhance the potential for community-trade union partnership working in the current policy context.

'The community' is a concept in vogue. The coalition government has pledged to transfer power from Whitehall to the community. Senior Labour MPs have said they want to train a legion of community organisers, a job once held by the current President of the United States. There has been a surge of activity in online communities. These policy developments have already been discussed across the third sector.

Meanwhile, there has also been increased interest in 'community unionism' within the trade union movement. The pursuit of community engagement has been proposed as a means of union revitalisation, supposedly allowing unions to connect with workers that have proven difficult to organise, deliver improvements to people's working lives, help to rejuvenate areas beset by economic decline, and build alliances for social change.

While those inside the labour movement rightly identify unions as the largest civil society actor in Britain, this is not widely acknowledged beyond. It has been claimed that greater community engagement can help to change this. Community engagement, it is said, can reinforce broader associations of unions as 'swords of justice' and dispel notions that they are merely 'vested interests'. This should strengthen the potential for partnership working on all sides. Many of those who are active in their communities are also active in their trade unions, and vice versa. In this respect, the shared interests of unions and community groups need to be understood more widely.

This report supports these propositions. Furthermore, it argues that the time is ripe for greater community-based strategies by British trade unions. On the one hand, the Big Society agenda allows unions to promote their unique position between the community and the labour market, which they can further harness to help to revitalise local economies and improve social cohesion. On the other hand, community engagement will be instrumental in determining whether unions can successfully persuade the broader public against the government's cuts to public services.

Introduction

The next section sets out the approach of this report and gives an overview of the previous research into trade union community engagement. The terms 'community' and 'community engagement' are examined and a review is provided of the conventional explanations of the benefits of community-based strategies and the factors required to make them effective. This is followed by an overview of the extent to which British trade unions have adopted community-based strategies and how they have done so. The existing activities of union affiliates, trades councils and unemployed workers centres is explored in this section, as are the possibilities for using 'natural allies' and the learning agenda to enhance community engagement. Five case studies are then presented and the ingredients of successful community-based strategies assessed. Finally, various recommendations are made for how and why unions can and should become more actively engaged with the community, and for communities to engage more actively with trade unions, which is of particular importance in the context of the current economic and political climate.

Section three

Research approach and literature review

The research contained in this report was conducted between March and July 2010. Its remit was to evaluate the effectiveness of the community engagement strategies of British unions, particularly with respect to specific campaigns around unemployed and vulnerable workers, as well as a broader promotion of active citizenship. The report also has a number of more focused objectives. These are to:

- ascertain the links that exist between unions, trades councils, unemployed workers centres, workplace and community-based learning centres, and other community organisations, and the objectives that these relationships aim to serve
- assess the effectiveness of these links in supporting unemployed and vulnerable workers, promoting broader objectives such as active citizenship and community cohesion, and strengthening union-community relationships
- explore these issues in relation to the TUC's Vulnerable Workers and Skills: Recession and Recovery projects
- develop recommendations for how to best cultivate community unionism for the benefit of unions, partner organisations, communities and their constituents, both generally and specifically in relation to unemployed and vulnerable workers and active citizenship strategies, and for how these benefits can best be demonstrated and promoted.

To ascertain the extent and effectiveness of community engagement by unions, discussions were held with numerous officials and representatives in the TUC, affiliate unions, unemployed workers centres, trades councils, learning centres and community groups. These discussions helped to identify various examples of where unions had sought to develop working relationships with other community organisations for strategic purposes. Five case studies were subsequently chosen to examine the project objectives in greater depth.

The case studies were based on around 35 in-depth interviews with officials, workplace-based representatives ('union reps') and rank-and-file members of unions and community organisations, as well as observations of planning meetings, workshops and community events. An online survey of attendees of a community event was also conducted for one of the case studies. The particular issues examined in researching these case studies included: the extent to which unions actively built and cultivated relationships with community

Research approach and literature review

organisations; their motivations for doing so; how these relationships were built; whether engagement strategies were primarily devised and carried out at the leadership, official, lay representative and/or membership levels; whether the nature of community engagement strategies changed with time; the specific motivations of community groups for engaging with unions; the degree of similarity or difference in the objectives of unions and community organisations; the extent to which these objectives connected to the direct experiences of members and constituents; the degree of strength and depth in the relationships between unions and community groups; whether there was scope for building upon these relationships in the future; the extent to which community engagement strategies reached workers and community members that were not union members and activists; and the tangible impact of these strategies on membership levels, activism, union profile, contact with non-members, service delivery and campaign leverage.

Defining 'community' and 'community engagement'

'Community' can be a rather vague concept, but here we take it to mean three specific things: a common place or locality, a common identity, and a common interest.¹ While there is overlap between these dimensions, they can help us to better understand the different ways in which unions engage with 'the community'. Each dimension translates into a distinct type of 'community unionism'.²

Unions can engage in place-based community strategies to organise workers that live or work in the same city, town or neighbourhood. Community unionism of this variety was particularly prevalent in the 'industry towns' that emerged out of the industrial revolution and often comprised a single dominant workplace. In such places, the union and the community were effectively one and the same. While deindustrialisation has resulted in a decline of industry towns in recent decades, populations still remain and it is not uncommon for unions to retain a strong institutional presence within these local communities.³

Unions can also pursue identity-based community strategies, seeking to foster relationships with community groups that are formed around shared identities, such as ethnic background or faith. This strategy may be particularly useful in engaging groups of workers that are difficult to organise at the workplace.

¹ Amanda Tattersall, *Power in Coalition: Strategies for Strong Unions and Social Change*, 2010, Cornell University Press: Ithaca; Jane Wills and Melanie Simms, 'Building reciprocal community unionism in the UK', *Capital and Class*, 2004, 82, 59–84

² This section draws extensively on Tattersall, *Power in Coalition*

³ Paul Stewart, Jo McBride, John Stirling, Jane Holgate, Amanda Tattersall, Carol Stephenson and Dave Wray, 'Introduction', in Jo McBride and Ian Greenwood, eds, *Community Unionism A comparative analysis of concepts and contexts*, 2009, Palgrave MacMillan: Basingstoke, 10

Interest-based strategies may be used to engage communities with similar stakes in a particular outcome, such as expanding public transportation or preventing a hospital closure. Unions often use these strategies for mainly instrumental rather than recruitment purposes, but they can also help to build links with community groups and strengthen organisational capacity, which can subsequently contribute to increased membership or activism. The Australian academic and trade unionist Amanda Tattersall, who has been at the forefront of comparative research on community unionism, identifies ‘coalition unionism’ as an additional but related type of community unionism. This involves unions forming alliances with community organisations around specific campaigns through some degree of organisational integration.

Andy Banks, who was one of the first to write on this subject through his work in the United States in the 1990s, offers a rather rigid definition of community unionism. He says that it requires community groups to have “some sort of ownership over unionisation efforts”.⁴ Martinez Lucio and Perrett claim that community unionism involves a deep commitment “of a political, strategic *and* structural nature”.⁵ However, they also say that the community dimensions of union strategies “need not be organised on any community-based structure. They can involve direct intervention and representation right through to indirect representation and coalition building”.⁶

Few of the case studies and examples presented in this report involve the deep-seated engagement required by a strict understanding of community unionism. Indeed, any such instances across the British trade union movement are isolated ones. Rather, the case studies show how unions have sought to work with community groups in a variety of ways and with different degrees of engagement in order to fulfil assorted objectives. Therefore, the terms ‘community engagement’ and ‘community-based strategies’, rather than ‘community unionism’, are widely used throughout this report.

Benefits of community engagement for unions

Now that the concepts of ‘community’ and ‘community engagement’ have been clarified, we need to establish the advantages that community-based strategies may offer to trade unions. Four possible advantages identified in previous studies are discussed: increased membership, enhanced legitimacy, greater resources, and improved organisational capacity.

⁴ Andy Banks, ‘The power and promise of community unionism’, *Labor Research Review*, 1990, 18, 18

⁵ Miguel Martínez Lucio and Robert Perrett, ‘Meanings and dilemmas in community unionism: Trade union community initiatives and black and minority ethnic groups in the UK’, *Work, Employment and Society*, 2009, 23(4), 697, emphasis in original

⁶ Miguel Martínez Lucio and Robert Perrett, *Linking Up? The Different Realities of Community Unionism*, 2006, Working Paper No. 06/26, Bradford University School of Management Working Paper Series, 14

Research approach and literature review

The first commonly cited advantage is that establishing strong links with other community organisations on the basis of locality and identity can directly lead to increased membership. Wills claims that forming alliances with local community groups can help unions organise companies with geographically diffuse sites.⁷ In addition, while a person's identity may be strongly defined by their job, other factors such as their ethnicity, gender or membership of groups and organisations outside of the workplace may have a greater influence.⁸

According to American scholar Janice Fine, engaging with community groups on this basis to reach workers is not just “a nice way to garner expressions of solidarity”, but can be an effective means of union recruitment and organising.⁹

Research suggests that community engagement may be particularly effective for reaching workers in vulnerable employment. Heery and Abbott argue that detachment from the workplace is “a defining characteristic of worker insecurity”, which leads them to question “whether the emergence of a more contingent workforce implies a shift in the locus of union representation beyond the workplace”.¹⁰ Indeed, Fine claims that community-based strategies are particularly important for engaging vulnerable workers because they often work in decentralised industries where contract-based employment makes firm-based organising less effective. Furthermore, workers in the vulnerable workforce have a weaker attachment to their occupational and industrial identities, which makes it naturally harder for unions to engage with them. Fine suggests building relationships with the community organisations with which these workers have connections as a more effective means of organising and as a way of highlighting their plight within the broader community.¹¹

Similar calls have been made for the use of community-based strategies to organise vulnerable workers in Britain. Martinez Lucio and Perrett argue that the concentration of black and minority ethnic (BME) workers in more precarious parts of the labour market means that unions should attempt to engage them through their community groups rather than workplace-based strategies.¹² Heyes also claims that migrant workers are commonly found within the vulnerable workforce, particularly in agency and contract-based employment, making them difficult to organise. Union membership among

⁷ Jane Wills, *Union Futures: Building Networked Trade Unionism in the UK*, 2002, Fabian Ideas pamphlet No. 602, Fabian Society: London, 32-35

⁸ Jane Holgate, ‘Organizing migrant workers: a case study of working conditions and unionization in a London sandwich factory’, *Work, Employment and Society*, 2005, 19(3), 476-477

⁹ Janice Fine, ‘Community unions and the revival of the American labor movement’, *Politics and Society*, 2005, 33(1), 160-161

¹⁰ Edmund Heery and Brian Abbott, ‘Trade unions and the insecure workforce’, in Edmund Heery and John Salmon, eds, *The Insecure Workforce*, 2000, Routledge: London, 156

¹¹ Fine, ‘Community unions and the revival of the American labor movement’, 158-159

¹² Jason Heyes, ‘Recruiting and organising migrant workers through education and training: A comparison of Community and the GMB’, *Industrial Relations Journal*, 2009, 40(4), 194

ethnic minority workers is relatively low,¹³ but this does not necessarily reflect a lack of desire to join. Rather, he suggests that migrant workers may not be members for various reasons, including the absence of opportunities to join, deterrence from contacting a union due to employer intimidation or concerns about their immigration status, negative preconceptions emanating from hostility towards unions in their country of origin, or language barriers.¹⁴

A second advantage of community engagement is that it may improve the capacity of unions to mobilise and boost their broader legitimacy.¹⁵ Forming alliances or coalitions with community groups is said to help unions exert pressure and marshal broader public support in campaigns to change or influence government or employer decisions.¹⁶ Additionally, as Allan Flanders once wrote, “unions have always had two faces, sword of justice and vested interest”.¹⁷ Forming alliances with community groups to campaign around social justice issues may enhance the public perception of unions as ‘swords of justice’, rather than ‘vested interests’ focused on more narrow industrial issues. According to Taylor and Mathers, the political legitimacy yielded from this perception can feed a virtuous cycle of increased loyalty and commitment among union members, which can in turn increase workplace strength.¹⁸

