

Trade union community membership: exploring what people who are not in paid employment could contribute to union activism

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Abstract

The industrial relations literature tends to argue that the main reason workers become union members is primarily instrumental—to provide assistance if there's a problem at work, yet this clearly doesn't apply to those who are not in work. It is, in many ways, counterintuitive to join a trade union when not an employee or in paid employment, looking for a job, or retired—as there's generally little material benefit in doing so. Other literature though has noted that personal values—particularly those associated with the ideological left—can lead to a predisposition toward union joining that is not based on a purely material calculus. Yet still, this analysis usually applies to workers. The research reflected in this article aims to understand the motivation of people who are not in paid employment, such as jobseekers/unemployed, students and retirees, in joining labour unions and becoming active within them. It does so through a case study of the UK's largest private sector union, Unite, and considers the contribution to, or rationale for, union activism within community membership and the possibilities for a rethinking of trade unionism beyond its traditional workplace base.

Key words

Activism, community organising, motivation, retirees, trade union membership.

Introduction

Given the considerable decline of trade union density in many Western countries over the last half century, there's been increasing attention on how unions might broaden their base to involve a wider constituency of membership. One way of doing this is to develop a deeper, more nuanced, understanding of the decision to join a union and, in particular, what this means for union activism. As Frangi and Barisione (2015a) have noted, this has now become a 'fundamental subject for research and union practitioners'. The focus of this paper is a case study of Unite, the UK's largest private sector union, as in 2011, Unite introduced a community membership section, Unite

Community (UC), opening up union membership to people not in paid employment (e.g. retirees¹, students, unemployed) (Holgate 2018). The community membership sits alongside the industrial side of the union and is dwarfed by its 1.4 million industrial members. Unite has only around 15,000 community members—although many more have been in membership since the formation of this new section. The reason being is that UC members leave this section when they gain employment hence becoming members of the industrial side of the union, while others have fallen away through natural wastage. Members of UC have mostly been part of the political activist wing of the union, campaigning primarily around welfare issues in their local communities on behalf or alongside benefit claimants, but have also actively been involved in supporting striking industrial members and unionisation drives. While Holgate's (2018) paper on Unite Community considered whether the initiative was an attempt to rethink union purpose as a consequence of loss of power in the workplace, in this paper our contribution is to re-focus attention on the subjective factors and motivation for people not in paid employment to join a trade union.

While Unite set out its reasoning for this expansion in membership (to provide a way people can find and use their political voice by taking a stand against service closures, or coming together to improve their local communities), our research focus is on the motivation of individual Unite Community members for joining a labour union—rather than a community organisation or a political party—and why they considered Unite as a space for their own social and/or political activism. Exploring different drivers for union participation is particularly relevant in the context of new forms of workplace-social movements coalitions and hybrid forms of worker organising across the community and the workplace. By focusing on individual motivation this contributes a different dimension to social movement unionism literature.

There is an extensive literature on social movement/community unionism, which is described as a form of unionism that advocates building alliances where union and community interests overlap (Breecher and Costello 1990; Cockfield et al. 2009; Cornfield et al. 1998; Fine 2000; Holgate 2015; Rhomberg and Simmons 2005; Tattersall 2006), but in this paper, we explore whether Unite's approach differs to the more commonly understood labour/community alliances where support is requested/offered for a particular (often time-limited) campaign. The paper explores these issues through in-depth biographical interviews with Unite Community members who talked about how,

¹ Although many unions have retired members sections (as does Unite), the union 'community membership' is in *addition* to that where Unite members are provided with the option of moving into the 'retired members' section when their employment comes to an end at the close of their working lives. The two memberships are organisationally completely separate. It is, however, possible to belong to both at the same time.

as people not in paid employment, they were motivated to become active within Unite Community. A short outline of Unite's community initiative provides context before we consider the implications of expanding unions in this way, and whether it could provide opportunities for growing union membership through increased social movement unionism.

