

Is there an organising ‘model’? An empirical critique

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Introduction

This paper is, in short, a plea to (re)locate debates about union organising activity within a broader political context. After a decade of both practitioner and academic interest in union organising activity in the UK, much has been written about the ‘organising model’ (amongst many others Carter 2000, Carter and Cooper 2002, de Turberville 2004, Heery 2002, Heery et al. 2000). Building on arguments made by de Turberville (2004), we set out to consider empirical evidence reflecting the very different practices of organising activity within UK unions. In rejecting the idea of a single organising model, we locate the debate within the US origins of organising ideas and argue that many of the underpinning syndicalist notions of worker self-organisation were abandoned as the language and practice of organising transferred to the UK in the 1990s. This, we argue, has created a context within which UK organising activity has largely become a set of practices without an end purpose in mind. We explore the reasons for this development and argue that there is an increasingly urgent need for academics and practitioners to engage in a debate to (re)define the purpose of organising work in order to set out a future vision for the union movement.

Broadly speaking, the term ‘organising’ is used to describe an approach to trade unionism that emphasises membership activism around relevant workplace issues. Beyond that, we argue that its meaning and use are fuzzy and indistinct. The term originates in the US (Fiorito et al 1995, Russo and Banks 1996, Bronfenbrenner et al 1998, Clawson and Clawson 1999). Hurd (1998: 23) specifically locates the origins of the term to a manual for US union organisers published in 1988. It was used to differentiate between an approach to trade unionism that emphasised the importance of union officers dealing with members’ problems (the ‘servicing model’) and an approach that emphasised membership activism and collectivism as being the crucial aspect of addressing workplace problems collectively (the ‘organising model’). These so-called ‘models’ have been well rehearsed and outlined in much previous literature (see amongst others Blyton and Turnbull 2004, Bronfenbrenner 1997, Bronfenbrenner et al 1998, de Turberville 2004) but given that the purpose of this paper is to argue against the notion that there is a single model of organising, it is important that we revisit the roots of some of the early claims made about it.

The organising model in the US context

In an early review of the US literature and practice, Craft and Extejt (1983: 20) identify what they call a ‘classical approach’ to organising. It is worth citing from this paper at some length as we can see the early seeds of ideas about what organising ‘is’ in the US context:

‘Traditionally, most unions conduct highly decentralized organizing programs with the effort directed at individual work units (e.g. offices, plants). The organizer, a person who is generally self-trained in union organizing activity and comes from the rank-and-file membership, is the key individual who has substantial control over the design and implementation of the organizing campaign. In organizing efforts, the organizer is the embodiment of the union to the prospective union members.

The emphasis in organizing activity appears to be directed heavily toward face-to-face contact with union recruits. The organizer visits homes of employees to discuss the union, develops social contacts and relationships with workers, organizes small informal meetings of prospective members, and occasionally obtains employment in the target company to have direct access to and integration with the employees. Through their contacts and effort, union organizers seek ‘ways to transform individual dissatisfaction into a collective condition of unrest’ and ‘channel it into the direction of group action through the formation of a union’ (Karsh, et al, 1953, pp. 33, 94). The organizer generally attempts to tailor the organizing approach to the concerns and problems of the prospective members (e.g. the special needs of women workers, skilled workers, racial and ethnic groups, white collar workers). The organizer sells the idea of group action – that through the instrumentality of the union the employees’ concerns and dissatisfactions could be addressed effectively.’

Although lengthy, this quotation is revealing in a number of ways. It nicely summarises the core *tactics and practices* of organising activity as we currently understand them within the US context. It also shows us that *union organising is not a new phenomenon* as is sometimes assumed within UK writing. It shows that very early in the process of US academic reflection on union renewal, attention was turned to describing and analysing a particular approach to developing and expanding union membership which still has much contemporary resonance. Further, the reference to Karsh et al (1953) is a reference to a very early descriptive, ethnographic case study of the work of a union organiser. This early work clearly outlines the kind of approach that Craft and Extejt (1983) describe as ‘classical organizing’, which has been sufficiently common in the US experience as to generate sociological study since at least the 1950s.

So, if we use this as our starting point of our understanding of the ‘organising model’, why did it gain so much sway within the US labour movement in the 1980s and 1990s? Others have written extensively on US industrial relations (Turner et al. 2001), so our objective here is simply to point to the key factors that allow us to understand the development of the particular philosophy of union organising that has become so influential in the UK. Three factors are particularly worthy of note: collective bargaining structures, the dominance of the closed shop in US unionism, and the particular influence of the anarcho-syndicalist ideology promoted particularly (although not exclusively) by the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). We consider each of these in turn.