A third reason is that unions may garner additional resources from community engagement. Community groups can perhaps provide access to finance, communication networks and expertise, as well as constituencies that may serve as potential union members or campaign activists.¹⁹

A fourth and perhaps less tangential advantage is that by working together and pooling resources and knowledge, unions and community groups can potentially achieve more than they would on their own. Moreover, the exposure to different organisational approaches and assumptions brought through this process may stimulate unions to adopt innovative strategies.²⁰ Therefore, the benefit of unions and communities working together comes

¹³ The most recent available figures show that union membership density is 18.6% among workers in Chinese and other ethnic groups and 21.5% among Asian and British Asian workers, compared with 27.4% of all workers in the UK. See James Archur, *Trade Union Membership 2009, 2010*, Department for Business, Innovation and Skills: London, 16

¹⁴ *ibid.*, 183

¹⁵ Carola Frege, Edmund Heery and Lowell Turner, ‘The new solidarity? Trade union coalition-building in five countries’, in Carola Frege and John Kelly, eds, *Varieties of Unionism: Strategies for Union Revitalization in a Globalizing Economy*, 2004, Oxford University Press: Oxford, 139-140

¹⁶ Banks, ‘The power and promise of community unionism’, 20

¹⁷ Allan Flanders (1970) *Management and Unions*, Faber: London, 15

¹⁸ Graham Taylor and Andy Mathers, ‘Organising unions, organising communities? Trades unions councils and community union politics in England and Wales, 2008, Working Paper No. 10, University of the West of England: Bristol, 4-5

¹⁹ Frege *et al.*, ‘The new solidarity?’, 141

²⁰ Marjorie Mayo, ‘Partnerships for regeneration and community development: Some opportunities, challenges and constraints’, *Critical Social Policy*, 1997, 17(3), 4-5

Research approach and literature review

from the possibility that, in the words of Stewart and colleagues, “the whole is stronger than simply the sum of its parts”.²¹

Whilst the research is primarily focused on the activities of unions, it is important to emphasise that community-union engagement brings benefits to both parties. Voluntary and community organisations can gain from these types of partnerships in a number of ways. Unions can offer organisational strengths and resources to these groups, particularly with respect to their expertise in workplace matters and vocational education and training. Additionally, trade unionists’ particular knowledge of and commitment to the organisation and the delivery of the public services are so vitally important, especially in relatively disadvantaged areas.

Requirements for successful community engagement

Previous studies suggest that a number of factors are required for community engagement to be successful. We can take success to mean not only whether a particular community-based strategy achieves its objectives (for example, increased membership or activism, improved rep development, or changing the decision of a government or employer), but also in terms of the extent to which unions are able to use engagement to build strong and resilient relationships with community groups that can be later utilised. As Tattersall says, “success is not simply the realisation of social change outcomes but is reflected in the means by which such victories are achieved”.²²

The first ingredient of successful community engagement is for unions to recognise the importance of context. The opportunities and constraints posed by the economic, political, legal and institutional environment will determine the viability of different engagement strategies. Of particular importance is the nature of existing relationships with other community groups. It is obviously easier for unions to engage groups with which they have longstanding links, but alliances with such groups will not necessarily be the most effective way to achieve a desired outcome. In any case, different contexts present different choices and therefore will require different strategies.²³

Secondly, sufficient planning and investment is needed to make such community-based strategies work.²⁴ A long-term commitment of resources will often be required, the returns from which may take some time to be reaped.

A third factor is the manner in which unions build relationships with community groups. If unions are perceived to be pursuing community-based strategies simply to further their own objectives, the likelihood of successful

²¹ Stewart *et al.*, ‘Introduction’, 10

²² Tattersall, *Power in Coalition*

²³ Gregor Gall, ‘What is to be done with union organising?’, in Gregor Gall, ed, *Union Revitalisation in Advanced Economies: Assessing the Contribution of Union Organising*, 2009, Palgrave Macmillan: Basingstoke, 9–10; Tattersall, *Power in Coalition*

²⁴ Tattersall, *Power in Coalition*

outcomes and lasting alliances will diminish. Trust and reciprocation between unions and community groups is therefore important.²⁵ According to Heery and Abbott, different organisational cultures and decision-making structures can often make alliances between unions and community groups “fraught with difficulty”.²⁶ These challenges may require unions to be flexible in negotiating how they work with other organisations and relinquish some control over a particular strategy. But successfully managing differences with community groups pays dividends, according to Tattersall, helping unions to “shift from being agents with a narrow focus on the workplace to becoming organisations that connect workplace concerns with a broad agenda”.²⁷

A fourth factor is the role of individuals both at the grassroots and leadership levels. The involvement of leaders of unions and community groups can be an important in demonstrating commitment to the partnership, building relationships between the organisations and providing input and direction over strategy. From the perspective of unions, leadership involvement may help ensure that there is overlap in their own organisational and industrial objectives on the one hand, and the mutual objectives of the partnership on the other.²⁸ The involvement of members is also important for establishing and strengthening links with community groups at the grassroots. According to Gall, union activists are a particularly key mechanism for promoting relationships with the broader community. His research finds that union representatives (reps) are often committed community activists who can assist unions to create links with community groups. Indeed, Gall cites research showing that union reps are eight times more likely than other members of the public to be active in their communities and three times more likely to be involved in volunteering.²⁹ Additionally, Banks argues that involving members in community-based strategies can aid recruitment and cultivate leaders.³⁰

²⁵ Amanda Tattersall, ‘Bringing the community in: Possibilities for public sector union success through community unionism’, *International Journal of Human Resources Development and Management*, 2006, 6, 188

²⁶ Heery and Abbott, ‘Trade unions and the insecure workforce’, 166

²⁷ Tattersall, *Power in Coalition*

²⁸ *ibid.*

²⁹ Gregor Gall, *Unions in the community: A survey of union reps*, 2009, TUC: London, 5

³⁰ Banks, ‘The power and promise of community unionism’, 19

Section four

Opportunities for union-community engagement in Britain

Community engagement has become an increasingly common strategy among trade unions abroad, particularly in the countries most renowned for using the organising model, such as the United States. A number of researchers argue that community engagement not been adopted as widely among British unions.³¹ This was not always the case. British unions were grounded in geographical communities from their very beginnings, forming strong local connections in the towns that grew out of industrialisation around industries such as mining, ports and mills.³² According to Hobsbawm, these were communities where “home, work, leisure, industrial relations, local government and home-town consciousness were inextricably linked together”.³³

With the encouragement of the TUC, many trades councils were established around the turn of the twentieth century for union branch representatives to campaign around issues of local concern. However, the middle of the century saw the strategic focus on local communities diminish, mainly due to the growing industrial strength of union organisation and a greater reliance on political strategies through the Labour Party.³⁴ Unions remained synonymous with the community in industry towns through the latter half of the twentieth century, but in many cases were weakened by the structural economic shifts of the 1980s and 1990s.

Despite the reputation of British unions having a weak record of community engagement, there are a number of exceptions. Once response of the TUC to the hostile political environment of the Thatcher and Major years and growing workforce diversity was to build national-level alliances and coalitions with

³¹ Miguel Martinez Lucio and Mark Stuart, ‘Organising and union modernisation: Narratives of renewal in Britain’, in Gregor Gall, ed, *Union Revitalisation in Advanced Economies: Assessing the Contribution of Union Organising*, 2009, Palgrave Macmillan: Basingstoke, 34; John Stirling, ‘There’s a new world somewhere: The rediscovery of trade unionism’, *Capital and Class*, 2005, 87, 56-57; Wills, *Union Futures*, 2

³² Jane Holgate, ‘Contested terrain: London’s living wage campaign and the tensions between community and union organising’, in Jo McBride and Ian Greenwood, eds, *The Complexity of Community Unionism: A Comparative Analysis of Concepts and Contexts*, 2009, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 55

³³ Wills and Simms, ‘Building reciprocal community unionism in the UK’, 62

³⁴ Wills, *Union Futures*, 49–53; Wills and Simms, ‘Building reciprocal community unionism in the UK’, 64

various social movements and voluntary and community organisations to campaign on issues of mutual concern, such as privatisation of public services, pensions and part-time workers.³⁵ According to Heery and colleagues, unions engaged in coalition-building during this period not only because the Conservatives were in power but also due to “the need to identify new resources of power, by the feminisation of unions and an increasing commitment to represent diversity, and by the desire to learn from seemingly more dynamic and successful movements, particularly in reaching out and organising younger workers”.³⁶

The activities of affiliate unions

In the words of one TUC policy officer, “trade unions are a huge potential source of community involvement, of expertise about job creation, quality employment, skill needs and skill gaps, training, equalities, anti-racism and anti-discrimination”.³⁷ Indeed, various union affiliates have consciously aimed to build community engagement into their broader activities. Since forming out of a merger between steel and clothing and textile manufacturing unions in 2005, Community has sought to establish itself as a ‘union for life’. It claims to support union members “where they live as well as where they work” by, for instance, making membership services available to family members and neighbours.³⁸

Some unions have successfully connected with churches and community organisations to organise migrant workers. For instance, GMB Southern Region used these channels to establish a Polish workers branch in Southampton in 2006.³⁹ UNISON also initiated the Migrant Workers Participation Project to cultivate links with Filipino and Polish communities with the aim of identifying potential activists.⁴⁰

The London living wage campaign represents another example of union-community engagement. However, the unions involved experienced difficulties working with London Citizens (the lead organisation in the campaign which draws much of its support from faith-based community groups) over

³⁵ 344–346

³⁶ Edmund Heery, John Kelly and Jeremy Waddington, ‘Union Revitalization in Britain’, *European Journal of Industrial Relations*, 2003, 9(1), 88

³⁷ Quoted in Wills and Simms, ‘Building reciprocal community unionism in the UK’, 66

³⁸ Department of Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform, *Community – Creating Capability to Manage Transformation*, Union Modernisation Fund Round One Case Study, 2007, www.bis.gov.uk/files/file43273.pdf

³⁹ No Sweat, *Solidarity with Migrant Workers*, 2007, www.nosweat.org.uk/files/6231_NS_Migrant_Work_bk.pdf

⁴⁰ Sian Moore and Max Watson, UNISON Migrant Workers Participation Project: Evaluation Report, 2009, UNISON/Working Lives Research Institute, www.unison.org.uk/acrobat/B4847.pdf

differences in their objectives, internal structures and campaigning approaches and have had reservations about working with organisations of faith.⁴¹

Trades councils

Unions have the foundations upon which to build networks with other community organisations in the form of trades councils. However, various barriers as well as opportunities exist to using trades councils as a focal point for community engagement. There has been a marked decline in the number of officially recognised trades councils in recent years, from 418 in 1982 to 155 in 2010.⁴² A survey of trades councils secretaries showed their demographic profiles to be not reflective of the broader union movement, with over 80 per cent aged 50 or above, almost 90 per cent male and more than 90 per cent of white British ethnicity. This potentially inhibits the appeal of trades councils to a more diverse membership.⁴³ Additionally, lack of resources and finance and low levels of union involvement and affiliation have been identified as notable obstacles to trades council activity.⁴⁴

The existence of these barriers leads Wills to question the viability of using trades councils as a mechanism for community engagement, calling on unions to create new local structures instead.⁴⁵ However, Taylor and Mathers are more optimistic. Their research finds “limited signs of rejuvenation” and a recent increase in trades union council activity. Activism has increased in two key respects: where trades councils have been involved in community campaigns against the British National Party (BNP), and where trade unionists of more diverse backgrounds have been elected or appointed as trades council officers.⁴⁶

Taylor and Mathers claim that trades councils have “(currently unrealised) potential to go beyond the role proposed for them as providers of community support to union recruitment drives to make a major contribution to the revitalisation of trade unionism as a social and political movement”.⁴⁷ They have been quite active in recent years in terms of community engagement, particularly through involvement in campaigns around pensions and the defence of local public services.⁴⁸ Indeed, community campaigning is central to the work of many of the trades councils visited for this project. For instance, the South East Northumberland Trades Council recently co-ordinated a

⁴¹ For more information on union involvement in the London Living Wage campaigns, see Holgate, ‘Contested terrain’, 58-71; Wills, *Union Futures*, 27-32

⁴² Taylor and Mathers, ‘Organsing unions, organising communities?’, 11

⁴³ *ibid.*, 17

⁴⁴ *ibid.*, 3; Wills and Simms, ‘Building reciprocal community unionism in the UK’, 77-78

⁴⁵ Wills, *Union Futures*, 54-55

⁴⁶ Taylor and Mathers, ‘Organsing unions, organising communities?’, 3, 11-12

⁴⁷ *ibid.*, 29

⁴⁸ *ibid.* 19-21

successful campaign against a council decision to close a local leisure centre. There was a large but unorganised outcry against the move within the local community, so the trades council agreed to orchestrate the campaign, which ultimately resulted in the council backing down from its original decision.