In our research, we are interested in how members articulate their reasons for joining UC and choosing this space for their social movement activism. We also speculate whether this alternative form of (non-employment related) union membership and activism could provide a way to re-imagine a form of community unionism in a changing labour market. In describing the development of Unite Community, Holgate (2018: 17) has argued that in, 'the development of the Unite Community initiative, there has been a shift in organizing focus towards people who are not in work, but are angry about the effects of austerity on the most vulnerable in society. This suggests perhaps a slight re-orientation of union purpose as Unite draws these 'non-members' into the union and creates a space for them to organize and be active.' Following this proposition, we consider to what extent UC members have bought into this re-orientation towards a type of unionism where there is increased focus on community (or 'society' if viewed through Hyman's (2001) class–society–market nexus) as an organising space. What is it that they personally get out of being involved with Unite Community?

Why join a union when you're not in paid employment?

It is perhaps unsurprising there has been intense scrutiny in academic literature as to why workers join trade unions—and the reasons they become active within them—not least in the recent 40+-year period of union decline when there was/is a need for unions to understand how they might mitigate the drastic loss of members over this time. Quantitative analysis of data from surveys of members and prospective members has been a popular method of research (see for example Buttigieg et al. 2007; Charlwood 2002; Deery and Cieri 1991; Frangi and Barisione 2015b; Kirmanoğlu and Başlevent 2011; Lowe and Rastin 2000; Schnabel and Wagner 2007; Toubøl and Jensen 2014; Waddington and Whitston 1997). There has also been many qualitative investigations that have aimed to dig deeper, to unpack the statistics in order to understand the individual decision-making of union members and non-members (Kirton 2005; MacKenzie 2010).

Findings from earlier studies (Nicholson et al. 1981) suggest a range of reasons for joining unions that can be broadly categorized in three ways: instrumental, ideological, and cultural/social customs. In the first, instrumentalism is identified in much of the literature as one of the primary

reasons for joining a trade union—the highest response in surveys is often, ‘in case there is a problem at work’, followed by ‘improved pay and conditions’ (Waddington and Whitston 1997: 522). This is perhaps unsurprising given the *raison d’être* of trade unionism, as defined by the Webbs, is ‘a continuous association of wage earners for the purpose of maintaining or improving the conditions of their employment’ (Webb and Webb 1894). In this respect, union membership represents a rational choice based upon a cost-benefit analysis of the likelihood of gaining material benefits such as union representation and higher wages, better terms and conditions, or job security. Yet the union members in our study are formally ‘non-workers’² in that they are not in paid employment (but rather labelled by the UK government as jobseekers—possibly in receipt of benefit—or are retirees, or students), so these reasons do not apply.

However, people are not mobilized solely on the basis of an instrumental calculation of self-interest (collective or individualised). Other reasons advanced for joining are ideological, where there is a political commitment to the values of collectivism—where there is class-consciousness and an objective to the transformation of inequality or social order (Moore 2010). Deery and Cieri (1991: 62) suggest that for some, ‘the explanation for union membership may lie in the general value system of the individual, the antecedents of which can be traced to societal and family variables.’ For example, having a mother or father with strong commitment to unionism is a predictor of union joining, as it’s often connected to local historical and cultural expectations or heritage (Barling et al. 1991; Nicholson et al. 1981). A group of studies have shown that it is important to consider these social or psychological approaches if we are to fully understand individual rationality—beyond instrumental factors—for union joining and activism.

As Guest and Dewe (1988: 180) have noted, the social, cultural, material, and psychological aspects of an individual’s union joining and subsequent activism, ‘will be shaped and perhaps modified by subsequent work experiences and possibly also by a more conscious political commitment’. In the writings of Nicholson et al (1981) this conscious political commitment to unionism is picked up in the notion of ‘ideological activist’, which is used to describe the politically-motivated union

² We use the term non-workers in inverted commas mindful of the contested definition of work and the wider theoretical debate about the boundaries of work and employment. Indeed, many of Unite Community members while not in paid employment often carry various forms of unpaid work, reproductive, and care work for their families and community. Note: however, despite Unite rules not allowing paid workers to join the UC section of the union, we did find a few UC members who were occasionally undertaking marginal, or intermittent paid work often on a ‘self-employed’ basis, but these are people joining outside of the rule book (mostly unknown to the union). The Unite rule book clearly states membership is only open to people who are not in paid employment. If in paid work, people are directed to join the main/industrial section of the union—according to the rule book people cannot be members of both.