The first two are closely intertwined. Collective bargaining structures in the post-New Deal context rest largely on securing recognition for bargaining at the level of individual workplaces. Thus, it is entirely common in the US, that some workplaces of a large company may be

unionised, whilst others will not be. Further, for much of the post-1945 period, there has been a substantial union wage mark-up that typically gives unionised workers rights, for example, to employer-paid health insurance, better holidays, etc (Wheeler 2002). The union wage premium, combined with an assertive managerial culture, ensure that there are strong incentives for employers to resist unionisation. Alongside this, most states have a system of post-entry closed shops, whereby all workers employed in that location must join the representative union. This secures income for the union from member dues.

Together, this structure of trade union membership and collective bargaining informs a clear logic of organising at workplace level. Within this context, organising activity largely focuses on pre-recognition work (i.e. persuading workers that a union could effectively represent their interests if they collectivised). Unions in this context know that this kind of intensive work with rank-and-file activists will not have to continue after recognition because once recognition is secured, officers of the union can negotiate and re-negotiate the contract, terms and condition at pre-determined intervals (servicing). Identifying activists during the pre-recognition phase is essential because much of the day-to-day representation work will be done by these activists. Teaching workers to act collectively is also crucial because these are the skills that they will be expected to use to ensure that the negotiated contracts are being enforced. Face-to-face recruitment in the workplace or in workers' homes is essential in a context where membership numbers matter and access to workplaces prior to recognition is extremely limited. A claim for recognition is highly likely to end up being assessed by the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), who will look for evidence of membership as the key indicator of the strength of support for the union. So having organisers who can 'sell' the union – typically through their own experiences of unionisation – is central to the success of a recognition campaign.

What is usually less explicit within US analyses is the 'business unionism' inherent in some ideas of 'classical organising'. In other words, the idea that, ultimately, paid union officers have responsibility for bargaining once recognition for bargaining has been secured (usually through NLRB processes). This has often had the effect of disempowering workers from some of the emphasis on collective action that can develop during a lengthy recognition campaign (see Markowitz 2000 for extensive case studies). Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, 'business unionism' came under increasing pressure and was frequently identified as a key reason for the decline in union strength in the US, prompting both academic and practitioner debates to seek alternative visions for the trade union movement (Bronfenbrenner et al. 1998; Turner et al. 2001).

Underlying these debates and tensions within US organising practice and analysis was the influence of the IWW, particularly on the left of the trade union movement. Understanding the influence of the IWW on US ideas about organising is essential as it helps to explain why 'organising' became an explicitly political rallying cry throughout the 1980s and 1990s; politics which have, by and large, been lost as debates about organising have transferred to the UK context. The IWW takes an essentially anarcho-syndicalist position on labour relations. Central to the IWW approach has been an emphasis on worker self-organisation and although the IWW have always been a minor player in US labour relations, their influence on debates – and most particularly on the left of the US union movement – is undoubted (Kimeldorf 1999). Alongside the kind of 'classical organising' discussed by Craft and Extejt (1983), a parallel notion of organising has persistently been evident in US debates. This has centralised the importance of worker collective action at workplace level, and rejected the idea that paid union officers would take responsibility for bargaining once recognition was secured. For the IWW – in common with many syndicalist positions – the objective of organising activity is to use the tactics described above to ensure that workers have sufficient skills and knowledge to continue to organise and represent themselves; often, ultimately, with the objective of presenting a fundamental challenge

to structures and capital accumulation. Collective bargaining may be temporarily advantageous in redistributing wealth, but is only one small part of the objective of organising activity. As such, organising across workplaces is of fundamental importance to ensure sufficient ‘industrial’ power and the core of the IWW position remains a focus on continuous worker self-organisation.

Whilst there is evidence of a long history of debates on organising activity, and specifically debates over the *purpose* of organising activity, within the US labour movement, throughout the 1980s and 1990s unions were faced with a particular conjunction of factors which explain why a more leftist vision of ‘organising’ shot up the agenda of the US labour movement. Specifically, the end of the Cold War, the crisis generated by collapsing union membership figures, the growth of union busters and the associated difficulties getting recognition cases through the NLRB process, and generational change within individual unions and within the AFL-CIO, all allowed much freer discussion on the American left about the future of the union movement and strategies for renewal (Bronfenbrenner et al. 1998; Mort 1998).

