

## Unions and Communities – a discussion note.<sup>1</sup>

- a submission to the Inquiry into the Future of Civil Society in the UK and Ireland

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### Introduction

This discussion note gives some examples of the ways in which UK unions have sought to work with communities and community based organisations and explores some of the issues involved. Although, in principle, both sides usually want there to be a strong relationship this is not always easy to achieve in practice. Some within community organisations have accused unions of being insular or short sighted, unwilling to take a broader view of social justice than unions' workplace concerns. Some within the union movement have accused community organisations of being undemocratic, concerned only with their immediate issues and unwilling to help union campaigns. Yet the relationship has been enduring. There is a long history of mutual involvement, with many successful campaigns (and some less so) and there are signs of a current resurgence of interest on both sides. This discussion note aims to raise some of the issues and prompt discussion; it is not a statement of TUC policy.

### Trades Union Councils

One place to open the discussion is with Trades union Councils (or Trades Councils as they are often known) which are intended to be the voice of the union movement in the community. Originally set up in the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century they are based in towns and cities across the UK. Local union branches affiliate, send delegates and money. The Trades Council usually meets every month or two and their purpose is to get involved in community campaigns, raise the profile of trade unionism in the locality and rally support in the community for union campaigns. In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century they were a strong part of the movement. In the 1926 General Strike they were the mobilising force which ran essential services and organised the strike in many parts of the country. But in recent years they have declined. There are now only 125 registered with the TUC (though there may be a few others which are not registered) and of those only about 80 are substantially active in their communities. There had been a steady decline in registered numbers to some 110, the low point in 2003, but numbers are now slowly beginning to rise.

Some Trades Councils are famous. The Brent Trades Council ran the Grunwick dispute in 1979. Although that did not succeed in gaining union recognition for the largely locally based Asian workforce, the Trades Council did succeed in organising mass pickets for several weeks and highlighted the inadequacy of the recognition law. The Cheltenham Trades Council organised the annual rallies at GCHQ. Battersea and Wandsworth Trades Council set up the Workers Beer Company which runs major catering operations at, for example, Glastonbury; and have set up a workers pub – the Bread and Roses – in Clapham.

But it has to be admitted that these are rare examples of major activity. Most Trades Councils are attended by only a few, often retired, stalwarts. A diminishing number of union branches are affiliated, partly as a result of the smaller number of unions due to mergers, so finances are weak. Each Trades Council is entitled to apply for a grant of £300 from the TUC but less than half do so. Trades Councils are organised into County Associations which in turn are entitled to representation on the regional TUC but relations between them and union reps at Regional TUCs are often variable. Unions can feel trades councils pursue their own agendas and neither represent their communities nor the movement. Trades Council delegates are often resentful that unions are not more supportive. On the other hand Trades Councils have organised valuable support for recent union campaigns including the closures and cuts at

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Peugeot in Ryton or Friction Dynamix in South Wales. They have also helped in many community campaigns for example against hospital cuts and closures and have played a leading role in many anti-racism campaigns.

They do these things better in the U.S.A. where the equivalent body is the Community Labour Council. Typically they are larger and a lot more active. For example the Rochester CLC website proclaims that "union members live and work in our communities, our children go to school, we shop locally, and attend church / synagogue. Union workers in some areas are stereotyped as being paid too much, work fewer hours, and cause problems. Delegates of CLC's will become involved in community projects, assist our communities, and show that union members are no different than any other member of the community. On a political note, the long term goal is for all unions represented by CLC to agree to support a candidate so that our voice as union members is loud and strong." Like many CLC's it supports local union campaigns, it organises local pickets against Wal-Mart and Safeway's; and it supports local political candidates - which is a much bigger part of many CLC's activity than it is for Trades Councils.