Unemployed workers' centres

Similar barriers and opportunities exist for unions to use unemployed workers' centres (UWCs) as a basis for community engagement. UWCs play a vital role in supporting unemployed and vulnerable workers, with around 750,000 using their services and facilities each year. The TUC encouraged the formation of UWCs in the early 1980s to provide unemployed workers with counselling and advice, help them establish or maintain links with unions, and make representations to central and local government in promoting policies that would support the unemployed.⁴⁹ However, there was ambiguity about the precise role of UWCs, with some mainly providing support and advice around training and job opportunities, others functioning as congregation points for unemployed workers, and others still operating as campaign organisations.⁵⁰

By 1984, more than 200 UWCs had been established; only 34 continue to operate today, with none remaining in the South East. This decline is mainly due to funding problems, since UWCs are reliant on government and other forms of external financial support. Many unions and activists give support to their locals UWCs through One Fund For All (OFFA) schemes, which allow union members to make small regular donations generally of around one pound per month. The TUC has encouraged unions to find other ways to support existing UWCs and establish new ones.

Perhaps owing to the initial uncertainty over their objectives, the remaining UWCs are diverse and often creative in their activities and funding. Some UWCs function primarily as community learning centres. For instance, learning is the main activity of KCU Ltd in Kettering, which offers free courses across a range of subjects and qualification levels to people who are unwaged or in low-income households. Since KCU's establishment in 1984, it has provided learning courses to some 250,000 local residents. It has also taken over 1,000 children of the learners in greatest need on holidays, gives meals to the poor and homeless, donates food parcels and runs a free crèche for learners. After its funding was withdrawn from the local authority in 2003, KCU now relies on funding from unionlearn, Derby College and through a small OFFA scheme. Additional revenue comes through various fundraising activities, such as a charity shop run by volunteers, regular cake stalls and car boot sales, donations, and an annual charity appeal. Support also comes from

⁴⁹ Trades Union Congress, quoted in Keith Forrester and Kevin Ward, 'Trade union services for the unemployed: The unemployed workers' centres', *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 1990, 28(3), 387

⁵⁰ Allan Barker, Paul Lewis and Michael McCann, 'Trades unions and the organisation of the unemployed', *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 1984, 22(3), 400–401

Opportunities for union-community engagement in Britain

local union branches and the dedication of its volunteers who have seen and experienced the positive role that the centre plays in improving people's lives.

By contrast, the main function of the Centre for Full Employment in Sheffield is to act as a local jobs brokerage between workers and employers. Its focus is on finding training and job opportunities for people out of work and matching the skills and aspirations of job seekers with the labour requirements of accredited local employers. These activities have been supported through funding from local and central government and the European Social Fund.

The Chesterfield Unemployed Workers' Centre is an example of a UWC offering support and advice on a range of employment-related issues, including workplace rights, health and safety, immigration and benefits. It works with other community organisations to provide these services and co-ordinate local campaigns. The value of the Chesterfield UWC's work to the community has been recognised by continual funding from the local authority for almost three decades.

The fact that these UWCs have managed to maintain sufficient resources to continue operating, despite many UWCs having been forced to close, demonstrates the important – albeit different – role each plays in supporting workers, communities and workplaces in their areas. They demonstrate the diverse and innovative ways that union-affiliated organisations can use their networks to help bridge local communities and labour markets.

Working with natural allies

A number of writers have suggested that unions should work more closely with organisations that share similar principles and engage in similar activities, such as voluntary and community sector groups, to reach difficult-to-organise parts of the workforce. According to Heery and Abbott, collaborating with voluntary agencies such as Citizens Advice would improve the communication of unions with vulnerable workers.⁵¹ However, Holgate and colleagues find that the provision of employment advice by CABx and community law centres is limited, and that few sustained links exist between community-based advice agencies and unions, particularly (perhaps surprisingly) around employment issues. In asking where the non-unionised go for support with workplace problems, they find that these gaps mean that workers in vulnerable segments of the labour market, especially migrants, will often lack access to any form of employment advice or support. However, many of these workers have ready access to community centres. This finding leads Holgate and colleagues to assert that while unions are well placed to provide much-needed support for

⁵¹ Heery and Abbott, 'Trade unions and the insecure workforce', 172

communities with high concentrations of vulnerable workers, community organising is required to establish contact with these workers.⁵²

The TUC's Vulnerable Workers Project saw unions in East London develop partnerships with voluntary and community sector organisations in recognition that while unions needed to play a central role in helping improve the lot of vulnerable workers, they could not do so alone. Unions adapted their strategies and structures to reach these workers more successfully. For instance, local branches established advice surgeries alongside weekend training courses as well as a Vulnerable Workers Group to extend their reach into the workers' communities and cultivate activists. The project concluded that working more closely with the community in this manner could assist union efforts to organise vulnerable workers.⁵³

The proliferation of 'community unions' or 'worker centres' in the United States represents another interesting development. Janice Fine has been a prominent advocate of these organisations, which she claims to be the most effective mechanism for organising and providing support to vulnerable workers in BME and migrant communities. Worker centres operate as 'mediating institutions' that have been created by unions and other groups as new bodies or adapted out of existing structures to support and organise members of these communities around issues relating not only to work but also education, housing and healthcare.⁵⁴

The learning agenda

The learning agenda offers potentially significant possibilities for community engagement. Various studies find that workers are more likely to get access to learning in workplaces where unions have a presence and that union involvement in management decisions around learning will generally lead to more positive outcomes.⁵⁵ The creation of the union learning representative (ULR) role with statutory rights to paid time off in 2002 widened the scope for unions to promote learning at the workplace and beyond.

According to one study, the creation of 20,000 ULRs over the past decade represents "an important cadre of new union activists" and that the union learning agenda provides "a valuable new offer to existing and potential members". Learning centres allow unions to connect with workers through skills provision and guidance, thereby giving unions an opportunity to

⁵² Jane Holgate, Janroj Keles and Anna Pollert, 'Union decline, minority ethnic workers and employment advice in local communities', *Industrial Law Journal*, 2009, 38(4), 413–414

⁵³ Trades Union Congress, *Vulnerable Workers Project: Final Report – Informing Strategies for the Vulnerable Workers*, 2009, www.vulnerableworkersproject.org.uk, 4, 7, 31

⁵⁴ Fine, 'Community unions and the revival of the American labor movement', 153–155

⁵⁵ See Heyes, 'Recruiting and organising migrant workers through education and training'

“position themselves around key issues of workforce development, workplace dignity and labour market inclusion”.⁵⁶

Munro and Rainbird argue that workplace learning can aid union revitalisation by not only by improving people’s working lives (particularly for those in precarious labour market situations), but also through fostering the development of union reps and sparking membership activity.⁵⁷

According to Fitzgerald and O’Brien, the demographic profile of ULRs is more reflective of the increasingly diverse workforce, which can make it easier for workers to identify with them than with the older, white men who dominate trades councils. They claim that the learning agenda can help unions connect with workers who have proven difficult to organise and who have traditionally faced barriers to learning, such as those in vulnerable areas of the workforce and BME, elderly and female workers.⁵⁸

Warhurst and colleagues’ study of workplaces in the health, finance and food processing industries finds that union-led workplace learning creates or reinforces positive associations of unions among workers, often leads to substantial boosts in membership, can provide ULRs with opportunities to promote trade unionism to non-members, and encourage workers without a activist background to become ULRs. Union-led workplace learning can present a “new face of unionism” by altering existing negative perceptions or creating greater awareness among non-unionised workers or those in weakly organised workplaces. It can also reinforce positive images of unions in strongly unionised workplaces by making members realise that unions have a wider role beyond industrial representation. Significantly, they claim that the learning agenda can generate a ‘roles escalator’ in union activism, turning non-members into members, members into ULRs, and ULRs into health and safety and workplace reps.⁵⁹

Some scepticism has been cast over the potential for workplace learning to contribute to union revitalisation.⁶⁰ Indeed, it appears that workplace-based learning can lead to a dominance of employer objectives around skills development over the interests of workers and unions.⁶¹ Wallis and colleagues

⁵⁶ Martinez Lucio and Stuart, ‘Organising and union modernisation’, 33

⁵⁷ Anne Munro and Helen Rainbird, ‘Opening doors as well as banging on tables: an assessment of UNISON/employer partnerships on learning in the UK public sector’, *Industrial Relations Journal*, 2004, 35(5), 431

⁵⁸ Ian Fitzgerald and Peter O’Brien, ‘Like taking coals to Newcastle: A new era of trade unionism in the North East of England?’, *Capital and Class*, 2005, 87, 23–24

⁵⁹ Chris Warhurst, Patricia Findlay and Paul Thompson, *Organising to Learn and Learning to Organise*, 2007, Research Paper No. 2, unionlearn: London, 16–20

⁶⁰ John McIlroy, ‘Ten years of New Labour: Workplace learning, social partnership and union revitalization in Britain’, *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 2008, 46(2), 283

⁶¹ Emma Wallis, Mark Stuart and Ian Greenwood, “‘Learners of the workplace unite!’: An empirical examination of the UK trade union learning representative initiative”, *Work, Employment Society*, 2005, 19(2), 287; Warhurst *et al.*, *Organising to Learn and Learning to Organise*, 6

suggest that the learning agenda should be more targeted towards those less likely to have access to workplace learning centres, particularly lower-skilled and vulnerable workers in sectors with minimal union coverage. This would help to improve basic skill levels across the workforce,⁶² which is a stated objective of the new government.

There is emerging evidence that community-based union learning can overcome the identified shortcomings of workplace-based learning, by widening access to those with limited opportunities to learn at the workplace and removing the likelihood of employer prerogatives dominating learning outcomes.

A potential opportunity has opened for unions to use community learning centres to connect with migrant workers around the provision of English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) classes. Many workers have encountered difficulties improving their English skills since the government reversed its previous policy of free universal ESOL training in 2006. The scope for ESOL training at the workplace is limited because many employers are reluctant to provide it.

However, according to Heyes, the Union Learning Fund has allowed a number of unions such as UCATT and the GMB to offer free ESOL training to both members and non-members through community learning centres. His study shows how the GMB contacted workers through their migrant community organisations and used tutors and project workers that had experience of working with unions as well as direct connections with migrant communities, which helped to link unions to migrant workers. In some cases, migrant workers used community-based learning centres as permanent meeting points, thus allowing the workers to be collectively engaged and organised more easily. This proved to be an effective recruitment strategy, as the vast majority of the some 600 migrant workers enrolled in the GMB-provided ESOL courses became union members.

Heyes' study shows how unions can use learning as a means of organising workers by improving their skills and confidence at work and beyond. While learning is in some respects an example of 'servicing' unionism, it is one that involves collective engagement, worker participation and empowerment. He also argues that it allows reciprocal relationships to be built between workers, unions and learning providers, which can help to embed union networks with the broader community. By allowing workers to gain an initially positive impression of unions that could be later consolidated through the provision of additional support and services, the provision of education facilitated increased membership. Thus, education provision provided an initial window for unions

⁶² Wallis *et al.*, 'Learners of the workplace unite!', 294

Opportunities for union-community engagement in Britain

to gain migrant worker trust by demonstrating the role that unions could play in improving the lives both at work and beyond.⁶³

It appears that union activity in this area is becoming more widespread. This project identified numerous instances of unions creating new community learning centres or establishing relationships with existing ones to bring learning opportunities to workers without access to workplace-based centres. Southern and Eastern Region TUC unionlearn and the Olympic Development Authority recently founded the Community and Trade Union Learning Centre to give learning opportunities to workers at the Olympic site in East London and people in the surrounding boroughs.