From these debates emerged a clear contrast between so-called models of ‘organising unionism’ and ‘servicing unionism’ which have been well rehearsed elsewhere (Boxall and Haynes 1999, Carter and Cooper 2002, Heery et al 2000). Nonetheless, it is useful to re-state our understanding of this contrast, both because it illustrates the political importance of the idea of self-organisation within the US ‘organising model’ and because it was so influential on UK policy makers. Figure 1 sets out some of the practices/approaches that are used to distinguish between the differing roles within unions.

Figure 1 Comparing the servicing and organizing models

<i>Servicing model</i>	<i>Organizing model</i>
1. Union leadership solves problems for members on basis of complaints or requests.	1. Stimulates and involves members in problem solving in group process or collective action.
2. Total reliance on grievance and negotiations process.	2. Not limited to the bargaining process.
3. Passive membership or limited to leadership requests for cooperation.	3. Commitment to education, communications from and participation in the union.
4. Reliance on specialists, experts and union staff.	4. Development and dependence on members’ skills and abilities.
5. Secretive and closed communication	5. Information sharing and open channels. communication channels.
6. Centralized and top heavy organizational structure.	6. Decentralized organizational structure.
7. Dependent on management, reactive.	7. Independent of management, proactive.
8. Makes distinctions between internal and external organizing activities.	8. Makes no distinction between internal and external organizing activities.

Source: Russo and Banks (1996: 4) and cited in de Turberville (2004). A slightly different, but more accessible, version of this table can be found from Organizing Works (1995) in Blyton and Turbull (2004).

This vision of organising goes beyond Craft and Extejt's (1983) description of tactics and integrates more of the syndicalist view of workplace self-organisation (although it rejects the revolutionary undercurrent of the IWW position). We see a clear development of some of the ideas of 'classical organising' into an 'organising model' which emphasises continued worker activism in both pre- and post-recognition phases. Indeed, it is notable that when a group of Cornell University scholars published a seminal text on union organising in 1998, all of the tactics associated with 'classical organising' were still central to their analysis of organising work (Bronfenbrenner et al. 1998). But, by 1998, one essential factor had changed; the political context of unionism and union organising. Prompted by some of the wider changes mentioned above, in 1995, John Sweeney won the election to the leadership of the AFL-CIO under a campaign entitled 'New Voice' which put a central emphasis on the importance of organising work. This signalled a very substantial move in US union politics, although inevitably had its roots in previous developments. Politically, this was a shift away from the Cold War politics of Sweeney's predecessors (the comparatively conservative eras of Meany and Kirkland) and a definitive shift to the left. Sweeney himself came from the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), which had developed influential and innovative organising campaigns amongst low-skill service workers throughout the 1980s and 1990s and explicitly attempted to move away from the business unionism of the Cold War era.

It was precisely at this point that, prompted by many of the same crises of membership decline, UK policy makers became very interested in US developments and it is to the transfer of these ideas into UK debates that we now turn our attention.

The 'organising model' in the UK context

While the idea of organising transferred to the UK, many of the political ideas inherent within US models of organising were very different. The central political and practical contrast at the time was between 'organising unionism' and 'partnership unionism' (Heery 2002). In the UK, interest in union organising as a separate function emerged in the mid 1990s, largely as a reaction against some of the practical and political criticisms of the 'new realism' approach that promoted ideas of a consensual 'partnership' with employers. Around that time, key policy makers at the TUC and in affiliate unions became interested in US programmes such as the Organizing Institute and Union Summer which were explicitly intended to attract young people, ethnic minority workers and women workers to work within the union movement. Importantly, these initiatives were also underpinned by central ideas of worker self-organisation and were explicitly linked to the political agenda of shifting the culture of US unions away from 'business unionism' towards 'organising unionism'.

Although senior figures responsible for launching and steering the TUC's New Unionism initiative and Organising Academy accepted that the politics of worker self-organisation underpinned their vision for a future direction of the union movement, these objectives were rarely, if ever, explicitly stated. Indeed, the then General Secretary of the TUC, John Monks, was frequently heard calling for 'Partnership with good employers, and organising bad employers.' This clearly signalled that at the highest level, the TUC had a formal policy of pursuing *both* consensual relations with some employers, and organising activity in others. This was further underpinned by the TUC policy to fund both a Partnership Institute and an Organising Academy simultaneously – a strategy that was not without its critics (Carter and Fairbrother 1998; Kelly 1999). It is not our objective to review these debates again here, but to note that a consequence of the dualism in the 1990s was to shift the debate away from the *political objectives of organising*, and towards the *practice of organising*.