member, and ideological reasons are also articulated in a later study by Toubøl and Jensen (2014) who note the importance of a union member's normative and attitudinal characteristics, particularly the positive correlation between left-wing ideology (class) and union membership. Here we might expect to find that workers who have an ideological predisposition to collectivism will join unions even in circumstances where there might be little material benefit (for example in a non-recognised workplace) and this is borne out by a review of studies in this area (Riley 1997).

Our study also suggests that unions may expand their membership (and union activism) by becoming relevant to people who are politically committed (in terms of social justice) but who are not in paid employment, yet have a desire to be actively involved in a union movement that sees itself as a broader social movement to improve working people's lives towards more equal/just society. This perhaps suggests an untapped potential for union growth. We've learnt from the Covid-19 pandemic and concerns around climate change, the #MeToo and #Black Lives Matter movements, that there are considerable numbers of people, many young, who are active in social justice issues looking for a home for their activism. As such, exploring new forms of membership and activism is an important area of consideration for unions wanting to increase their membership, scope of activity and social relevance. We explicitly focus on the concept of activism and motivation as described in the work of social movement theorists such as McAdam (1988), Tilly (1978) and McCarthy and Zald (2001).

Gathering data on motivation: interviews, participation and observation

The research began just after the UC initiative was conceived in 2011 and it has continued throughout its formation and subsequent existence. The methodological approach has been qualitative and inductive. Using in-depth interviews, observation, and participation, the researchers immersed themselves in the activities of Unite CU branches to obtain a rich understanding both of what was said, but also what has been done. As a result of their expertise in trade unions and community organising, the researchers also acted as 'sounding boards' in discussions about direction and progress, and have taken part in training, presentations and workshops with Unite staff and UC members, as well as attended branch meetings over a seven-year period.

Initially, the aim of the research was to observe what was taking place on the ground as the parameters or direction of the community initiative had not yet been formulated. It was only after a structure for this section of Unite had been devised, funding allocated, and staff recruited, that a vision emerged for what Unite Community might be in practice. Once articulated by the union,

this allowed the development of research themes and questions; a key focus was motivation, and it was through in-depth biographical interviews that members were able to clearly articulate the values that drew them to become not only members, but activists as well. It was values that the research hoped to capture, which is why in-depth semi-biographical interviews³ were chosen as the most appropriate method (Rosenthal 2004). We were interested in people's stories and formative influences and this allowed interviewees the opportunity to reflect upon their life choices, decision-making, motivation, and routes into activism (Bron and Thunborg 2015). Interviewees were provided with an uninterrupted opportunity to explain how their commitment to trade unionism and social justice came about, whereby interviewees were encouraged to identify these issues through their own associative or chronological structure. This led to lengthy life history stories that framed the more recent decision to become active in Unite Community. We listened closely to each individual's narrative so as to understand if and how members developed a sense of injustice, and from where decisions to collectivise originated (Kelly 1998). In total, 48 interviews with lay members were undertaken with an overall average of 2 hours per interview (29 were retired, 10 unemployed, 7 employed, 1 student, 1 other), the average age was 59 and there was an almost even split between men and women, and 39 had previously been union members (often with other unions). We also conducted 18 interviews with Unite staff. Interviewees were selected either by direct face-to-face requests at branch meetings, or via email from lists of members in branches. We approached interviewees by explaining that we were interested in exploring member motivations for joining and becoming active within Unite Community.