Unite and the CWU have been particularly active in this respect, with each opening a number of community-based learning centres across Britain. The two unions recently helped to establish a union-community learning centre at the Port Vale Football Club in Burslem, Stoke-on-Trent. While trade unionism in the city has historically been strong, the decline of heavy industry in recent decades has led to significant economic decline and entrenched unemployment. Local communities have become fragmented and the popularity of the BNP has increased. Unions have found it difficult to maintain a connection with workers moving in and out of jobs and to organise new industries such as logistics and call centres. They have aimed to work with the few institutions that have a strong community presence, the most notable being Port Vale FC, which is situated in the middle of a large housing estate and has an on-site learning facility. Aside from the popular appeal that goes with the territory of being a football club, Port Vale FC is a community-owned club with a relatively diverse membership.

In recent years, the club has tried to use its profile to promote community cohesion through education, which it believes is the key to local regeneration. Unite and the CWU saw the opportunity to use the learning agenda to collaborate with Port Vale FC to improve people's skills and their chances of getting work. The regional development authority recognised the difficulties of engaging people in structured workplace-based learning in an area with high unemployment and saw the advantages of a union-community learning centre. While it is still early days, Unite and the CWU also aim to use the centre at the basis for community organising and promoting the positive role of unions.

⁶³ Heyes, 'Recruiting and organising migrant workers through education and training', 187–194

Section five

Case studies

The themes that have been discussed are further explored in the following section, which examines five cases where unions have tried to develop community networks to organise vulnerable workers, encourage activism, enhance access to learning and employment support, improve social cohesion and generally promote the benefits of trade unionism.

The case of Unite's Migrant Workers Project explores how unions used the learning agenda and identity-based community networks as ways of organising vulnerable workers. The Scottish Trades Union Congress case study provides an example of unions using community engagement to encourage the development of union reps and gain access to non-unionised workers through partnerships with voluntary sector organisations. The study of Castleford Community Learning Centre looks at the renewal of a longstanding community relationship by unions to improve local access to learning in an area beset by economic decline. The case of Hackney Unites shows unions building coalitions around a social inclusion agenda to foster links with community organisations and gain access to unorganised workers. And the Wallsend People's Centre case looks at how unions aimed to use the networks of a community centre to improve their connections with local migrant groups. An analysis of the various lessons that can be drawn from these cases follows on pages 52–55.

Case study 1: Unite – Migrant Workers Project

Through its Migrant Workers Project (MWP), Unite was able to use the learning agenda to organise workers in hard-to-reach industries. This was achieved by utilising the community networks of existing activists to promote union-based learning, which brought the union into contact with non-unionised workers, encouraged further activism and helped the scheme to further expand.

Using union-based learning to engage non-unionised workers

The MWP started in 2007 on the back of the Justice for Cleaners campaign. The Union Learning Fund (ULF) enabled Unite to give migrant workers in the London cleaning industry the opportunity to improve their English language skills. The project also received support from unionlearn in the Southern and Eastern Region TUC. Virtually all workers in the cleaning industry are born outside the UK and many cannot speak fluent English, creating the need for language and basic skills training. Unite set about promoting free Skills for Life



courses (literacy and numeracy and ICT) to both members and non-members by seeking employer commitments to workplace learning through collective bargaining. Officials in the education and organising departments also thought that this might generate organising opportunities, since the lack of basic language skills meant that cleaners often did not know their employment rights, making them difficult to organise and highly susceptible to employer intimidation.

Some employers had provided workplace-based learning and the organisers were reasonably confident of winning further commitments. However, the Justice for Cleaners campaign had provoked hostility from the employers and negotiations proved difficult. In response to this setback, Unite decided that it would establish its own learning centre at its office in Holborn. A site-based strategy was adopted, whereby native speakers of Spanish and other languages were used to promote the courses to the cleaners. Much interest was generated and enrolments began to rise.

It was soon realised that the project would have to be expanded and moved to a larger premises. A facility was needed that was accessible to the cleaning workers and, if possible, nearby the union's offices, so that the learners would readily associate the programme with Unite. The learning organisers realised that the Syracuse University had premises in Faraday House, which was very close to the union's office. After approaching the university, they discovered that its teaching facilities were suitably equipped for the training courses and available during weekends when most cleaners were free to attend. Syracuse University was in the midst of trying to improve its community profile and found a compatible partner in Unite.

The next task was to find an education provider that could deliver the courses on weekends and in a flexible manner. Unite partnered up with the College of North East London (CONEL), which was able to provide Skills for Life and ESOL courses in a manner that accommodated the cleaners' learning needs. CONEL also proved willing to incorporate union education into the courses, which would normally be difficult to negotiate at a workplace learning centre. Films such as *Billy Elliot*, themes such as workplace health and safety issues, and union and Acas websites were used as teaching aids. Before long, some 150 cleaning workers were attending classes every Saturday and the decision was taken to expand the project to other industries, beginning with domestic work.

Domestic workers are one of the most vulnerable segments of the workforce. Women from developing countries make up the vast majority of the domestic workers, with many brought into Britain by professionals to look after their children. Before the Labour government introduced the Overseas Domestic Worker Visa in the late 1990s, domestic workers were legally bonded to their employers, meaning they could be deported if the employment relationship broke down. The domestic worker advocacy and support group Kalayaan claims that the visa has "acted to prevent contemporary slavery", a sentiment that was supported by various ministers of the previous Labour government and the House of Commons Home Affairs Committee.⁶⁴ But while migrant workers can now switch employers without risk of deportation as long as they stay in the domestic work industry, various reports have shown that exploitation remains rife.⁶⁵ It is common for employers to use domestic workers' migration status, language difficulties and their lack of workplace rights awareness to exploit and intimidate.

Domestic workers are poorly paid and generally required to work 16-hour days, six days a week, making it difficult to access to learning and improve their labour market position. In 2009, Unite decided to expand the MWP by offering ESOL courses to domestic workers on Sundays, their only day off. While this helped to remove barriers to learning, the individualised nature of employment in the industry made it very difficult for unions to reach domestic workers, thus challenging Unite's ability to promote the courses. The union used the community networks of existing activists and its longstanding relationships with Kalayaan and Filipino community groups, which had been built through various immigration campaigns, to publicise the programme through word of mouth. Enrolments were initially small but increased sizeably within a few weeks. The project not only gave domestic workers access to

⁶⁴ Kalayaan, *Submission to the Special Rapporteur on Contemporary Forms of Slavery*, 2010, 4 June, www.kalayaan.org.uk, 4

⁶⁵ See for instance Emily Dugan, 'Diplomat's nanny lifts lid on modern slavery', *The Independent*, 2009, 9 August; Alice Fishburn and Hattie Garlick, 'Migrant domestic workers: "I was in a prison, a cage, just like a slave"', *The Times*, 2010, 21 January; BBC Radio 4, 'Investigating the plight of foreign workers in the UK working in domestic servitude', *File on 4*, 2010 22 June

Case studies

education, but also raised awareness of employment rights. During the lunch breaks, the existing activists would talk to the other domestic workers about these issues and encouraged them to join Unite as the best means of employment protection.

By bringing domestic workers together, the project facilitated a support network that helped many workers realise they were not alone. The workers' self-confidence and public speaking skills soon markedly improved and they became encouraged to speak out about their precarious working lives, particularly through the media. According to one domestic worker activist, this raised awareness across the broader community and made other domestic workers realise that they had rights and that there were networks to provide support.

A Unite organiser says that because of the barriers to organising in the industry, the key to sustaining union membership in the industry is to have active campaigns, because it is the most effective means of identifying and mobilising domestic workers. As enrolments continued to increase, the workers became increasingly active and started to use the facilities provided by the union to organise various campaigns around immigration, citizenship and workplace issues. One such campaign revolved around the negotiation of an International Labour Organisation (ILO) convention to give domestic workers full access to basic employment rights, such as the right to organise and bargain collectively. The workers used these negotiations to highlight the issue of domestic worker vulnerability.

While Unite and Kalayaan offered support and limited resources, the domestic workers wanted to organise the campaign themselves. Much of the energy was drawn from a committee made up of 12 activists that were recruited through the MWP. They used the space provided by Unite to promote the campaign and compile evidence in support of their case. Many of the activists became confident and skilled campaigners through this process, with one activist recently attending negotiations at the ILO headquarters in Geneva as an official spokesperson for the British delegation.

Together with the education project, the activism of domestic workers around these campaigns served as a very effective vehicle for increasing union membership in an industry that was notoriously difficult to organise. A sub-branch of Unite called Justice for Domestic Workers has since been established and has recruited some 300 members. The branch is run and controlled by its members and according to one organiser operates as a "lay member union democracy".

Developing union activists and community networks

The provision of union education courses through the MWP also facilitated activist development. These courses were later introduced for workers that had completed a Skills for Life programme and joined Unite and were interested in

becoming more active. Many activists were cultivated among the cleaners through this process, which gave them the encouragement, skills and capacity to organise autonomously and led to the development of links with other community networks.

Members of the Latin American Youth Forum and the Indo-American Refugee Migrant Organisation had parents working as cleaners. These groups approached Unite and requested involvement in the MWP, leading to the incorporation of weekly classes for young workers around a range of cultural educational activities. Unite's education department had followed the Brazilian union movement's use of culture as a tool for organising and utilised the cultural education classes to encourage participants to become community activists. These groups promoted the learning courses through their own networks, particularly among younger migrant workers, which resulted in the inclusion of members of the Chinese Migrants Network and migrant hotel and catering workers in the project.

Since its inception, the Justice for Cleaners branch had regularly arranged social gatherings for the activists and workers involved in the campaign. The MWP decided to take this idea a step further by organising 'celebration days' that combined social gatherings with graduation ceremonies to give learners recognition of their achievements. Learners were encouraged to bring traditional food and members of the various community groups provided entertainment in the form of theatrical performances, music and dancing. The celebration days also incorporated information and guidance sessions around employment support and access to further learning. The learners were encouraged to bring friends to the celebration days, many of whom were inspired by what they saw and ended up enrolling in training courses, thereby extending the project to workers in other industries, such as hospitals, catering and security. Around 250 people attended the most recent celebration day.

Promoting positive images of trade unionism through the grassroots

On a range of measures, the MWP can be considered a success. While it finished in March 2010, a successor project has since started up, targeted at both migrant and non-migrant workers across a broader range of industries. The MWP was given a ULF award for equality and diversity and a more than 1,000 workers attended courses throughout the project's three-year duration. It directly led to an increase in new activists and enhanced the skills and activism of existing reps, thereby creating organising opportunities. Increased activism was particularly evident among the domestic workers, which has resulted in Unite devising a mapping strategy for the industry, a feat that has never previously been accomplished.

While failing to establish a learning agreement with cleaning employers was initially seen as a setback, the establishment of a union learning centre

Case studies

unconstrained by employer prerogatives benefited workers through free and flexible learning and gave Unite the opportunity to engage workers in notoriously difficult to organise industries. The MWP was very effective for promoting a positive image of trade unionism to the workers. The effectiveness of union learning as an organising strategy could not have been achieved through a workplace-based centre, where employers would have invariably received some credit for providing learning access. It also allowed confidence to be built among the workers without fear of reprisal from employers, which was especially important for migrants from countries where unions are demonised or outlawed.

The relationships developed with community organisations were central to increased course enrolments and activist development. These links were established and cultivated entirely at the grassroots level through the work of both union and community activists and not officials. The success of the domestic work campaign in particular was based on strategies developed organically in response to the unique context of the industry, which makes it difficult to assess whether the strategies could be applied to other industries. Nonetheless, the key role of activists in driving the campaign, particularly in light of its limited resources, suggests that there are benefits to allowing union activists to drive community-based strategies using initiatives and ideas gained from their workplace experience, rather than those dictated from above by officials. The creativity and energy of these activists was particularly important to the campaign's success.