Why the difference and why have Trades Councils declined? One major factor is that few workplaces in the UK now draw all their workers from a particular locality and there are few localities where most of the workers are employed by one employer or even in one sector. Historically some of the strongest Trades Councils used to be in South Wales or based around mining villages, railway towns or in areas where an industry like textiles or agriculture provided the common experience which linked work and home/community life. The decline in that kind of strong traditional working class culture (which has also seen the decline in e.g. working mens clubs) has gone hand in hand in the UK with a rise in travel to work distances, greater mobility, more disposable income and leisure time. It is arguable that these patterns are less evident in the U.S.A. where working time has not declined, many working families have not seen any rise in their real disposable income and there is still a strong relationship between work and community in many towns and cities.

Another factor may be that CLCs can campaign for particular local candidates. Within Trades Councils there are often strongly held political views but it is difficult for them overtly to campaign in the same way. This is partly because any expenditure would have to be counted against affiliated unions' political funds; partly because, once any electoral campaign had begun, Trades Council spending would also have to be counted within candidates campaign limits; and partly because there is no simple mechanism for Trades Councils to agree on a particular candidate. Their affiliated unions may have different views. All (with rare exceptions) would of course support the Labour Candidate but many would differ on whether and how to get involved in their campaign, especially at local Council level. It is arguable that the absence of this role in local politics is a major weakness of Trades Councils. It is notable that one of the most successful areas of Trades Council activity is in campaigning against BNP and similar candidates in local elections though for the legal reasons above this is usually described as (indeed it is) campaigning against anti-racism.

### **Community Organisations**

Turning from unions' work with communities to look at community organisations' work with unions, there are several successful and interesting examples. The Citizens Organising Foundation is an umbrella group of three (south, east and west) London based Citizens groups, with another recently founded in Birmingham. Of these, The East London Communities Organisation (TELCO) is arguably the most successful. It is a diverse alliance of active citizens and community leaders involving over 35 faith groups, schools, student organisations, union branches and charities, across 5 East London boroughs.

TELCO's aims are "action for the common good and to nurturing leaders from all backgrounds" (Telco website). TELCO claims it has secured historic success with its living wage campaign, fighting poverty pay in the capital. (Ken Livingstone set up a Low Pay Commission which recommended a much higher rate than the national SMW.) It claims recent victories in Canary Wharf and the City, as well as at Queen Mary University,

persuading high profile organisations to pay the London Living Wage. Last year, TELCO claims to have secured a series of ethical commitments for the London Olympics, including training, jobs for local people and the Living Wage.

Some of this is contested by some unions, which believe TELCO claims too much credit and that, for example, it was union pressure which gained the London Living Wage. It is certainly true that many union branches are affiliated to TELCO, particularly from Unison and Unifi (now within Amicus) representing public sector and city workers. However it is not clear what role these union branches play in many TELCO campaigns beyond being generally supportive. On the issue of low pay, the London living wage has no statutory force and some unions are sceptical on the extent to which TELCO can help to implement it. The TGWU are currently engaged in a major organising drive to recruit cleaners and other building services workers in Canary Wharf. While TELCO has provided general support the lead has very clearly been taken by the TGWU. On the other hand there is no doubting TELCO's strong local base in some of the east end communities, in particular among Muslims. Whatever the occasional irritation and friction over particular tactics and claims, there is warm support for TELCO, in general, from unions nationally, in particular TGWU and Unison.

Another example is Kalayan, an organisation originally of Filipino domestic workers which has grown to include other nationalities. It is less active today but in the late nineties had strong T&G, GMB and other union support and had some success in highlighting examples of exploitation and abuse, though unions have not succeeded in organising many workers in the sector.

### **Community**

The most radical and ambitious attempt to forge strong union/community links is that of the Iron and Steel Trades Confederation. Until 2005 it was a union of steelworkers largely based in S Wales and the old steelmaking areas like Corby or Sheffield with high assets but declining membership. In 2005 it relaunched itself as Community, a new "union for life" that aims to serve its members both at work and where they live, believing "it is the responsibility of a modern union to serve its members both at work and at home". Membership has stabilised at around 30,000 (down from over 100,000 in the late 80's) but is still overwhelmingly based in the steel industry. Efforts to recruit new kinds of workers (such as those in the gambling industry) are proving slow going. The Union is however seeking to present a new kind of image, highlighting for example its community work such as help to redundant ex-steelworkers, their families and communities with, for example, skills training, regeneration and housing advice.