Unlike the AFL-CIO, senior positions within the TUC are appointed, not elected. Thus, there was never a need to build a political campaign around a vision for union organising. Indeed, precisely the opposite. Some senior TUC figures were highly aware of the political underpinnings of ideas about organising but saw that the way to encourage TUC adoption of organising policies was to discuss practices and tactics rather than the broader political agenda. Given the decline of influence of trade unions in the 1980s and 1990s, few within the TUC or affiliate unions could effectively argue against tactics that might attract members, whereas a broader debate about the objectives of those tactics may well have entrenched established political resistance. Unsurprisingly, therefore, within the UK context, the primary interest became to establish a set of organising practices that would encourage unions to engage in membership growth activities.

We argue that there were several important consequences of shifting the focus of the *politics* of organising towards the *practice* of organising. The first, and in our view most important, is that any notion of there being an organising ‘model’ has been abandoned in UK unions. To support this, we present evidence of the implementation of organising practice in three large UK unions over the last five years that show significant divergence in both practice and the underlying purpose of organising activity. Thus, we argue, there is not a single organising model in the UK context. Therefore what is important is the consequences of shifting the focus of the politics of organising towards the practice. Specifically, a lack of coherence about the purpose of organising activity and an intellectual incoherence which lumps together so many different forms of organising under one umbrella that the term itself becomes unhelpful. We conclude by laying out a future intellectual project that separates the questions of the *purpose* of organising from the *practice*.

The research

The research has taken place since 1998; the year that saw the establishment of the TUC Organising Academy. Since then observation, interview, survey and documentary data collection and analysis have taken place at regular intervals in both the TUC and affiliate unions. The main body of data that we use for this paper comes from a Nuffield Foundation supported project that ran from 2007-2008. We conducted a survey of Organising Academy Graduates, interviewed 30 organisers and 25 key policy makers in both the TUC and the individual unions and observed several days of training in each of the research settings.

Other data sets on drawn to inform the historical overview include:

- Documentary evidence from the specialist training programmes being run by the three case study unions.
- Observation data of TUC Academy training sessions undertaken in years 1, 2, and 10.
- 2 surveys of union organising policy and practice undertaken in 1998 and 2001 respectively.
- Over 200 additional interviews with key decision makers from 1997 onwards.
- A survey of all TUC Academy graduates over the past 10 years.
- Detailed case studies of eight organising campaigns over a 4-6 year period.
- Documentary analysis of additional material such as training manuals and policy documents

The observation of and engagement with the three unions chosen demands some explanation. The three unions are three of the largest UK unions: Usdaw (organising in retail and distribution), the GMB (a general unions with membership across public and private sectors), and the TGWU section of Unite (a union which has recently merged and which organises across almost all sectors of the UK economy). All three are affiliate members of the TUC, and because of their size have a strong voice within TUC decision making structures. But they have primarily been selected

because they have all set up their own organising training programmes. These programmes are influenced by the TUC organising training, but are developed to fit particular needs of the individual unions. They also have sufficient resources and interest to take this path. By choosing to focus on them, we see how three very different models of organising have emerged, which allows scope for a discussion of the broader politics of organising in a UK context.

'Models' of UK organising

Before turning to consider the organising policies and practices of the three selected unions, it is useful first to consider the principles underpinning the TUC's flagship organising training programme: the Organising Academy.

1) TUC Organising Academy

The TUC Academy has been described at length elsewhere (Heery et al 2000). Established in 1998 (soon after the visits to the US by senior TUC officials) it is a one year training programme run by the TUC where participants are sponsored by affiliate unions. Participants receive around 20 days training per year, typically in residential blocks of 3 or 4 days. During this period they come together to discuss the organising practice they have been undertaking in their sponsoring unions and to receive training in particular core skills. The Academy tries to strike a difficult balance between the (sometimes conflicting) demands of affiliate unions operating in different sectors, with different 'kinds' of members. As a consequence, the training tries to establish organising 'principles' which can be transferred between different union settings; thus allowing, for example, an Academy Organiser or graduate to work equally effectively with public sector professionals or with low-skilled manufacturing workers. Indeed, much emphasis has been placed the transferability of these skills and organisers are far more likely to move to work in different unions after their training than other officers (see Simms and Holgate 2007 for further discussion).

