Employment Networks and Labour Markets in Migrant Communities: the case of learning and employment regulation

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There are various dimensions to the way migrant workers may find themselves within the most vulnerable parts of British society and also in a position where they cannot effectively deploy their skills, abilities and qualifications. First of all, their experiences of the initial stages into employment may be highly chaotic, disorganised and the product of a relatively de-regulated labour market. Secondly, the nature of the jobs many typically undertake means that they are unable to provide a framework of inclusion and support sufficient to allow an individual to prepare a clear plan for self development, or for using their skills and relevant qualifications. There is a failure within much of the labour market for skills and qualifications to be effectively recognised. Employers’ perceptions of migrant workers’ menial position within the labour market, and thus low salary expectations, means that some employers are effectively recruiting to low skilled positions on the basis of ethnicity as opposed to suitability. We therefore witness the situation where the acquisition of human capital by migrant workers generates no financial improvements, and worse still subjects migrant workers to a process of de-skilling. This is a generic problem but it affects the newly arrived more directly as they do not have the access points and local knowledge to overcome this challenge. Third, the uneven nature of employment regulation as in the case of Britain, for example, means that getting a basic wage and good working conditions is an all-consuming task for many migrants who work in some of the most vulnerable forms of employment. This leads to a fourth challenge in terms of mapping social support and being able to use networks and services that can alleviate many of their economic conditions. Many migrants have to use their own ethnic communities in order to gain information, services and a sense of dignity. This has implications on how they are able to use their experiences and qualifications to map their way into an improved and dignified existence. The paper attempts to map these dimensions of migrant activity and networks - explaining how institutions at the local level fail to map onto these experiences. The paper will look at how new social movements in terms of migrant organisations and traditional social movements such as trade unions have in various European cases (especially in relation to the United Kingdom) used the discourse and strategy of learning as a key element of their politics of connection with the broader needs of such communities. The paper will draw from a range of sociological sources to show that networking requires a multidimensional understanding of the employment relationship and the local spaces it is structured within. The role of the local state is a vital feature of this process and its form is a determining variable in terms of developments.

The research methods adopted for this paper were detailed interview case studies of five specific union learning strategies across the UK, most with some community network element.
The focus of this paper is on a significant ‘new actor’ within British industrial relations, civil society organizations (CSOs) that play an increasingly active role in representing the interests of workers. CSOs include identity-based organizations that project interests grounded in gender, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, belief and disability, issue-based organizations that campaign on particular workplace problems such as work-life balance or health and safety, and advocacy organizations that provide information, advice and representation to working people. Prominent examples in the United Kingdom include Age Concern, The Age and Employment Network, Arthritis Care, Carers UK, Citizen’s Advice, the Fawcett Society, the Free Representation Unit, the Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants, London Citizens, MacMillan Cancer Support, RNID and Stonewall. Organizations of this stamp are active in shaping public policy and employment law, formulating standards of good practice for employers, and supporting individual workers. They are an increasingly visible presence in the systems of worker representation and employment regulation.

The paper examines the relationship between CSOs and the established institution of worker representation, trade unions. One current in the existing literature stresses the scope for these two institutions to form coalitions, founded on shared interests and joint-working. The analysis, discussion and indeed celebration of coalitions of this kind have been a notable theme in the literature on union revitalization in several countries.

There is another current, however, that identifies conflicting interests between CSOs and unions and anticipates conflict. For some commentators, these are institutions engaged in rivalry to occupy a limited representational space. Others have noted the incompatible cultures of CSOs and unions and have described a repeating pattern of conflict, as attempts at joint-working and coalition have fallen apart.

A third possibility is that CSOs and unions will occupy distinct and non-overlapping niches in the system of worker representation, which means they perform separate functions that require little ongoing contact. On this view, the two types of institution perform complementary but discrete functions with regard to the representation of worker interests. They may be barely aware of each other’s activity.
The primary purpose of the paper is to establish the frequency with and conditions under which each of these three possible patterns of interaction – coalition, conflict and complementarity – emerge. Specific research questions include: the frequency and persistence of CSO contacts with unions; the pattern of joint-working where it exists; the points within the union movement at which contact is made with CSOs; the issues around which cooperation occurs; the types of CSO and types of union that form cooperative relations, including internal and external conditions that facilitate a positive relationship; the extent and pattern of conflict between CSOs and unions; the causes of conflict and types of situation in which it arises; the characteristics of CSOs that exhibit conflict with unions.

The research on which the paper is based was carried out in 2007-08 and was funded by the Nuffield Trust. It adopted a multi-method approach, which sought to provide a basis for making general statements about CSO/union relations whilst also providing detailed analysis of particular relations. To these ends, the research comprised three overlapping stages. In the first, media and web sources were used to compile a list of 422 CSOs seemingly engaged in worker representation, loosely defined. These were national level CSOs operating at the level of the United Kingdom or its constituent nations. Standardized profiles of these CSOs were then generated using websites and other documentary sources. In the second stage a conventional postal questionnaire was carried out of the population of CSOs identified through the initial search. This survey sought information on the characteristics of CSOs and their degree and pattern of involvement in worker representation, including their relationship with trade unions. About one third of the initial population responded to this survey. In the final stage interviews were conducted with senior policy officers in a sample of CSOs drawn from four types: equality and anti-discrimination CSOs, CSOs concerned with work-life issues, CSOs representing ‘vulnerable’ workers, and CSOs providing a general advocacy and information service to the UK working population. This stage of the research collected data from more than 30 CSOs via nearly 60 interviews. These cases were supplemented by a small number of interviews with key respondents from the Trades Union Congress and major UK unions that have dealings with CSOs.

The proposed paper will draw upon all stages of the research project, thereby providing an overview of general patterns of CSO-union relations in Britain while also furnishing examples of each of the three forms – coalition, conflict and complementarity – set out above.
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).