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Union identities in post-industrial and post-crisis society: evidence from the UK

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The late 1990s and early 2000s provoked an upswing in enthusiasm and confidence in the prospects for union renewal and revitalisation in the UK and beyond amongst both the academic and practitioner communities (for an overview, see the edited collections by Gall 2003 and 2006). After more than a decade of sustained investment and engagement in a range of strategies, the UK union movement is entering what seems likely to be a lengthy period of significantly higher unemployment and lower economic growth. Evidence from previous recessions suggests that this combination of events is likely to present unions with a far more challenging external context than has been experienced since the start of the long boom from the mid-1990s to the financial crisis on 2008-9 (Gallie et al 1996). Thus, it is a logical point at which to assess the efforts of unions during the 15 year period of steady employment growth, low inflation and very low unemployment.

The paper takes as a basic assumption Hyman’s view that solidarity and the expression of collective interests is, and always has been, a socially constructed process demanding a vision of the end purpose of such activity. He explicitly acknowledges the process of social construction of ‘working class interests’ and the important role that trade unions have always played in this (Hyman 1997, 1999). He argues that the notion of worker interests rests on “imagined solidarities” (1999; 94) which have traditionally privileged the interests of one group of workers (skilled, white, male, full-time, manual workers) above others (unskilled, ethnic minority, women, atypical and service workers). But because he stresses the extent to which “through their own internal processes of communication, discussion and debate – the ‘mobilization of bias’ – unions can help shape workers’ own definitions of their individual and collective interests” (1999; 96), he is relatively optimistic that unions can therefore “re-imagine” interests and, specifically, notions of solidarity, to reflect the diverse interests of a changing workforce and membership. The contemporary challenge is, therefore, to construct union identities that respond to the changing context of work, employment and society; specifically post-industrial labour issues and the challenge of the recent recession.

This paper uses data from a longitudinal study of union organising activity starting in 1996 and continuing to the present. Over that time, interviews have been conducted with hundreds of key decision makers, officers, and other key actors throughout the trade union movement. This data reveals information and analysis relating not just to union organising activity, but also to other renewal strategies and ideas. Periods of observation have been undertaken at peak level and within individual unions and campaigns. Documentary evidence such as policy documents, position papers etc. have been collected and analysed. Used as an empirical source alongside published debates and evidence relating to alternative strategies and initiatives, this enables us to assess ideas and initiatives relating to renewal within union movement since the mid-1990s.
The central argument is that union renewal initiatives in the UK have given very little attention to changed social identities and the complexity of identity in post-industrial society. I argue that the post-crisis socio-economic context is likely to present even more profound challenges. However, using Hyman’s typology of union identities (1994, 2001), it is evident that this failure is not inevitable. Not only is possible in theory for unions to “re-imagine solidarities” (Hyman 1999), evidence from organising campaigns (Simms 2007) shows that unions are capable of framing and giving voice to collective interests in a post-industrial context and that there remains a demand for collective representation on employment relations issues from both workers and, to some degree, from managers. Using the framework of identities proposed by Hyman (1994, 2001), the paper examines five initiatives within UK union renewal efforts (greenfield organising, legal mobilisation, union modernisation projects, union learning initiatives, partnership policies) to comment on the underlying views and assumptions about the future of collective union representation. The discussion focuses on the UK context, but may have relevance beyond.

The paper extends previous analysis which has examined these ideas in relation to organising activity (Simms 2009) by comparing the notions of union identity underpinning competing renewal strategies. It argues that different renewal initiatives draw on contrasting – and often conflicting - underlying notions of the processes involved in and the consequences of building (framing) collective interest and solidarity. Of particular relevance for this conference, the paper also identifies the very different underlying ideas of what we can infer about the perceived purpose of such activity in creating competing visions of a renewed (or renewing!) trade union movement. The paper argues that some of these visions of what trade unionism is ‘for’ (i.e. the purpose of collective solidarity between workers organised and expressed through the formal institution of a trade union) are more feasible and relevant than others in the post-industrial and post-crisis context.

This paper has not previously been presented for discussion or publication.

References