

# Union identities in post-industrial society: UK union renewal initiatives

Melanie Simms  
Industrial Relations Research Unit  
University of Warwick, UK

# Background

- ⌘ UK focus
- ⌘ Re-emergence of interest in union renewal from mid-1990s (run up to New Labour)
- ⌘ 15 years of relatively benign political context
  - ⌘ “Fairness not favours”
  - ⌘ But, no systematic repeal of Conservative legislation anti-union legislation
- ⌘ Investment in different renewal initiatives
  - ⌘ From the State (ULF, UMF)
  - ⌘ Direct investment by unions

# Union identities

- ⌘ Developed from Hyman's work (1994, 2001) – the eternal triangle of market, class and society
- ⌘ We can infer what unions seek to be 'for' from what they 'do' (Flanders 1970)
- ⌘ Solidarities are socially constructed (Hyman 1999)
  - ⌘ Collective interests need to be (re)framed and given expression
  - ⌘ Doing so requires an expression of the (hoped for) identity of the union
  - ⌘ This is central to any process of union revitalisation
  - ⌘ More than just an expression of the institutional context (cf. Frege and Kelly 2003) – unions have choices about which (if any) of these activities to undertake and how much to invest in them

# Union renewal initiatives in the UK

1. Organising (Simms 2007, Heery *et al* 2000)
  2. Partnership (Heery 2002, Terry 2003...)
  3. Legal mobilisation (Colling 2006)
  4. Union learning (Wood and Moore 2005, Forrester 2004)
- ⌘ Why these? Investment in these areas – either by State, or unions, or both. The first 2 have received considerable attention, but to focus on them alone gives us a very narrow understanding of renewal efforts.
  - ⌘ Important to note that these are not mutually exclusive

# Central questions

- ⌘ What debates over union identities are evident in the renewal efforts seen over the 1990s and 2000s?
  - ⌘ What are the underlying principles and ideas within different renewal initiatives?
- ⌘ How have unions tried to build collective interests around these different initiatives?
- ⌘ Are there patterns of coherence or contradiction within these initiatives?
  - ⌘ And to what extent does that matter?
- ⌘ Documentary research at this stage - interviews planned later

# Organising

- ⌘ Emphasis on collective interests
- ⌘ Generally emphasises conflicting interests between employers and employees
- ⌘ Solidarities built primarily at workplace level – little effort to systematically target under-represented workers
- ⌘ Some effort to connect beyond (links to wider union/ community organising) but not routine
- ⌘ Some success but expensive, slow and risky
- ⌘ Tendency to create ‘islands’ of organisation although some unions (Unite, RMT) now focused more on sectoral strategies
- ⌘ Objective largely to establish/reinforce CB (market)

# Partnership

- Much discussed - meaning highly contested but focus on consensual workplace employment relations
- Down plays conflicting interests between eee and eer
- Collective focus – but little emphasis on under-represented groups
- Notable success in some unions and organisations (e.g. Usdaw in Tesco) but widely rejected
- No longer the great hope of union renewal
- Failed to establish a shift to ‘society’ identity – largely because institutional structures lacking

# Legal mobilisation

- ⌘ Primarily individual – little provision for collective cases in UK
- ⌘ Emphasises wrongdoing on the part of the employer – but not necessarily inherently conflicting interests
- ⌘ Potential to build solidarity but little in practice – cases have focused on interests of particular groups (e.g. women, outsourced workers) because that's where the law is strongest
- ⌘ But has created huge complexity and most officers avoid legal mobilisation
- ⌘ Effort to regulate labour market and service market but largely failed to offer any underpinning narrative about wider interests

# Union Learning Fund

- ⌘ State funded and funding may continue
- ⌘ Emphasis on improving UK skills base esp. amongst low-skill & vulnerable workers
- ⌘ Puts unions as central actors to delivering this
- ⌘ Funds a range of learning activities e.g. learning centres, courses, etc.
- ⌘ Encourages joint action with employers, but not essential
- ⌘ Focus on individual rather than collective, and joint interests with employers
- ⌘ No inherent focus on solidarity with other workers – moving towards ‘society’ identity if State support remains

# Why does this matter?

- Unions are making active choices about whose interests to represent and how – although not always with the degree of strategic thinking suggested in some literature
- Union identities matter in these processes – they are not simply institutionally dependent (*contra* Frege and Kelly 2003)
- But the contradictions matter:
  - Shows a lack of ‘vision’ for a renewed union movement
  - ‘Class’ identity largely absent
  - Institutional mechanisms for ‘society’ identity weak
- Vulnerable workers and under-represented groups not routinely targeted in renewal efforts
- Workplace focus (historically important in UK IR) limits effectiveness of renewal efforts

# Conclusions

- ⌘ Little discussion of worker/union power let alone a vision for the locus of that power – workplace, labour market, society, interests of a workers more widely?
  - ⌘ Although a default assumption that workplace is central
- ⌘ Workplace is important but it cannot be the only locus of power
- ⌘ ‘Class’ matters in the sense that it is the identity that it is the union identity that most clearly gives vulnerable and under-represented workers a basis for collective solidarity
- ⌘ At the end of 13 years of (relatively benign) New Labour unions are no stronger than at the start