Case study 2: Scottish Trades Union Congress

Scottish trade unions have a strong profile of community engagement, perhaps to a greater extent than anywhere else in Britain. Part of the reason for this is the unique civic culture that exists in Scotland, where a “closely overlapping, often interlocking, dense set of institutions of state, government and civil society ... have generated a highly identifiable and tightly delineated public community”, according to Gall.⁶⁶ Unions have been central to maintaining this culture in recent decades, particularly through the lead role of the Scottish Trades Union Congress (STUC) in building coalitions with a range of progressive groups to campaign against various Conservative government policies during the 1980s and 1990s and in the lead up to Scottish devolution.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Gregor Gall, *The Political Economy of Scotland: Red Scotland? Radical Scotland?*, 2005, University of Wales Press: Cardiff, 119–120

⁶⁷ *ibid.*, 101–104



Community engagement to facilitate rep development

In 2004, the STUC embarked upon a series of more micro-level engagement measures in response to concerns that the community profile of unions was waning. It employed a full-time community organiser and consulted various community groups to see how unions could effectively lend their expertise around employment and workplace rights.

One such initiative was the development of the Unions into Schools programme aimed at teaching secondary school students the value of work, their employment rights and the role of unions in promoting fairness in the workplace and beyond. The scheme began in 2005 as part of the Scottish government's Developing Enterprise in Education agenda. The STUC convinced the government that in order to be good workers and managers, students needed to learn about not only about business skills, but also their responsibilities and rights in the workplace.

Unions into Schools involves pairs of specially trained 'union school reps' visiting local schools to deliver lessons on various topics ranging from workplace skills to the global economy that are designed to complement modern studies, business studies and moral and religious education subjects. Union school reps use role-playing activities in which students negotiate around issues such as redundancies and wage bargaining, and the broader impact of these decisions on people's lives, communities and families.

The STUC had three objectives when devising the programme: to educate students about the role of unions, develop the skills of union reps, and

Case studies

strengthen the links of reps with their local communities. The scheme appears to have been successful in meeting each objective. A study for the STUC found that while school students had broadly favourable attitudes towards unions, there were alarmingly low levels of knowledge about their actual purpose. It aimed to use the programme to promote trade unionism among students with part-time jobs, only a fraction of which was unionised. But the STUC also hoped that it would instil a positive image of unions among students that would convince them to become members upon entering the full-time workforce. There has been a noticeable change in students' attitudes to and knowledge of unions and the world of work, with 95 per cent rating the programme as "excellent" or "very good" in post-visit evaluations. It appears that a key reason for this positive reception was the connection of the course materials to students' experiences as both workers and citizens.

Unions into Schools has also encouraged the development of union reps. This has been a key factor in gaining support for the scheme from affiliate unions. There were indications that ULRs in particular wanted opportunities to develop their organising and representation skills in a more generic manner outside of the workplace. Unions have encouraged younger workers to train as union school reps, because they have been particularly successful at engaging and relating to students. But it has also been the case that pairing them with mentors in the form of more experienced or older union school reps has increased the development of younger reps.

Feedback from the union school reps indicates that they enjoyed the challenge of occasionally having to 'take it on the chin' and defend trade unionism to audiences that are not so easily convinced of its benefits. One rep said that the experience has improved her skills as a workplace rep, by forcing her out of the comfort zone of a unionised workplace and making her articulate the arguments for trade unionism to sceptical and unaware students. She said that most students' knowledge of unions was initially limited to images of Arthur Scargill and the miners' strike, but that the scheme helped dispel common myths and educate about the role of unions in promoting fairness and social justice. The scheme has helped to recruit new reps and develop the skills of existing reps. More than 80 activists from 17 different unions have been specially trained as union school reps, almost half of which were previously ULRs, around one-quarter health and safety reps, another one-quarter had not been reps at all, and very few were workplace reps.

Unions into Schools has also allowed unions to use their reps to cultivate links outside the workplace and across the wider community. Union school reps generally visit schools in their local area and work with teachers to tailor lesson content to the particular needs of each class. A number of strong relationships have developed between reps and teachers and between unions and individual schools. Consequently, various student and school groups have participated in broader union activities. For instance, through the Schools at Congress scheme, 40 student delegates are nominated by various schools to the

annual STUC Congress and Black and Women's Congresses. School groups are also involved in events for the annual Trade Union Week in the Scottish Parliament, including debates between students and parliamentarians inside the chamber.

As of late 2009, the increase in union school rep recruitment had resulted in visits to some 110 classrooms and more than 4,000 students in 20 per cent of all the schools across Scotland.⁶⁸ A similar scheme has recently been rolled out to vocational colleges. Cross-party support for Unions into Schools in the Scottish Parliament is another measure of its success. Debating a parliamentary motion in praise of the scheme, the Scottish Nationalist Party Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning said that Unions into Schools has “proved to be a great success with pupils and schools’ and acknowledged its role in “developing a strong, skilled and fair-minded workforce for Scotland”. The motion was even supported by a number of Conservative parliamentarians, one of whom said Unions into Schools “promoted understanding of and awareness about how to achieve a good working environment. That helps young people to gain the experience and skills that they need and to access full-time employment”.⁶⁹

Engaging with voluntary and community sector organisations

Another dimension of community engagement is the various ways that Scottish unions have actively nurtured relationship with voluntary and community organisations (VCOs), which are seen as obvious allies because they share many of the same objectives and interests as unions. The most notable example of this is through the Support@Work programme, which has allowed unions in Edinburgh to build links with VCOs around employment support. Support@Work is funded by the Joined Up for Jobs (JUFJ) scheme run by the Capital City Partnership (CCP), an organisation that delivers various projects for the City of the Edinburgh Council. The aim of JUFJ is to get long-term jobseekers back into the workforce, particularly those in disadvantaged groups.

While similar programmes operate in a number of cities across Britain, CCP claims that the promotion of sustained employment relationships has helped give the JUFJ a greater focus than its counterparts on quality employment. To this end, CCP uses Support@Work to harness union expertise and make workers and employers more aware of their rights and responsibilities in the workplace, in the hope of enhancing individual employability and more long-term employment relationships.

⁶⁸ STUC, ‘Unions into Schools update’, 2009, October, www.stuc.org.uk

⁶⁹ Scottish Parliament, Young People in the Workplace debate, 2008, 16 January www.scottish.parliament.uk/business/officialReports/meetingsParliament/or-08/sor0116-02.htm#Col5113

Case studies

The main focus of the programme is on worker support, by assisting people who are entering work for the first time or re-entering after a long period of absence, many of whom have little awareness of their workplace rights or experience of negotiating with their managers over employment arrangements. The CCP also refers requests for training, legal advice and support on workplace rights from VCOs to Edinburgh Trades Council. In addition, Support@Work has allowed unions to help VCOs lacking capacity for expertise in employment law and conflict resolution to remedy workplace grievances that would have otherwise gone to employment tribunals.

The Edinburgh Trades Council and local branches of GMB, UNISON, Unite and USDAW have used the casework arising out of Support@Work to inform their policies and strategies for how to best engage with VCOs and give them the support that they need to be good employers. For instance, union reps and managers have been used jointly to deliver practical training and advice sessions to workers and employers on managing the employment relationship. UNISON has also given training on issues confronting women at work following specific requests for advice.

Support@Work has allowed Edinburgh Trades Council to develop relationships with various VCOs. One such example is a partnership established with the Ethnic Minority Law Centre (EMLC) to deliver support for migrant workers. The EMLC's solicitors give union affiliates and their members legal advice for cases involving discrimination, immigration, housing and benefits. In return, unions provide statutory workplace representation for members of ethnic and minority communities, both union members and non-members alike. This exchange of expertise has allowed both unions and the EMLC to build their support capacity. It has opened up organising opportunities among BME workers and allowed unions to project a positive image as defenders of social justice. Edinburgh Trades Council has used Support@Work to establish similar reciprocal relationships with other VCOs.

Community engagement as coalition-building

The STUC has also sought to build coalitions with other community groups through its central involvement in the Living Wage campaigns rolled out across various Scottish cities. In Glasgow, the city council agreed to pay the living wage to all its workers before the campaign gained significant momentum. This perhaps showed that Scottish unions retain their role as a civic pillar that was consolidated during the campaigns of the 1980s and 1990s. However, the shift in the focus of Scottish unions' community activities in recent years from 'coalition unionism' to relationship-building with communities based on locality and common interest seem to have improved the profile of unions at a local level and among groups that have been difficult to organise. Working with VCOs to improve their capacity to support members and engaging with school students and ethnic minority groups appears to have allowed unions to promote their positive role in the workplace and beyond.

According to one STUC official, the issue of broader public perceptions lies at the heart of its community engagement strategy. To avoid being portrayed as sectional interest groups, and ensure that they are seen as extensions of ‘society’ rather than ‘the state’, Scottish unions have worked hard with other groups to show that they represent not only workers, but also their families and communities. How the broader public responds to the forthcoming campaigns of Scottish unions in defence of public services will be a key measure of this strategy’s success.

Case Study 3: Castleford Community Learning Centre



The partnership between unions in the Yorkshire and the Humber region and the Castleford Community Learning Centre (CCLC) shows how unions can use community relationships to improve the learning opportunities available to local workers and their families. In this case, the learning agenda assisted the revitalisation of an industry town crippled by the withdrawal of its main industry, thereby reinforcing positive associations of trade unionism in a former union stronghold.

Breaking down barriers through community learning

From the 1870s, Castleford was a town that revolved around the mining industry and until the mid-1980s some 10,000 workers were employed in the

Case studies

11 pits around Castleford.⁷⁰ However, virtually all of the pits have been closed and mining jobs lost in recent decades, along with many more in associated industries. As with other mining communities,⁷¹ high levels of unemployment, poverty, social deprivation and personal debt afflicted Castleford and the surrounding area.

Economic activity around Castleford is now centred on the retail, distribution and service industries, with many of the new jobs unskilled and casual. To some extent, the community spirit that was forged during the 1984/85 miners' strike has been weakened by the lack of opportunities for quality employment. According to one former miner, there has been "a continual battle in those communities to keep people on the straight and narrow", particularly among the younger generations.

Unions have a long history in Castleford where, in the words of one official, "trade unionism was built around those industries that the community was built on". In the context of economic upheaval, it has been difficult for unions to retain their erstwhile status as community pillars. But unions have explored the possibilities for reconnecting with and revitalising the local community, particularly through the learning agenda.

The CCLC was set up with the help of unions in the aftermath of the miners' strike. Women had largely been subjugated prior to the strike and after the men went back into the mines, there was a large expectation that their wives would resume their roles as full-time domestic carers. But many women had been empowered by the experience, which made them aware that things could be a lot better and that life offered other possibilities. A number of women in Castleford who had actively helped to support the miners and their communities through Women Against Pit Closures looked for ways to open opportunities for the miners' wives. They decided to set up a learning centre to help give local women the skills to improve their chances of employability and a better life. With the support of unions such as the NUM and TASS, the women set up a stall in the Castleford market, which sold donated mining memorabilia and, along with a grant from the local authority, eventually helped to raise enough funds to establish the Castleford Women's Centre in 1986.

The centre removed various hurdles to learning, not least of all the resistance that many women faced from their husbands. Numerous marriages nonetheless broke down in the aftermath of the strike. Rights awareness, victim support and confidence-building courses were among the most popular when the centre first opened. Since many women in the community were still the primary carers of their children, access to learning remained difficult. So a free crèche was

⁷⁰ unionlearn, 'Miners' strike commemoration', *Union Learning News in Yorkshire and the Humber*, 2009, Summer, 22–23

⁷¹ See Fitzgerald and O'Brien, 'Like taking coals to Newcastle', 20

established within the centre, allowing mothers to attend courses without having to arrange for childminding.

