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

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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)

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