In order to understand the purpose of the union's initiative, interviewees also included Unite Community co-ordinators—the paid organisers in each of the union's regions, and three senior officials with responsibilities for UC. A few of these were interviewed on more than one occasion. One senior staff member was interviewed multiple times, and met with on a regular basis over the last 10 years. In addition to interviews, there was participant observation at branch meetings and attendance at workshops/training over a three-year period in three different Unite regions. Field and interview notes were taken and where possible, recordings were made and transcribed verbatim. Data were inputted to text analysis software and codes applied to the interview transcripts according to a number of themes. Themes related to issues of motivation (e.g. political history, previous trade union experience, union identity/purpose, social justice, power, voice, etc.) alongside interviewee's biographical histories. From this, the literature on motivation for

³ We refer to the interviews as 'semi-biographical' because although interviews began as life stories of social justice motivation the interviewers later followed up with probing questions about involvement in Unite Community.

joining/activism, and social movement unionism, was re-read alongside data to help understand how decisions were made and how this led to activity when becoming part of Unite Community. There is not the space in an article of this length to explore the motivations of each of 48 interviewees in depth, but the accounts selected here provide what we feel are representative according to the coding of the transcripts. By focusing on the narratives from a few of the interviewees we are able to unpack individual stories in more detail. This allowed us to explore how social norms, individual values and a collective and class-based sense of belonging, have a profound influence on the willingness of people not in paid employment to join and be active in a trade union. The next section considers how these issues were articulated by the interviewees, and the extent to which people's identities, education, health, work status, personal and social life, politics, attitudes to unions, and historical factors affected their decision-making around becoming active members of UC.

Understanding union purpose and individual motivations for joining

It is important to begin by exploring what interviewees thought the purpose of UC to be. It may be assumed that this would be fairly obvious, but the union's publicity material was at the time somewhat opaque. The union's website stated 'Unite's mission is to organise people to strive for a society that places equality, dignity and respect above all else...Unite's community membership scheme brings together people from across our society. Those *not in employment* are welcomed into the union family, adding another dimension to our strength in thousands of workplaces across the UK and Ireland.' Yet this tell us little about activity, or how members can get involved, or how the branches function. So how did members articulate *their* understanding of what they were joining and the purpose of Unite Community?

Overall, most interviewees were able to describe UC as providing a space for people not in paid employment to be part of the union movement, but struggled to put into words how they would actually describe it to someone on the street who didn't have much understanding of unions. This is perhaps unsurprising if we take the common understanding, provided by the Webbs (1894: 1) of UK trade unionism as being about maintaining or improving the employment conditions of workers. How to explain why a person who was not in paid employment should join a trade union proved difficult for many interviewees: 'for quite a while I couldn't get my head around it and couldn't quite pin it down' said one member with a long history of trade union activism, and 'I can't honestly think of a proper answer' said another with a similar background. However, most were comfortable in describing the initiative as a community-based union for the unemployed or

the underemployed to engage in social justice campaigns. One interviewee described it as revisiting the mutual aid tradition of the 19th century trade unionism. While these understandings ‘fit’ with the vision from the originators of the initiative i.e. it provides a campaigning voice for the unemployed, many interviewees expressed the view that its purpose was/should also be for the *underemployed* and those workers without a traditional workplace, for example those employed in the ‘gig economy’ or forced into self-employment or in precarious jobs. One interviewee said, ‘it should provide a voice to people who have no defined workplace’, yet Unite’s rule book explicitly states that people who are working, or who are employed, should join the industrial side of the union—not Unite Community.

The political nature of UC was evident to interviewees where it was understood to be about organising unorganised groups of people in the community into politics through a non-partisan organisation. Others described UC as providing a home for those on the political left—aligned or otherwise—to undertake campaigning work. Dave, who was retired, but still doing some freelance trade union tutoring work had been a life-long union member—a GMB branch president, a Unison senior shop steward, and graduate from Ruskin College where he had studied economics. Dave made reference to the purpose of UC in providing support to the industrial side of Unite and this was also well-understood and articulated by many interviewees—indeed this was one of the most frequently mentioned reasons offered for its existence. ‘I think its main purpose really is to act as a continuation of the union movement and support for those still involved in industrial struggle, I think that’s what it was created for’ explained George, another retired life-long trade union member and political activist. This comment suggests that instead of the UC initiative being a new organisational cleavage, its activities ‘fit’ with the expectation of what unions *should* perhaps have always been about, and suggests a blurring of community-workplace battles was important for this member.