The centre broke down another barrier by providing a more relaxed learning environment than was offered by formal institutions. Some 95 per cent of respondents to a survey conducted by the centre when it first opened said that they wanted to improve their education, but were daunted by the prospect of attending college. The homely and inviting informal setting encouraged people to use the centre and gain them the skills and confidence to rebuild their lives. One CCLC staff member says it acted “like a crutch” for the people in the mining communities around Castleford, who enrolled in courses in large numbers. “The people who came were hungry and greedy to learn ... it empowered them”.

The centre had surveyed local residents to find out the kind of skills they wanted. A list of 48 subjects was drawn up, from basic skills and cake decorating to computer courses and degree-level programs. The women used their links with various local education providers to find appropriate tutors for the various subjects. Computer courses were run with the help of Wakefield District College, using donated computers. Leeds Metropolitan University even agreed to provide degree-level psychology at the centre, which led to them to later run other degree-level courses and laid the grounding for the expansion of the university’s community education programs.

The centre soon expanded to provide courses for all those out of work in the area, not only women, and changed its name to the CCLC in 1995. It was the venue for many success stories and according to the Workers’ Educational Association (WEA) “became one of the pioneers of community learning”.⁷² One unemployed mother enrolled in an ICT course later became learning manager of the largest construction company in Britain. Many of the tutors and workers in the CCLC started off as ‘home grown’ learners.

Central to the centre’s success was the sense of community spirit that it embodied. The CCLC utilised local connections within the community to promote its work and assist those who came through its doors. In the words of one staff member, “if we couldn’t help, we knew a man who could”. Virtually everyone in Castleford knows someone who has done courses through the centre and the word-of-mouth factor has been instrumental in encouraging others to enrol.

Reigniting union-community partnership to deliver mutual benefits

The CCLC thrived for 20 years until a change in the national funding structure in 2006 resulted in the local authority cutting its resource allocation for adult

⁷² Workers Educational Association, ‘Coalfield centre burns bright’, 2010, www.wea.org.uk/yh/new%20pages/Castleford.htm

Case studies

education and withdrawing support. All the workers had to be made redundant, but the managers kept working voluntarily to allow the centre to continue providing learning, for which there was still a considerable demand. Nonetheless, the CCLC was back to square one.

The local WEA was affected by the same funding decision, resulting in the loss of its premises, without which it also risked losing its role as a provider of trade union education for Yorkshire and the Humber unionlearn. In looking for a new venue, the WEA discovered that the CCLC was in need of a new client, so approached unionlearn about relocating their courses. Upon visiting the centre, unionlearn officials found that its positive spirit made it an ideal place to provide courses for union reps.

The relationship between local unions and the CCLC flourished. Unionlearn helped the centre make a successful bid to learndirect to provide ICT training to union members. Unite later decided to open a regional union learning centre within the CCLC. The provision of Skills for Life and union rep courses brought in a number of other unions, such as NUM, the CWU, GMB and BFAWU. While the CCLC had previously focused on providing learning to people out of work, the shift towards people in employment and union reps required it to go through a learning curve, but one that it managed successfully.

The involvement of unions in the centre provided a resilient funding stream and allowed it to revert to operating at full capacity and rehire staff. While the CCLC had maintained close connections with local unions, the reestablishment of a strong working relationship was “like going back to the beginning”, in the words of one staff member, when unions had been instrumental in its creation.

Using union learning to improve lives and regenerate local communities

The strengthening of links with the CCLC allowed unions to become more aware of local community needs and how they could help improve peoples’ working lives. Union-provided learning was subsequently promoted to the large number of younger people around Castleford needing assistance to secure their place in the labour market. One unionlearn official says there have been numerous cases of union reps attending training at the CCLC and then referring friends and family to the other courses on offer, many of which continue to be provided for free.

While mining has largely disappeared from the region, the NUM still has a presence. According to one official, the NUM still sees itself as a pillar of the mining towns around Castleford, because while the pits may have closed, “the communities are still there and they still see themselves as mining communities”. Working with the CCLC to deliver its Mining Education Project allows the local branch of the NUM to play a central role in these communities by giving new skills to active and retired members and their

families to help them find a new lease of life. The CCLC has given a number of NUM members their first learning experiences in over 40 years and allowed people to use computers for the first time. For their families, it has offered people to chance to undertake free training courses not provided by their employers. Their work through the CCLC has increased the profile of the NUM and reminded people of the benefits of trade unionism. It has also given the NUM the chance to engage with the broader community, which has been an undertaking of the project.

The CWU is another union that has actively worked with the CCLC to provide learning to members that do not have access to a workplace centre, particularly postal workers in the small towns around Castleford. According to one CWU official, there are several hundred members of CWU Royal Mail in the region that would not get access to learning were it not for community centres like the CCLC, which plays a vital role in filling the learning gap for people in the smaller communities. Unlike in workplace learning centres that are only open to workers, the CWU can advertise the courses run through CCLC to members and their families. This has helped the CWU broaden its presence to the community members also enrolled in the courses, many of whom are not in unions. Because unions are seen to be doing something positive for their members through free access to learning, using the CCLC raises awareness of a positive side of the union movement to non-members and the broader community.

The partnership with the CCLC has helped the WEA establish new relationships to deliver learning to a wider base across the community, as well as to union reps and members of other unions such as RMT, PCS and UNISON. It has also improved the quality of course provision. One official says the common objectives and aspirations of the WEA, unionlearn and the CCLC in the region has allowed each organisation to deliver its work more effectively.

During its quarter century existence, some 50,000 people have come through the doors of the CCLC to undertake learning. Its positive work was recognised by Yorkshire and Humber TUC and unionlearn in 2009 with two awards for Outstanding Achievement in Education. Its role in instilling confidence and providing skills has helped maintain a sense of community cohesion in an area that has experienced profound economic change. In the words of one unionlearn official, there is “all the more need for places like the Community Centre”. Working with the CCLC has improved the working lives of union and non-members alike and renewed awareness of trade unionism in a former stronghold. Unions in the region have provided the CCLC with a secure foundation for the future, while the centre has given unions a platform to engage with the local community and showcase their positive role to the many people using the centre.

Case studies

Case study 4: Hackney Unites



The case of Hackney Unites is a promising example of unions promoting social inclusion as a mechanism for organising through various forms of community engagement based on location, identity and mutual interest. Hackney Unites is the product of a long-considered strategy by Hackney Trades Council activists. Their objective is to gain an organising foothold in an area with many active community organisations but low levels of union membership.

Building community alliances around common interests

Hackney Trades Council has been active for many years, but its activists recognised that the high proportion of Hackney residents working outside of the area made it difficult to use traditional union organising strategies. Low union membership among workers in the borough is mainly due to various structural factors, notably large numbers of migrant workers employed by small businesses on a casual basis. But union activists also acknowledged that workers have been reluctant to participate in local union structures, including the trades council itself. This led the activists to conclude that the most effective means for unions to engage and organise workers living and working in Hackney is through the community groups that they are involved with.

The origin of this strategy lies in Hackney Trades Council's anti-fascist campaigns. While the BNP is not especially active in the borough, there were concerns that a low voter turnout would allow the party to gain seats in the 2008 Greater London Authority election. In mobilising against the BNP, Hackney Trades Council activists discovered that various community groups

were similarly determined to prevent such an outcome. An alliance was soon built with local political parties such as Labour, the Greens and Liberal Democrats, faith and ethnic minority groups and Searchlight to get residents to vote and to ensure that they voted against the BNP.

These groups worked together to organise a hustings meeting between the candidates, the distribution of 50,000 leaflets across the borough by some 200 residents, and for community leaders to put their names to a full-page advertisement in the local newspaper. The campaign proved successful and was replicated during the 2009 European Union elections. Searchlight's contact database for Hackney mushroomed to some 2,000 residents, representing the largest number of any community across Britain and a likely product of the campaign's success. The anti-BNP mobilisations showed the potential for alliance-building between community organisations in Hackney. Aware of the possibilities that this opened for union renewal in the borough, but also of the need for a more concrete platform, Hackney Trades Council activists agreed to launch Hackney Unites as a separate organisation. A grant from the TUC's Active Unions Active Communities programme allowed it to do so.

The main objective of Hackney Unites was to facilitate broader community involvement than could otherwise be achieved through the trades council. In the same way that involvement in the anti-BNP campaigns was purely based on whether community groups wanted to be involved, irrespective of their broader politics, Hackney Unites aimed to build a stable coalition by emphasising unity and agreement over division and disagreement. The trades council activists approached various organisations with which it had built good working relationships through the anti-fascist campaigns and found that they had similar aspirations. This included migrant and ethnic minority groups and the local branches of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament and various unions.

Hackney Unites was formed in January 2010 with a management committee of eight organisations. The committee agreed upon a constitution that established promoting social inclusion and active citizenship and as guiding principles of the organisation. Hackney Unites initially focused its attention on three integrated activities: the looming general election campaign, the organisation of a social forum event, and the creation of a centre to support and organise workers living and working in Hackney.

The first activity continued the work that had first brought these groups together, namely combating the BNP. The far-right party was not fielding candidates in Hackney for the 2010 general election, so Hackney Unites organised local activists to campaign in other East London constituencies where the BNP posed a genuine threat. Hackney Unites co-ordinated the participation of local activists in Hope Not Hate campaigns in Barking and Dagenham. These activities generated further engagement with community and political groups and, according to one activist, boosted the image of Hackney

Case studies

Unites as a non-partisan organisation playing an active and positive role in challenging fascism and the politics of exclusion. This built a sense of trust in Hackney Unites' capacity as a campaign organisation and respect for its achievements, which were important in generating further momentum.

The second activity designed to bring local groups together around the promotion of social inclusion was Celebrate Hackney, which was marketed as "a day of debate, discussion, film, arts and culture", "part community conference, part local film festival and an arts showcase".⁷³ The event used the vibrancy and diversity of the borough to encourage community participation. Celebrate Hackney aimed to facilitate dialogue between different groups around common interests through over a dozen plenary and workshop sessions on various issues relating to social inclusion in the borough, such as migration, policing, education and public services. The event also involved photo and arts exhibitions and children's performances. Many community groups had stalls and a number of local cafes and restaurants served food.

While the organisation of the Celebrate Hackney began with the eight groups composing the management committee, by the time it was held in June 2010, some 40 were involved either through running stalls or participating in the workshops. The groups on the management committee initially used their own networks to make contact with other local organisations, and then went beyond this by using the list on the Hackney Council website to contact other groups directly. The local press, a database of local activists and websites such as Facebook were also used to promote Celebrate Hackney, which resulted in other groups approaching the organisers to get involved.

Using these various means of communication allowed the event to grow organically. While ensuring that it was competently organised, the Hackney Unites management committee was keen not to be too controlling over the event's direction and allowed it to take shape in a democratic manner, thus giving a sense of ownership to those involved. Over 400 people attended Celebrate Hackney, surpassing the expectations of the organisers. A survey was sent to all participants as part of this research project (which elicited 153 responses), the feedback from which was overwhelmingly positive, as is evident from the following selection:

"The event helped different organisations come together and introduced a means by which those organisations can cooperate in Hackney and the surrounding area."

"[The event] put people in touch in our fragmented society."

"It made different organisations aware of one another's existence."

"It helped create a sense that as a community change is possible."

⁷³ Hackney Unites, *Celebrate Hackney* tabloid, 2010, hackneyunites.blogspot.com/2010/05/celebrate-hackney-tabloid.html

“It enable[d] participants to see that they were not alone and there were many other[s] in the same boat.”

“[The event showed] the people of Hackney that there are a lot of people involved in improving the community and standing up for the residents. Having them all there in one place also showed the willingness to work together.”

“The stalls were a wonderful representation of Hackney’s diversity.”

The event was seemingly successful in bringing together the various local organisations that held an interest in promoting social inclusion and active citizenship. According to one of the organisers, “the name ‘Celebrate Hackney’ was actually chosen by default because we didn’t know what to call it, but it really captured the essence of the event”. Its success can be partly attributed to being held one month after an election that produced a Coalition government. There was also a palpable sense that participants were looking for ways to respond to the looming cuts in public expenditure that threatened to have an impact on local services in Hackney.