But arguing that organising skills are (in part) transferable between union settings is very different from arguing that there is a generic 'organising model'. Indeed one of the core issues for participating unions and organisers has been to address precisely what they want 'organising' to mean in their individual contexts. Thus, the focus of much of the training is in introducing organisers to particular techniques – role playing recruitment scenarios, discussing the use of corporate campaigning or community involvement etc. – and then encouraging them to apply whichever techniques they and their mentors deem to be appropriate to the particular context in which they find themselves working. So, for example, an organiser within the Communication Workers Union (CWU) may get a lot of experience in greenfield organising work and find it very easy to demonstrate how they have applied their training to involve activists outside the target workforce. But an organiser for the University and Colleges Union (UCU) may never work on greenfield organising work because recognition of the union in the sector is very high. For them to demonstrate their skills at engaging community activists, they may have to think innovatively about drawing in stakeholders within colleges and universities – perhaps students, parents, and other user groups – to a particular campaign.

This diversity of context, and particularly the dominance of public sector unions where organising is rarely about gaining recognition for collective bargaining because unions are well-established in the public sector, is an important explanation of the emphasis on context-specific organising in the UK. We therefore explicitly reject the notion that there is a single 'organising model' and we want to explore further how different approaches to organising are associated with both different *purposes* and different *practices*. In what follows, we present three very different approaches that we have observed in order to explore some of the different 'models' of organising that have emerged

in different contexts, before going on to reflect on some of the issues related to a rejection of the notion of an ‘organising model’.

2) Unite (TGWU national organising strategy) – organising as a specialist function

The Unite (TGWU) National Organising Strategy is based upon an approach that is ‘strategic, sectoral and global’. Using corporate and economic research strategies to map various sectors, the union has attempted to forecast where they need to be in the economy in 2, 5 and 10 years time. From this, growth areas in the economy have been identified and are given priority in the national organising strategy. The strategy has provided some significant organising growth, meeting a target of 10,000 new members per year, plus recognition wins in difficult sections of the labour market such as the low cost airline, Flybe, where 94 per cent of the workforce voted for recognition on a remarkable turnout of 89 per cent. Another sector where there has been success is the poultry industry. Here thousands of migrant workers have been recruited and a successful combine has been established with over 50 senior lay activists from the big three companies that dominate the industry; Bernard Matthews, Moy Park and Grampian. Contract cleaning and the high profile Justice for Cleaners campaign, has continued to dominate media headlines in London enabling negotiations to take place on zonal agreements by way of minimum standards for thousands of cleaners throughout Central London.

Prior to its merger with Amicus to form Unite, the TGWU had been experimenting with a number of innovative approaches to organising activity. Specifically, it had rejected an approach that focused on organising individual workplaces, in favour of a more co-ordinated sectoral approach. It established a National Organising Strategy in 2004 that involved a phased recruitment and in-house training programme for over 100 dedicated organisers. These organisers have been through an intense period of training, similar to that provided by the OA, but tailored to the specific sectoral approach.

By recruiting such large numbers of specialist organisers to work on the kind of high-profile and intensive greenfield campaigns mentioned above, the union is seeking to develop strength in new sectors. The objective is to ensure that activists take a large part of the responsibility both for organising work and for representation once recognition has been secured. Officers will then take responsibility for some of the broader strategic issues and some of the more complex negotiations. In this regard, the TGWU approach is closest to the kind of work seen in some of the large US unions; notably the SEIU with whom it has a close working relationship. Many of the core ideas of worker self-organisation can be seen in the organising strategies and practices of the TGWU and this reflects not only influences from the US, but also the particular history and labour markets within which the TGWU operates, and specifically the long history of independent shop stewards (workplace activists) networks which has been extremely influential in the political history of the union (Fisher 2005).