A different perspective was put forward by Linda who was one of the few interviewees without a background in trade unionism. Linda’s key motivation for joining Unite Community was to campaign against and organise around the government’s austerity measures and the impact it had upon communities. She expressed her initial reservations about joining: ‘I’ve always thought of unions as very blokeish, very male’, but hoped that more women and people from ethnic minorities, and disabled people would get involved to make it more representative of local communities. She envisaged Unite Community providing space for campaigning around

environmental and climate issues, housing and the sell-off of the National Health Service—being much more ‘broad-based’ and outward looking:

I think the unions need to rebrand, particularly to appeal to younger people and students, they need to move away from what’s happened in the past and go for a really big rebranding that will appeal to the students.

While austerity has been one of the major foci of Unite Community activity, environmental issues had not received the same degree of traction at the time of the research, nor has membership expanded much beyond the over 50s age group, suggesting its appeal is mainly to those with either past trade union activism, or people who have operated in similar structured campaigning organisations, or even those who have time on their hands.

Investigating motivation

Most interviewees had either had a history of active trade union membership or involvement in left wing politics—in many cases both. Twenty-nine of the 48 interviewees were retired and wanted to continue to be active in the union movement, but the opportunity to do so in their previous unions was limited to retired members’ sections⁴ that only focused on retirement issues, or were viewed as social sections. Unite Community offered something different to this as the focus was much broader and connected with members’ interests in campaigning around wider social justice issues.

The members we interviewed were strong advocates for social justice campaigning and this was the key motivation for most in becoming active within Unite Community. If we analyse the narratives from UC members there appears to be a clear ideological ‘fit’ that leans most towards Hyman’s (2001) class/society nexus in terms of the ideal type of union identity—i.e. as a social justice movement rather than just to regulate the employment relationship. For example, in telling his story, Mark drew upon his personal history to explain why, even though retired, he wanted to still be active in the union movement. He explained how despite not coming from a political family, or home that contained books, he had always had an interest in politics, considering himself as communist while still at school. In exploring where his commitment to social justice originated he recalled a school students strike in the mid 1970s and teachers’ strikes during that period that led to his radicalisation: ‘I remember them very well...I think the teachers would have been an influence, definitely’. His working life was spent in social services in local government where he became a

⁴ A number of interviewees held dual membership of unions – they were retired members of their previous unions as well as Unite Community members.

team manager. Prior to promotion he was ‘very active’ in the union but felt it difficult to maintain this position in his new role. Yet his commitment to the union remained strong:

I stayed with the union but it's a bit difficult when you're managing a team of people, it's kind of contradictory in a way. So that was a problem, but I maintained my union membership all the way through and never ever crossed a picket line.

Once finishing work, Mark had time on his hands and wanted to do something in the community— to do some more political work. He heard about Unite Community from someone who was interested in the housing activism taking place in his locality: ‘I thought, ok, that sounds good, and I liked the idea of the union actually doing something outside of the workplace, that was quite important for me’.

In another narrative, Katrina’s upbringing was very different to Mark’s in that she came from a privileged background and an intensely political family with generations of activism, both in the political sphere (Christian socialist) and in the union movement. She recalled being taken by her mother to picket lines at the age of 14, and drafted into leafleting against the National Front in the 1970s. These influences had a profound effect on her own views of social justice. Her involvement in progressive causes was considerable, from environmental organisations and international causes to legal support groups and trade unions. Katrina was 55, but not in work due to caring responsibilities, and had previously worked as a solicitor, and in a high street bank. Her motivation for joining UC was deeply ideological—there was a strong political attachment to collectivism as a way to effect change; ‘I believe in an alternative society, I want to help encourage other people—all of us—to work to change this society for an alternative social society.’

