

# 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- Tensions between officers and organizers means initiatives often stop or have resources withdrawn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