**Faith in unions: from safe spaces to organised labour?**

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In many parts of the world, the UK included, trade unions have seen their power, influence and membership drastically decline over the last couple of decades. As the global and local economies have rapidly changed affecting all aspects of work and the employment relationship, unions have faced constant challenges to traditional workplace organising: there are new and complex subcontracting relations, the spatial dispersal of workers across multiple sites means workers have less connection with fellow workers, there are also higher levels of job mobility and people commute and live in different residential patterns, which affects traditional community life. Further, the individualisation of the employment relationship has also changed the relationship that workers once had with their unions – making many view their membership as a ‘contract’ for a service, should a problem arise. The forced migration of labour, either due to political unrest, war or economic necessity, has created new divisions of labour based on nationality and ethnicity and the most vulnerable of workers – often new migrants – have attracted the attention of union activists who are looking for ways of bringing them in to union membership, recognising that their exploitation has negative impact upon other workers and wider society. All these factors have meant that unions have slowly woken up to the need to (re)build links outside their direct constituencies and there has been a shift – sometimes only in rhetoric, but also in some practice – towards greater engagement with local communities.

In the UK, we have seen the development of broad based community organising in London in the form of London Citizens – a London-wide coalition of faith groups, schools, tenants’ associations and universities which has been campaigning (successfully) for a London Living Wage (Holgate and Wills 2007; Wills 2004). There have also been a few trade union branches that have joined the coalition but the UK trade union movement is avowedly secular, and unlike unions in the US, for example, where we have seen joint faith community/union alliances in organising campaigns, trade unions in the UK are much more reticent about working alongside such organisations (Holgate 2009). Unions in North America have embraced and courted faith leaders to speak out about social injustice in relation to work and the employment relationship. Sometimes, cynically, publicity events around union organising campaigns are called where it’s seen useful to ‘rent a vicar’ to add ‘moral authority’ to the occasion. But other union/faith alliances are much more egalitarian where parties have common understanding and work closely together to build organisations to improve the lives of workers – particularly those most marginalised or vulnerable (Fine 2005a; Fine 2005b; Peters and Merrill 1998). In many cases, faith communities represent ‘safe spaces’ in a hostile world and, particularly for some new migrant workers they are the main social networks that link them to people from their national or ethnic group (Jamoul and Wills 2007; Warren 2001).

This paper considers the relationship between migrant workers, minority ethnic workers, faith organisations and organised labour in the UK. It draws on a range of data. The first from a 3-year ESRC research project that has been looking at how workers attempt to resolve problems they face at work. The focus has been on three minority ethnic communities in London and the places/individuals/organisations to which they turn when they are in difficulty. Interviews were conducted with 180 workers, from three minority ethnic groups in three London boroughs: Kurds in Hackney, South Asians (originating from the Indian sub-continent) in Ealing and people of Black Caribbean heritage in Lambeth – all of whom had faced problems at work1. Each of the communities has their own religious (e.g. Alevi, Christian, Hindu Muslim, Sikh), political and secular traditions, which allowed for an exploration of if, how and why these might contribute to providing support within each community. In addition there were interviews with 64 key respondents, including people working in third sector organisations such as Law Centres and other advice and advocacy organisations like Citizens Advice (a national UK charity), local solicitors, community organisations; faith groups and

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1 By ‘problems’ we are referring to issues of disciplinary and grievances, where workers are subject to bullying, harassment, victimisation and discrimination – as well as breaches of statutory rights, such as health and safety, failure to pay wages (including National Minimum Wage), provide holidays and abide by the Working Time Directive, amongst others.
local council representatives. Interviews varied in length from 30 minutes to 2 hours, the average was approximately 1.5 hours. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, anonymised and analysed using qualitative software. The second set of data is from research into London Citizens since 2001. This research has included extensive participant observation from 2001 to 2009 and 20 interviews with organisers from London Citizens and trade unions.

In the ESRC research, participants (who included trade union and non-trade union members) were questioned about whether they were members of any faith organisations and whether they had used or considered using these when they were in difficulty at work. As might be expected, responses were incredibly varied. For example, workers talked about how Sikh temples (gurdwaras) supported local South Asian workers in West London when they faced protracted industrial action against a local large employer – help sustaining the strike with daily food and premises for meetings and how a local mosque provided legal advice session. This was despite these workers being members of a trade union that was supporting the strike. Other workers felt their faith communities provided general comfort and pastoral support but felt that this was not the place to take individual work-related problems. Similarly, Kurdish research participants – almost all of whom had no religious affiliations or trade union membership, but very strong community organisations in the form of community centres - also held the same view. Community centres were used for immigration and housing matters – but these were not considered the places to discuss employment matters. This raises important questions about the individualist and collectivist nature of employment and the ways that trade unions respond to these issues, which we will address in the paper. A further aim of the paper is to attempt a theoretical engagement between geography and the sociology of work. Until recently this has been missing from industrial relations studies (for exceptions see Herod et al. 2003; Rainnie et al. 2007) and this omission is even more evident when issues of ethnicity, identity and notions of community are included. As Castree et al (2004: 63) have pointed out ‘if theorising is about identifying the fundamental processes at work, then geography has theoretical significance’; a fact we believe is largely ignored by industrial relations academics.

Selected bibliography
Jamoul, L and Wills, J (2007) 'Civil society, faith organisations and political engagement'. London: Queen Mary, University of London (paper from authors).