In terms of ideological commitment to activism feminism was the key influence in Eve’s route into social justice campaigning. She didn’t have much of a trade union background having only briefly been a member of a teaching union, and because the work that she currently did was not in a sector that was unionised. At the time of interview, she was acting as branch equality officer and, despite UC rules, was working, doing sessional counselling on a self-employed basis. Her background was a working-class family in the north of England with parents who were in the Labour Party and the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. Eve’s parents were the first in their families to go to university and she explained,

‘if you were of that generation and in that particular sort of transitional position—I suppose from a working-class—I think, in many cases, you took the responsibility very seriously to do something with it. They would

use the privilege that had been fought for and won and bestowed on them that they had a duty to give back and to make the world better.'

Although her parents didn't talk politics in the family home—'my parents had an idea that you don't brainwash your kids into a political attitudes'—there is nevertheless a sense that social justice values can be learned and absorbed through behaviour even if not expressed verbally. As a young child Eve was acutely conscious of, and a witness to, gender discrimination and violence against women. In her youth, she visited Greenham Common women's peace camp in the 1980s and worked at Women's Aid providing support for abused women. More recently her campaigning activities had been in the anti-globalisation movements, but Eve was looking for something more stable, 'less random, more coherent, systematic and strategic', an organisation that wasn't a political party with a centralist structure. Something that was inclusive of the spectrum of the radical left;

Because of the campaigning that I'm doing, I felt more like the campaigning was actually my central occupation and the other stuff is what I have to do to put bread on the table. So really, I want to be in a union that reflects what I do rather than where I get my income from. That, ultimately, is why I'm in Unite Community.

In this powerful quote Eve suggests a different form of unionism to the accepted view that it is a particular workplace and occupation that forges the bond with a union. Rather, in this case, it is a wider sense of being part of the working-class, whereby the union is a home for political praxis, but in a larger and more transversal social movement. In Eve's case, it was issues related to the local community and social reproduction (e.g. claimants' rights and housing) rather than external support for industrial disputes that determined her affiliation with the union. As such, Eve was not really looking for a 'trade' union in the traditional sense, she was looking for an established organisation structure with a resource base to help her engage with and propagate her political beliefs. In essence, her motivation stems more from wanting to be part of a 'social movement organisation'.

The retiree members interviewed for this research most likely would have started their working lives in the late 1960s and 1970s at a time when around half of all employees were trade union members, collective bargaining was the norm covering 75-80 per cent of workers, and unions had considerably more power, and were thus able to win significant concessions than today. As a result, normative influences at workplace level would have meant many workers came to see union

membership as a *social custom*—an ‘obligation’⁵ to conform—or perhaps a concern not to be labelled a ‘free-rider’. But also, the *material value of collectivism* was much more evident in this period as unions were able to extract increases in wages from employers to the benefit of members. Yet, while social custom or instrumentalism may have been an influence on notions of collectivism in early working lives what was evident from the life stories articulated here was that political attitudes and individual social values and ideals were *now* the key motivating factors in union joining and activism for this group of members. What do these biographical narratives of UC members tell us about the potential for a much broader community-based *unionism*, and about union purpose more broadly? Can unions ‘capture’ new membership by focusing more on social justice activism alongside, across and together with industrial unionism? The next section will explore these issues.

Rethinking union purpose: opportunities for growth?

Unite’s introduction of a community membership provides an opportunity to question the *purpose* of trade unionism. The core business of most trade unions is largely to collectively bargain on behalf of their members and to represent them when they have problems at work, and it thus can largely be considered to be instrumentalist. Attempting to redress the imbalance of power in the employment relationship is a key union activity, but unions also have a long history of ideological commitment to wider social justice issues many of which do not have a direct impact upon what happens in the workplace. This resonates with Kaufman’s (2008) notion of an ‘original industrial relations paradigm’ that embraced the employment relationship beyond the world of union and management rules and institutions. However, we know from the literature that, for most workers, concerns for wider social issues are *not* the primary motivations for joining trade unions, and few members are involved in this aspect of union activity, or have knowledge of union campaigns on political or environmental issues, for example. This maybe because people do not associate trade unions with this form of activity and thus they maintain an instrumental approach to membership.