The organisers were quite explicit in their intention that, in the words of one, “the event is not an end but a beginning – it will be used as a stepping stone and a bridge between various groups and activities in the community”. A number of open meetings were held in the months after Celebrate Hackney to decide how the momentum and community links could be built upon. The defence of local public services was a major concern to those involved in Celebrate Hackney. At the time of writing, Hackney Unites was in the process of creating an alliance around this issue. While the organisers stressed that Hackney Unites’ future activities should be determined from the ground up, there was an emphasis on being positive and proactive to ensure that any action taken against public service cuts would not be futile. In the words of one organiser, “given a choice between doing nothing and doing something that will have an impact, we should choose the latter. But we need to be sure that we have a very proactive and not a negative approach, drawing upon the creativity of people within the community, which can best be realised by bringing people and groups together to ensure that we don’t suffer together”.

Community organising to engage vulnerable workers

One Hackney Trades Council activist says that Celebrate Hackney has made local residents more aware of Hackney Unites and that this has helped to promote its third area of activity, the Workers Advice Project. A session of the project was held at the event and a number of local groups (such as benefits advice and residents organisations) approached Hackney Unites seeking involvement. The project tries to overcome a particular barrier to union organising in Hackney, mentioned at the start of this case study, which is that only a minority of Hackney residents work in the borough. While 83 per cent of respondents to the Celebrate Hackney survey lived in Hackney, only 28 per

Case studies

cent worked there (70 per cent were engaged in either full-time or part-time paid employment and 55 per cent were union members).

The Workers Advice Project is based on the American 'workers centre' model popularised by Janice Fine. Its central principle is reciprocity: in exchange for receiving legal advice and support on employment issues, workers agree to participate in training or collective discussion sessions in order to make them understand the broader context in which they work. In particular, the collective sessions draw themes from the issues faced by participants to raise awareness that their grievances are not isolated and that the best way to deal with them on a long-term basis is through collective organisation. As well as providing employment advice and support, the project therefore aims to encourage union membership and community activism.

The project also recognises that if unions and other voluntary and community groups work together and promote community organising around workplace issues, they can overcome the gaps that exist in employment support. Unions find it difficult to engage workers in Hackney, community organisations lack access to expertise and there are no employment law centres in the borough.

The traditional 'plant-based' model of union organising – based on large workplaces that operate at fixed times and that are staffed by local residents, making them easy to organise with minimal resources – does not apply in Hackney, but this does not mean that people are without employment problems. On the contrary, many workers living and working in the borough have very difficult working lives, particularly members of ethnic and minority communities that work for small businesses. The nature of this work means that many have limited or no access to unions.

An absence of UWCs and employment law centres meant that there is no effective means of employment support in Hackney. Organisations such as these that provide employment advice centres might address individual grievances or problems, but they tend to do so in an individualistic and ad hoc manner without being able to systematically address power imbalances in the employment relationship. In any case, legal rights are difficult to enforce without collective organisation. There are many local organisations, particularly in minority and ethnic communities, with the capacity to provide other forms of support to these workers. However, they do not have expert knowledge on employment matters.

Using coalitions to promote union activity

The Workers Advice Project was only just getting off the ground at the time of writing, so no concrete assessment can yet be made about whether it is helping to organise those living and working in Hackney. However, various law firms, community organisations and unions are working with Hackney Unites to promote the project and a number of successful pilot sessions have been held.

Various courses for the Workers Advice Project have been scheduled for the latter half of 2010. Of those that have registered to attend, less than half are union members, several work in difficult-to-organise jobs and industries and a number of others work in the voluntary sector. This suggests that the project is helping to build bridges between local trade unionists and the wider community. Additionally, 26 per cent of Celebrate Hackney participants surveyed said explicitly that they would be interested in participating in the project. A test will be whether the courses can facilitate an increase in union membership and participation in local branches. A lack of resources is the biggest barrier to its future viability. That said, an OFFA-type scheme is being established (in which 56 per cent of Celebrate Hackney respondents said they would participate), which would help Hackney Unites to finance the project.

One Celebrate Hackney organiser (who is not a union activist) said that the event had helped to further raise the profile of unions in the area and allowed them to build on the credibility gained from involvement in the anti-BNP campaigns. Another claims that because Celebrate Hackney involved a more representative cross-section of the local community, the active participation of unionists allowed a more appealing image to be projected of worker organisations than would have been the case if the Hackney Trades Council tried to promote worker rights through traditional strategies. While it is too early to make a judgement call on its success, Hackney Unites shows promising signs of how unions can foster links with local organisations around issues of mutual interest to raise their profile and promote union activity.

Case study 5: Wallsend People's Centre

Over the past two years, the Northern TUC (NTUC) has aimed to create a community-based strategy for engaging workers in vulnerable areas of the labour market. This strategy was born from a realisation that non-unionised workers could not be reached through workplace-based organising alone and that unions in the region needed to organise through relationships with various community groups. However, various obstacles have so far prevented the NTUC from realising its objectives.

Building on a legacy of community engagement

The NTUC and its union affiliates were well placed to build upon the links established through various community engagement measures developed in recent years. Local unionists have used anti-racism strategies to build relationships with local migrant and BME communities, which acted as platforms for joint campaigns on the right to work for asylum seekers, ESOL and agency work. Links had also been established with local organisations around issues of common interest, such as public housing, education and international solidarity.

Case studies



The recent community engagement strategy was underpinned by the longstanding legacy of community engagement by unions in the North East. This came from a prevalence of industry towns, where people commonly lived and worked in the same area. Since many people worked alongside their neighbours, the links within these communities were strong, giving unions deep local roots. For much of the twentieth century, the region was a heartland of secondary industry, particularly manufacturing. The availability of good and secure employment opportunities was for the most part plentiful. However, many plants, factories and pits closed in the 1980s and the share of regional employment accounted for by secondary industry fell from 34 per cent in 1981 to 14% in 2004.⁷⁴

Rising unemployment has brought an increase in economic and social deprivation in recent decades. Industry towns increasingly morphed into 'dormitory towns' as a result of economic change, with more residents commuting to work in cities such as Newcastle. Many people still live and work in the same place, but local communities tend not to be as strong as they once were. Much of the growth in the recent years has been in lower-skilled service industry jobs and the public sector. The proportion of regional economic activity account for by public sector industries grew from 21 per cent in 1981 to 31 per cent in 2004,⁷⁵ industries that remain strongly unionised.

⁷⁴ Fitzgerald and O'Brien, 'Like taking coals to Newcastle', 18; 'Secondary industry' encompasses manufacturing, mining, engineering, shipbuilding and steel

⁷⁵ *ibid.*, 18 'Public sector industries' encompasses education, social work, health, public administration and defence

Overall union membership in the North East has fallen significantly since the 1980s. However, at the relatively high level 35.7 per cent in 2009, it has the highest union density of any region or nation in the UK aside from Northern Ireland.⁷⁶ There is still a strong sense of identification with unions and this is reflected in the prominent civic role that unions continue to play in the region. Trades councils, UWCs and local union branches such as UNISON in Newcastle in particular have established records of community engagement, especially in building alliance with other groups around public services.⁷⁷

The strong community engagement legacy of unions in the region appeared to provide a sound platform for the NTUC's community engagement strategy. The strategy began in late 2008 as a pilot of the TUC's Active Unions Active Communities programme. For the first 12 months, the NTUC sought to build campaigns with community organisations around various employment rights issues. A right to work campaign for asylum seekers was developed in partnership with the Regional Refugee Forum North East and a Know Your Rights event was organised with the Berwick Migrant Support Group, which had been established by the local Citizens Advice Bureau in conjunction with Polish community groups.

These initiatives helped to build alliances between unions and local community organisations. But because they were rather isolated events, it proved hard for unions to maintain sufficient lasting momentum after the events to nurture engagement with the community organisations. Furthermore, the events were not as successful as hoped, owing to some reluctance on the part of local unions to devote resources.

Using community centres to cultivate local networks

The NTUC reasoned that in order to sustain relationships with local community groups, future community organising needed to be based on ongoing rather than one-off initiatives. It approached the Wallsend People's Centre (WPC), which had good working relationships with both unions and community groups in the area and was an ideal base for further developing the community engagement strategy.

The WPC was initially created as a UWC in the late 1980s and subsequently reinvented itself as a community centre. Much of its work comes through providing learning opportunities to individuals and groups in the local community. Government contracts for training and support around economic inclusion have allowed the centre to successfully support itself. The centre has flourished in recent years, growing from five to 19 employees, with several hundred people undertaking learning courses each year.

⁷⁶ Archur, *Trade Union Membership 2009*, 21

⁷⁷ For information of UNISON's record in this respect, see Hillary Wainwright, *Reclaim the State: Experiments in Popular Democracy*, 2003, Verso: London, 143–179

Case studies

The WPC has become a hub of local activity with strong links to other groups around Wallsend, particularly migrant and BME community groups. Its success as a community centre owes much to its other activities, including the provision of advice and support on employment, employability, skills, benefits and immigration, and many people use its in-house crèche and cafe. It is also an active campaigner on local issues.

Wallsend was once a heavily industrial area centred on ship-building, but as with other parts of the region this is no longer the case. Aside from an expansion of public sector activity, there has not been much private sector growth to replace the decline of manufacturing jobs. Most of the industries that have declined were strongly pro-union, but this has not transferred into the new areas of economic activity. While high levels of identification with unions remain in Wallsend, this exists mainly among the older generations.

Wallsend has experienced a fair amount of population flux in recent years and an increase in immigrants and refugees and the WPC has established good connections with the new communities. It has provided training and support to Iranian and Uzbek community groups, which has resulted in the development of a number of Community Learning Champions.

There is some distance in the relations between these groups and longstanding residents. To address this, the centre has tried to strengthen links between migrant and other community groups by campaigning on issues that have a universal impact across the local community. For instance, it organised a campaign around the reinstatement of free breakfasts for school children after the Conservative local mayor abolished the scheme.

The NTUC hoped to use the WPC's community profile and its links with the union movement to form a joint partnership to organise difficult-to-reach workers by engaging them through local community groups. In October 2009, the NTUC and the WPC formally agreed jointly to develop an agenda for community organising, which would incorporate core union activity into the work of the centre. Various workshops would be held to address the needs of vulnerable workers and help them overcome labour market barriers. It was hoped that this would lead to the establishment of a migrant support group.

In addition, the NTUC agreed to facilitate ESOL and employment rights training for migrant workers. The WPC would deliver community organising training for union reps to assist them in identifying ways to reach these workers. It was also agreed that the centre would be used to establish a community networks forum to unify these strategies by fostering dialogue between unions and local organisations as a foundation for partnership.

Impediments to effective community engagement

The NTUC and Wallsend jointly launched a network of community organisations to promote these activities in March 2010. However, many of

the activities had not begun at the time of writing due to delays in the meeting of various commitments. Both organisations have agreed that more progress will be made in the coming months. But each has found it difficult to allocate sufficient staffing resources to the project. The WPC claims that it does not have the solid financial resources to commit to community-based strategies on a large scale. The WPC was also yet to deliver on its undertakings to link unions with other local organisations through the community networks forum, which is key to the overall success of the project. In addition, it has also been somewhat difficult to get affiliate unions involved, largely due to resource constraints and their commitments to core workplace-level activities.

In identifying how future joint community organising strategies could be more effective, both the NTUC and the WPC say that a dedicated union project worker would need to be seconded to the centre. This would allow the strategies to be better co-ordinated, links to be established more effectively between unions and community organisations, networks developed more extensively and potential activists and leaders to be identified more easily. Despite a legacy of community engagement in the North East, union efforts to cultivate community networks to reach unorganised workers have thus proven difficult.

Section six

The lessons for community engagement

The five case studies show that community-based strategies can yield numerous advantages for unions, but also that certain factors are required for such strategies to be successful. They demonstrate the learning agenda to be a particularly effective instrument for connecting unions to difficult-to-organise segments of the workforce. This was particularly evident in the MWP case, where Unite used community-based learning and migrant community networks to complement its organising agenda. The learning agenda was also used by unions in Castleford as a way of improving working lives in an area afflicted by industrial decline.

