UNION VOICES
Tactics and Tensions in UK Organizing

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A puzzle

• Investment in organizing by UK unions increased dramatically from 1997 onwards

• But little evidence of anticipated renewal on most measures – both quantitative and qualitative

• Objective of paper (and book) is to explain why

• Argument: the tensions within the way organizing has developed in the UK have limited its effectiveness
The research

• Longitudinal study from 1996 to present day
• 300+ interviews
• 8 ethnographic studies of organising campaigns
• 150+ days of participant observation of training, other organising campaigns etc.
• Repeat surveys of officers, organisers and campaigns
• Studies of strategies and practice within individual unions (x5 in-depth, x15 smaller)
The transfer of organizing ideas and tactics to the UK

- Inspired by developments in US and Australia
- Change in the political context – election of New Labour in 1997 with statutory recognition legislation promised
- Establishment of Organising Academy in 1998 by TUC
  - TUC leadership central to the story
  - TUC cannot instruct affiliates
  - TUC leadership appointed not elected
Organizing as a toolbox of tactics

• UK unions never specific about what they/we are organizing ‘for’ (Simms and Holgate 2010)
  – Little evidence of radical political agenda seen in US literature and practice
• Tensions and contradictions in the way that organizing was set up and ‘managed’ within unions
  – Tense relationships between organizers and officers
  – Few development opportunities for organizers
  – Little strategic oversight
Evaluating outcomes of organizing

• 3 relevant measures (Simms, forthcoming)
  – Effectiveness at influencing management and others (e.g. governments)
  – Representativeness of workers in general and of the workplace/organization
  – Sustainability of effectiveness and representativeness
Outcomes of organizing

- Membership
- Collective bargaining
- Targeting under-represented groups
- Organising in under-represented sectors
- Workers self-organization and union democracy
- Social movement unionism
What explains these outcomes?

• Lack of clarity about organizing objectives means wider objectives often not pursued
• Tensions between officers and organizers means initiatives often stop or have resources withdrawn
• Career progression for organizers means becoming a generalist officer – lack of strategic vision leads to further lack of clarity
But it’s not all pessimistic!

• There have been important examples of innovation
  – Sectoral organizing in e.g. white meat production, low cost airlines, casinos
  – Migrant worker networks and representation
  – Critical mass of organizers in union movement
  – Organizers move between unions spreading ‘good practice’
  – Mobilization around austerity and spending cuts

• But times are tough ahead