It has been suggested elsewhere (Holgate 2018) that Unite, in its development of the Unite Community initiative, is perhaps attempting to re-define its own union purpose in opening up the social justice/campaigning element of unionism to incorporate a wider constituency beyond that of employed workers. If this were the case we may see the form of unionism starting to shift from a key focus on instrumentalism to a more altruistic model of collectivism and social unionism-type activity—a move toward the societal aspect of unionism as suggested by Hyman (2001) in his work

⁵ Indeed, in many workplaces there was an ‘obligation’ to conform as trade union membership was compulsory where a ‘closed shop’ was in place. This meant that union membership was a pre-condition of employment.

on union identity (the degree of a union's focus between market, class and society). Whether or not this is the case in terms of Unite (or perhaps too early to tell), it would nevertheless appear from the interviews undertaken that a key motivating factor for joining the union, for these members was precisely the opportunity for the union to be a vehicle for broad *working class-based* social justice campaigning in local community, according to a notion of the 'working class' that goes beyond formal participation in the employment market (and thus comprise retired members, unpaid carers and jobseekers). The ideological commitment to unionism, went deeper than this, however, as it was deeply political.

There were many opportunities for social justice campaigning where Unite Community members lived, but to do this work under the umbrella of a trade union was central to the stories told by the interviewees, that is, it was important to them to bring their social justice campaigns in their local communities into the 'home of labour'—again crossing the falsely rigid boundary of workplace and community issues (see Alberti 2016). While happy to be part of the 'Unite family' of 1.4 million members, and all that offered in terms of *inter alia*, credibility, structure, resources, media coverage, what mattered most was that the campaigning work was done, and *seen to be done*, by the trade union movement. Most interviewees had been members of other unions, but their ideological commitment was to trade unionism and the effectiveness of collectivism *per se* rather than identification or loyalty with any particular union (or indeed their predecessor unions). The interview with Linda, in particular, suggested how trade unions might create a form of organisation alongside their traditional centralist structures whereby there was a looser network of social movement organisations, working within and alongside unions in local communities.

Interviewees reported how involvement in Unite had created a sense of belonging for them and provided a space for political activism that wasn't available elsewhere. While many of the interviewees were seasoned, political campaigners (often as members of the Labour party or other left political parties), it was revealing that despite many already having a political 'home', interviewees felt that Unite was providing a different and more conducive space in which to form collaborations around broader social justice concerns/campaigns that went beyond the traditional class politics of political parties. As one member remarked, 'Unite has something to offer that political parties can't', and this sentiment, expressed by another member, was consistent throughout the branches the researchers talked to: 'we pride ourselves on being non-sectarian, we've got Socialist Party, we've got Socialist Worker, we've got Green, we've got the Communist Party, Morning Star readers, some Labour Party members—we're a real mix and we work really

well together'. The interpretation of this finding is that UC branches are creating an activist organising space for local campaigning, but unlike political parties UC is able to draw people from different parties to collaborate—thus widening the scope of activists willing to take part in campaigns.

It is evident that the UC members interviewed, demonstrate an ideological commitment to collective activism in a way that is at odds with the majority of 'ordinary'⁶ Unite members in the industrial sectors of the union. Unite is no different to most unions in that the great majority of members don't play an active role within their unions—yet if people are motivated to join a trade union for non-instrumental reasons, and there is perhaps an untapped residual commitment to collectivism in a section of society, this can only be of benefit to trade unions looking to grow and develop greater societal influence. For example, UC members have been involved in/led campaigns against zero hours contracts in Sports Direct, against precarious low-wage hospitality work in TGI Friday, as well as campaigning against the government's workfare, and representing claimants at benefit sanctions hearings.

As was noted earlier, Unite's community membership is (officially) only available to people who are not in paid employment, so this specifically precludes paid workers, and indeed Unite members in the industrial side of the union. Yet, providing opportunities for community-based campaigning in the way Unite has done could act as an effective vehicle for the recruitment and engagement of members within their unions, helping to convert non-members into members and crucially, for a union wanting to grow, to convert members into activists. The interviews showed how people who are partially in employment/underemployed, retired, on benefits, or who are part-time self-employed, or students can play an important role as union advocates in the community and in workplaces, strengthening solidarities and building transversal alliances (e.g. between welfare claimants and service workers, zero hours and permanent workers).