3) GMB – Mainstreaming organising work

In sharp contrast to the Unite (TGWU) and TUC approach, the GMB has adopted a view that employing specialist organisers can risk making organising activity a separate activity within the union – something that ‘those organisers’ do, rather than integrated into the daily work of everyone who works for the union. In an explicit effort to overcome this potential difficulty, the GMB have decided to integrate organising work into the roles of all officers. This has the advantage of mainstreaming organising activity as a core function of the union. However, previous studies of the work of union officers, and our recent research, shows that the day-to-day pressures of representation and negotiating tend to take over from the often more long-term responsibility of organising work (Holgate 2005; Kelly and Heery 1989; Simms and Holgate 2008). Therefore the risk is that organising falls off the agenda in the face of the pressures of

other commitments. In order to try to overcome this, the GMB has made it an essential requirement that all officers report regularly to their line managers on their organising work and that this is a key part of the objective setting and evaluation of all officers.

In trying to achieve this approach, the GMB has therefore focused on organising training for generalist officers rather than recruiting specialist organisers. There are, however, four senior organisers working in the union's national organising department and their role is to take a more strategic overview of the companies and workplaces being targeted for organising and recruitment efforts. Similar to Unite (TGWU), there are a number of nationally set organising targets which are priority for the union and the role of the organising department is to develop a strategic plan about how membership, activism and structures can be built and strengthened in key geographical or employer areas.

The senior officer with responsibility for developing the organising approach was actively involved in developing and delivering the TUC training programme at the start, and is happy to recognise the influence of the TUC programme on the current GMB strategy. But the specific approach of the GMB has also been informed by the particular context within which the union currently operates. This stems from an analysis that the union has expanded rapidly within key sectors over recent years and must now consolidate its position. Increasing density in sectors such as catering services, cleaning services and other contracted-out sectors will, it is hoped, increase bargaining leverage. The integration of organising work into the role of generalist officers is then supported by the development of activists who specialise in organising. The intention is that these specialist activists will develop an increasingly independent workplace-level representation structure and senior officials within the GMB argue that this is the way in which they are attempting to build sustainable worker self-organisation.

4) Usdaw –Routinising organising in the lay activist role

Usdaw is very different in that it was one of the first unions to establish its own internal 'organising academy', which now runs alongside, but separate from, the TUC programme. Usdaw is faced with the challenge of having a very high membership turnover each year, which is largely a function of the high labour turnover in the retail sector. A union of 340,000, this means that Usdaw has to recruit around 80,000 members each year just to keep a stable membership figure. In order to do this, the union has developed a six-month organising training programme that is accessible to lay workplace activists. Typically coming from one of the large retailers with whom Usdaw has good recognition rights, lay activists are given a secondment from their full-time job in order to participate in the programme. The union pays their employers the equivalent of their wages and the employee is released to work for the union for the six months of the programme with the expectation that they return to their usual job at the end of the training.

During the six months, Usdaw trains them to go into workplaces with a key focus on recruiting members, identifying activists and identifying issues that are relevant to that workforce. Again, the training is influenced by the TUC programme, but is narrower, is specific to the kinds of workplaces within which Usdaw is recognised, and is assessed with fewer written assignments. USDAW argues forcefully that this is a clear example of how partnership and organising can sit alongside each other. And the results are impressive; the union has grown from 310,000 to 340,000 members in the past four years.

Again, this strategy reflects the particular context within which the union finds itself. It has a long history of taking a more moderate bargaining position with employers, and is known particularly for its partnership deal with the large supermarket chain, Tesco (USDAW 2000). Officers argue that this moderate position reflects not only the political views of key actors within the union, but

is also a realistic reflection of the bargaining position of the union; members are, by and large, unwilling to take industrial action, they move in and out of employment with different retailers relatively frequently, and often have more fragmented engagement in the labour market than many workers. Within this context, recruitment has always been a far higher priority for Usdaw than many unions. What has changed with a greater emphasis on organising work is an increasing focus on developing branch structures and activists to ensure that at least some of the representation and recruitment work can be taken on by workplace activists.

Discussion

Having established that empirically the notion of a single ‘organising model’ is highly problematic within the UK context, it is important to explore further some of the consequences of this argument. The first thing to note is that in all unions the strategies and practices described are highly contested and are the consequence of a great deal of reflection and debate about how organising principles can and should be applied within the specific context. In all of the cases it has taken the best part of a decade to develop and implement these strategies and approaches. And in all of the unions, key actors argue forcefully that by focusing on building workplace activism their organising strategies do indeed reflect the core values of *organising* rather than, say, simply *recruitment* activity. The second noteworthy point is that in all of the unions these strategies and practices have been accompanied by a membership growth that is particularly notable when the figures are broken down by to a sectoral level. Union membership in sectors where these unions have targeted their organising strategies have grown substantially.