The cases also illustrate the benefits of community engagement for capacity building. Unions in Edinburgh used the expertise of VCOs to provide more effective support to their members. While it is too early to make a definitive assessment, similar partnerships had the potential to overcome a major gap in employment support for workers in Hackney.

Community-based strategies can also act as effective vehicles for the recruitment and development of union activists and reps. Linking learning to organising through the MWP allowed Unite to develop a 'roles escalator' and turn non-members into members and members into activists. Scottish unions used the Unions into Schools programme to recruit numerous new reps and improve the skills of existing ones.

A number of the case studies demonstrate how unions can use community engagement in various ways to act as 'swords of justice'. The MWP and CCLC examples (pages 27 and 37) show unions using learning to make tangible improvements to people's working lives, thereby presenting or reinforcing a highly positive image of trade unionism. Edinburgh unions used the Support@Work program to similar effect by giving employment support to migrant workers. Unions into Schools allowed Scottish unions to educate students with little knowledge of unions about their benefits. And the Hackney Unites case demonstrates that union activists can co-ordinate community campaigns and events to generate respect among other local organisations, thus helping to strengthen their alliances and build support for broader organising objectives.

The cases also show that working with other organisations can help unions to promote active citizenship and contribute to community revitalisation and

empowerment. This was evident in the way that unions used community-based learning through the CCLC to facilitate educational opportunities and build community links in a context of social fragmentation. The MWP case also demonstrates how community-based union learning can act as a focal point for community empowerment by helping to forge relationships between local and identity-based community groups. And Hackney Unites illustrated how anti-fascist campaigns were used to create community relationships that were further strengthened around various issues relating to social inclusion and active citizenship.

A number of lessons can be taken from these studies about the preconditions for successful community engagement. The importance of context was evident. The Hackney Unites example suggests that existing union structures should only be harnessed when they are likely to be effective. Experience taught union activists the limited appeal of the Hackney Trades Council to the broader community, which therefore made it an inappropriate mechanism for building a broad coalition. In successfully creating a new organisation in conjunction with other local groups, they were more able to forge an alliance on the basis of shared objectives. On the other hand, the co-ordinating role of the Edinburgh Trades Council in involving affiliate unions in the Support@Work program shows that trades councils may well be appropriate cornerstones for community-based strategies. In any case, such strategies need to assess the likely effectiveness of existing institutions in facilitating community engagement. While revitalising a moribund UWC or trades council may be futile, there is no point overlooking a properly functioning one. Indeed, a logical first step for unions wishing to develop community engagement strategies should be to look for active trades councils and UWCs with longstanding and positive links with other organisations and citizens in their local communities.

The cases also highlight the factors required for successful relationship building. Creating a new institution that shared control with partner organisations demonstrated flexibility and trust on the part of Hackney union activists. This appeared to engender the faith and confidence among other groups that was necessary to successfully organise community campaigns and events. The flexibility shown by Unite in giving ownership to workers through the MWP resulted in activists using their community networks to further promote the program, which in turn led to the recruitment of new learners and activists. Longstanding relationships between unions and the CCLC based on trust laid the foundation for these groups to subsequently re-engage. In strengthening and renewing this partnership, local unions not only allowed the centre to keep operating. Using its resources also improved their capacity to deliver learning to workers without access to a workplace centre and facilitated contact with workers and families in the local community.

Another lesson to be drawn from the case studies is the need to form relationships around issues of mutual interest. The broad theme of promoting

The lessons for community engagement

social inclusion allowed unionists in Hackney to build a large alliance of local groups committed to achieving joint goals. By contrast, while the Wallsend People's Centre had a long record of engagement with local unions and shared similar values, it was somewhat unclear what the WPC hoped to gain out of its partnership with the NTUC. The somewhat ill-defined goal of the partnership perhaps explains why the WPC had trouble delivering its various commitments to the project. Nonetheless, from the perspective of unions, the case shows that it is important to select partner organisations that can not only be reasonably expected to help meet the objectives of a community-based strategy, but also share a clear dedication to achieving them.

The importance of both leadership and grassroots level involvement in community engagement strategies is also illustrated. With respect to Unions into Schools, the local community connections of reps allowed relationships with individual schools to be established and strengthened, which helped to further promote and gain political support for the scheme. On the other hand, while the Hackney Unites and MWP cases underscore the importance of grassroots connections in creating and expanding union links with the community, they also show that some direction from above is required to maintain coherence in community engagement strategies.

Finally, the cases also show that networks between unions and communities will not flourish on their own. A commitment of time and sufficient finance and human resources is therefore required to make community engagement work. Whilst this is perhaps an obvious point to make, limited financial resources were the most frequently cited barrier to community engagement in case study interviews and discussions with union officials and activists. Most of the cases relied directly or indirectly on some form of government funding. Justice for Domestic Workers gained additional resources through an OFFA-type scheme and Hackney Unites was due to launch a similar scheme at the time of writing.

There have been some innovative examples of fundraising among trades councils, such as the creation of a union-community resource centre in Leeds and the Battersea and Wandsworth Workers' Beer Company, which admittedly would be difficult to replicate.⁷⁸ Nonetheless, the TUC and affiliate unions should find ways of encouraging activists to devise similarly ingenious and creative forms of fundraising. Affiliate unions are another potential resource for community engagement. Taylor and Mathers suggest mandatory affiliation at significantly reduced subscription rates as a way to both increase the limited resources available to trades councils and raise low participation levels among union activists.⁷⁹ Such a proposition seems to make sense with respect to community engagement activities.

⁷⁸ Taylor and Mathers, 'Organising unions, organising communities?', 27–28

⁷⁹ *ibid.*, 32–33

Of the five case studies outlined, Hackney Unites perhaps represents the most comprehensive form of community engagement, with unions connecting with communities at each of the four levels identified at the beginning of this report. As Tattersall says, “the greater the interaction between organisation, common interest/identity and place, the stronger the ‘community’ foundations”.⁸⁰ While it is an incomplete case study, the success of Hackney Unites in forging connections between unions and communities should encourage other unions to follow its example. However, it is recognised that many practical barriers exist to implementing such a comprehensive strategy. Furthermore, to return to an oft-repeated point, replicating such a strategy will not be appropriate for all contexts.

This report supports O’Grady and Nowak’s proposition that community engagement is “not a replacement or substitute for developing strong, effective workplace organisation – but it could be a valuable tool in reaching out to groups of workers which have failed to engage with our traditional structures”.⁸¹ However, the numerous factors required for successful community-based strategies that have been outlined suggest that tokenistic attempts at community engagement – i.e. those that fail to recognise the importance of resource allocation, context, trust and flexibility in relationship building, and leadership and grassroots involvement – are less likely to succeed.

⁸⁰ Tattersall, ‘Bringing the community in’, 187

⁸¹ Quoted in Stirling, ‘There’s a new world somewhere’, 57–58

Section seven

The way forward

In the absence of a more substantial commitment to community-based strategies on the part of unions, the rather ad hoc and inconsistent pattern that has characterised the activity of British unions on this issue will continue.⁸² It is in the immediate interests of unions to pursue community engagement more seriously; in fact, it could be decisive in determining whether organised labour prospers or withers in the coming years, for two paradoxical reasons.

The current political climate presents unions with both a potential opportunity and a major challenge. More comprehensive community engagement can allow unions to take advantage of the former and effectively respond to the latter. The hallmark policy of the coalition government is the creation of a Big Society. Power will be apparently devolved from central government to local communities to create “a society where people come together to solve problems and improve life for themselves and their communities”. We are told that the role of the state will not be to set down policy prescriptions but rather to “agitate for, catalyse and galvanise social renewal”.⁸³

The Prime Minister has said that “the rule of this government should be this: if it unleashes community engagement – we should do it”.⁸⁴ The government has promised to train an army of community organisers and support the creation of cooperatives and social enterprises to deliver locally-tailored public services through a Big Society Bank.⁸⁵ The government has also pledged to create local ‘Work Clubs’, “where unemployed people can gather to exchange skills, find opportunities, make contacts and provide mutual support”.⁸⁶ No institution is better placed to develop such institutions than trade unions and efforts should be made by unions to publicise and further promote the existing support they provide to local communities in this respect.

The TUC and many unions are sceptical about the Big Society agenda (along with many voluntary and community based organisations), particularly as to whether it reflects a genuine commitment to restore communities and improve participation, or simply a way for the government to reduce the delivery of

⁸² See Stirling, ‘There’s a new world somewhere’, 58; Wills and Simms, ‘Building reciprocal community unionism in the UK’, 79

⁸³ Conservatives, *Building a Big Society*, 2009, www.conservatives.com, 1

⁸⁴ Prime Minister’s Office, ‘Big Society Speech, 2010, 19 July, www.number10.gov.uk/news/speeches-and-transcripts/2010/07/big-society-speech-53572

⁸⁵ HM Government, *The Coalition: Our Programme for Government*, 2010, Cabinet Office: London, 29

⁸⁶ *ibid.*, 23

local services. Since trade unions are the Britain's largest voluntary and community sector organisation with the ability to draw upon proud legacies as civic pillars, the government's agenda potentially offers many opportunities. In particular, by increasing their level of community engagement, unions could provide – and act as a gateway to – valuable local services and support by using their unique position as bridges between the community and the workplace to improve learning access and employment support to those with limited opportunities. Not only would this help to improve people's employment prospects and prevent marginalisation, it would encourage social inclusion and active citizenship and contribute to local revitalisation.

As this report has shown, unions have used the learning agenda to provide opportunities to segments of the workforce that have traditionally faced major barriers to learning attainment, particularly lower-skilled workers. Union and community learning centres have been used to particularly good effect in delivering basic skills such as ICT, literacy and numeracy. While there is often high demand for these skills among workers, employers have been more reluctant to provide them through workplace-based centres, instead tending to concentrate on their own narrow skills needs.⁸⁷ Unions have thus been active in helping to raise basic skills standards across the labour market, an issue of notorious market failure but also a government priority. Removing learning barriers to the people and communities in greatest need has also allowed unions to project a positive image, including to many non-unionised workers (thereby potentially encouraging union membership and activism).⁸⁸

Unions could also advance the benefits of union-based community learning to local labour markets. By working more proactively with community learning centres and local employers, unions could act as brokers between local supply and demand, helping to find jobs for learners and fill vacancies for local employers. In this manner, unions could use their unique knowledge of local labour market information by promoting themselves as 'transmission belts' between community learning and the workplace.

The case studies in this report show how unions can use their local networks between community groups and voluntary and community sector organisations to fill gaps in the provision of employment support. This is another function of community-based union activity that potentially complements the Big Society agenda. Engaging community networks to ensure that workers have access to local expertise and support will prevent people from being exploited and falling through the cracks and thus help to improve local community cohesion.

The second key reason why community engagement is vital is that it will enhance the response efforts of unions to the government's looming public service cuts. The effectiveness of unions in the forthcoming campaigns hinge on

⁸⁷ Wallis *et al.*, 'Learners of the workplace unite!', 285

⁸⁸ Fitzgerald and O'Brien, 'Like taking coals to Newcastle', 25

The way forward

whether they are perceived as ‘swords of justice’ standing up ‘for’ the interests of broader public, or defensive ‘vested interests’ protecting their own sectional concerns.⁸⁹ Central to this effort will be the ability of unions to create broad coalitions with civic actors and community groups at the local as well as national level. This report has set out various factors required to make alliances of this nature work. Unions will need to adopt context-appropriate strategies and relationships founded on trust, reciprocity and flexibility in a manner that effectively involves and mobilises their members and activists. And, for their part, voluntary and community organisations need to work at developing joint strategies and relationships of trust with trade unions. Building support and forging partnerships from the ground up in this manner will be crucial in winning support from the wider public.

⁸⁹ See Tattersall, 2006, 196–197, on how coalition building can help unions to successfully frame public sector campaigns



SWORDS OF JUSTICE & CIVIC PILLARS

This report argues that the time is ripe for greater engagement between British trade unions and community organisations. Shared interests and strategies can build social cohesion, encourage active citizenship and forge alliances with the broader public that will assist union campaigning against cuts in public services.

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