Concluding comments

This study has provided an opportunity to reflect upon why people who are not in paid employment are motivated to join a union, and become active within it. It has allowed for a rethinking about the purpose and possible future direction of trade unionism in the current period where labour is much less organised than it once was. Unite's community initiative offers the

⁶ We make a distinction here between 'ordinary' union members, and lay activists such as branch officers and union representatives on the basis that the latter two groups are more likely to be of an ideological disposition.

potential for a reimagining of trade unionism in the way that unions could organise in such a way to include a much wider demographic who are interested in being active in social justice campaigns. While the primary purpose of trade unionism should remain to defend the interests of workers, a more expansive, hence inclusive definition of worker, that includes precarious and temporary workers, those forced into bogus 'self-employment', those with multiple workplaces and those with none, could, as has been shown from the interviews in this research, perhaps, also include those not in paid employment, recognising the changing and fluid nature of and involvement with work and employment over the life course and of forms of union motivation and social activism based on wider notion of the working class.

With less secure employment, increasing self-employment, and the growth of the gig economy a greater community focus could, as we have seen with Unite Community, widen the organizing focus and at the same time provide a non-party political home for people who are motivated to engage in community and national campaigns around broader social justice issues. In this sense, this model of trade unionism could restore the link between work and community that was more evident in the past, and in doing so could adopt the 'whole-worker organising' approach envisaged by Jane McAlevey (2016) in her book 'No Shortcuts, Organising for Power in the new Gilded Age' where the union is actively operating to harness power in *and* outside of the workplace. Such a model could provide a focus for people who would not normally work together to collectivise in their local communities because, as we know, participation in social movements can lead to a process of socialization where feelings of commitment to an organisation or cause can develop, and where loyalty to others deepens as a consequence (Passy 2001). Unions, in adopting such an approach, could thus use this to their advantage in terms of utilising 'non-worker' members as advocates and activists for the union movement, recreating a culture whereby unions were, once again, embedded in communities, and playing a greater role in social and community politics, hence responding to Kaufman's (2008) call for a return to an original industrial relations paradigm.

The aim of bridging the workplace and the larger community, as reflected in the words of Unite's internal report on the Unite Community initiative has, in part, shown there is potential here for incorporating industrial and community activism and, at the same time, highlights the false dichotomy between community and the workplace organising that has been written about elsewhere (Alberti 2016).

To conclude, it is understood that many union members are more engaged actively in their communities than they are in their unions, so in theory there is potential to broaden the base of trade unionism should unions decided to invest in a community organising approach. However, it is acknowledged that this widening has only developed so far in that the activists that have been attracted to Unite Community are, in the main, over 55 years old with a history of trade union involvement. To *really* widen the scope of union activity, Unite Community may rather need to attract people from a much wider demographic, and spectrum of precariousness (including the new generations of intermittent and gig workers) as it originally envisaged when the initiative was conceived. However, in doing so, the union—which is wedded to the Labour Party through its political affiliation—may find that a ‘rainbow coalition’ of future members may begin to challenge the union’s one-party allegiance, or conversely, this may become a stumbling block for the union in the growth of its community membership.

The research has also shown that there is an untapped residual commitment to the ideology of collectivism through trade unionism and people holding these sentiments are motivated to (re)join if asked and provided with the resources for social justice campaigning in their communities. Properly resourced, with leadership support to spread such initiatives through the entire union, the advantages to a community organising model, in addition to industrial organising, are threefold: increased membership and ability to hold onto this through a person’s life course, enhanced legitimacy from both members and the wider public, and greater resources upon which to draw both industrially and via political campaigning from increased capacity of member involvement. This, however, would require a radical rethinking and re-imagining of the purpose of trade unionism, restructured imaginatively in such a way to meet the needs of workers and ‘non-workers’. This radical thinking in renewing trade unionism becomes necessary in a world where the nature of work and employment is changing so quickly and so deeply, and in ways, it seems, not fully realised by some leaders of trade union movements.

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