But these very different models of organising practice are underpinned by different ideas relating to the *purpose* of organising activity. The syndicalist roots of US ideas about organising are notably absent from, for example, the Usdaw approach, yet tentatively present in the TGWU approach. For the TGWU the key objective is expansion into new areas, and securing sustainable, industry-level agreements (albeit in a geographically limited area). Being seen to fight high-profile campaigns around issues of social justice is also important and within this approach, the strong tradition of independent activist networks (combines) is clearly evident.

The GMB takes a different approach: after a period of expansion in strategically important areas – typically into representing workers who do similar work to existing members, but who work for un-unionised employers – the central objective is consolidation and integration of organising work into the role of generalist officers. Although there is an interest in worker self-organisation seen, for example, in the development of specialist organising training for activists, consolidation of bargaining strength is a primary concern.

For Usdaw, the central objective is recruitment and strengthening representation structures in areas of existing bargaining strength. Whilst developing workplace activism is of interest to the union, they feel that it is unrealistic to develop such an approach within the constraints within which they are working. Building and maintaining membership density is essential within that context.

This indicates that there is very little consensus within UK unions about their objectives. Membership growth, industrial and bargaining strength, culture change and worker self-organisation feature at different times and in different contexts, with different – and often competing – degrees of emphasis. While it is certainly true that within the US there is disagreement about the purpose of organising activity (not least during the breakaway of the Change to Win federation from the AFL-CIO in 2005), these debates both inform and are informed by academic literature (Crosby 2006, Masters et al 2006). This is not nearly so evident in the UK. UK scholars have, by and large, accepted organising as a set of practices and tactics

rather than a wider political initiative. We argue that this reflects the broader practitioner context that emerged precisely because of the way in which organising ideas transferred into the UK. The fact that the TUC were so keen to play down the broader political agenda meant that, in practice, organising *has* largely been a ‘toolbox’ of practices which different unions can apply in different contexts to different ends. But as individual unions have developed wider strategies that reflect their own particular contexts, histories, backgrounds and politics, we see very different ideas emerging about the *purpose* of that organising investment and activity.

One central question remains: should academics have a role in commenting on what the purpose of organising activity *should* be? Or is our role simply to comment on and analyse the competing objectives presented by the empirical evidence? We argue that academics should engage in these broader debates about the *politics of organising* for many reasons. Firstly, by turning away from debates about the objectives of organising we allow practitioners to set the agenda and, as ever when studying trade unions, their motivations are often political. Second, practitioners are sometimes poorly placed to observe, comment on, and analyse differing practices across the union movement(s). Thirdly, our role as industrial relations scholars has always been far wider than simply describing and understanding the behaviour of key actors. By putting the politics back into our analyses of union organising, we are seeking open a discussion and debate about competing visions of how unions structure themselves and engage with working people in the contemporary workplace.

Until very recently these visions have been presented as stark contrasts between ‘organising’ and ‘partnership’ or ‘organising’ and ‘servicing’. Our research indicates that this has blinded us to a much more nuanced debate about how different unions have developed different organising ‘models’ that reflect different objectives and contexts. But what *should* organising be? At its core, we argue that organising activity must deliver sustainable increases in workplace power for unions and for workers. Worker self-organisation must, at some point, be integral to our understanding of what organising ‘is’.

Starting from this view, we must be critical of many aspects of the current UK interest in organising. *First*, in common with de Turberville (2004), we reject the notion that there is a single ‘model’ of organising. Empirically our evidence clearly shows very different models of organising emerging in the UK. Underlying these different approaches are very different ideas about the purpose of organising. In general, these approaches are informed more by objectives of increasing membership and bargaining strength, rather than being driven by ideas about worker self-organisation. *Second*, as academics we need to open a discussion about whether this ‘matters’ in the UK context. In other words, are we happy to accept organising as being a set of practices that are disassociated from a debate about the purpose of organising activity? If not – and we argue that we should not be – *thirdly*, we must engage critically with empirical accounts of organising activity against the objectives set. In other words, we need to go beyond an evaluation of organising which assesses outcomes against the objectives set by the unions at the time, and move towards an evaluation which rests on a broader political evaluation of organising work. This may, inevitably mean, that we argue that what some unions label ‘organising’ may, in fact, require a different title.

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