A different kind of community-based campaign is that in Leicester launched by KFAT - the union for workers of all kinds in Knitwear, Footwear and Apparel (now part of Community). The campaign sought to organise predominantly Asian (often Hindu women originally from India) workers who worked long hours in "family" firms on sweatshop wages in poor conditions. The Statutory Minimum Wage was widely ignored and KFAT sought to find examples and tell SMW inspectors- the workers themselves were often afraid to do so. The campaign also sought to organise the workers through their communities, using a network of local ethnic and faith based community organisations. It had some substantial success, raising awareness of the SMW and helping to organise some of the firms.

### **The Third Sector**

This category (seen by some as a title somewhat arbitrarily bestowed by New Labour) covers the entire range of voluntary, community and charitable organisations which together employ some 2M people. Unions have traditionally had an ambivalent attitude to many of these organisations for two main reasons. First, charitable work is sometimes seen as a poor substitute for the state taking responsibility for delivering properly funded and organised welfare services; and second, many third sector organisations are poor employers and some positively anti-union. On the other hand many unions do organise in the third sector, Unison for example claims some 80,000 members typically in housing associations or the larger

charities. Many other unions will also have substantial membership including the TGWU, Amicus and GMB. A major current theme in union/community organisation relations is the Labour Government's current active consideration of some public services (such as Job Centre Plus) being handed over to the third sector. Unions such as PCS have been very critical of the third sector, highlighting poor governance arrangements, lack of accountability and poor services. The teaching unions are unanimously highly critical of plans to hand schools over to local trusts and academies.

Interestingly, this has NOT led to clashes between community-based organisations and unions as might have been thought. If anything it has spurred unions to work more closely with communities in order to, for example, protect local schools against the threat of an Academy being imposed. Similarly, Unison actively supports "defend council housing" a group lobbying against the transfer of housing assets from councils to e.g. housing associations or arms length management organisations (ALMOs). It has thousands of members working in local authorities and thousands working in ALMOs and Housing Associations so has to strike a balance, campaigning not against Housing Associations in principle but for greater local democracy in giving tenants a greater say in any transfer decision. Moreover very many third sector organisations are highly critical of the idea that they should take over public services. Their umbrella body, The National Council of Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) has signed a charter, along with the TUC and many other third sector bodies which does not support any such extension of the third sector and argues for more limited third sector role, playing to its strengths of flexibility and responsiveness to local need. The Association of Chief Executives of Voluntary Organisations (ACEVO) takes a more positive view of the sector's ability to take over public services but is very much a minority view. On the ground, there are far more community groups campaigning against Academies, against hospital closures and against social housing transfers than groups campaigning for them – which is both cause and effect of union alliances.

### Looking Ahead

There are signs that unions are rediscovering the value of strong links with communities. For example the recent influx of migrant workers has spurred many unions to work with migrants' community organisations in order to organise them. For many Poles (who comprise two thirds of all the recent EU accession migrants) the local Catholic Church will be a focal point. Others have coalesced around Polish Clubs or even Polish delicatessens whose noticeboards show adverts for rooms or jobs. Unions seeking to organise migrants, who are typically in low paid exploitative jobs in agriculture, building, cleaning or hospitality need to find activists who speak both English and Polish. Organising starts by listening to the immediate concerns of the workers which may be as much about their accommodation as their work. The unions have recruited Poles who speak some English, organised meetings after Sunday morning Mass, put up notices in the delicatessens in Polish, held meetings and advice surgeries in Polish Clubs and printed advice leaflets on welfare and housing, as well as employment, rights. Unions are seeking to forge strong links with the multiplicity of (sometimes warring) Polish community organisations. A recent TUC delegation went to Warsaw to give advice at a jobs fair. The GMB has organised a branch just for Poles in Southampton. All this activity has sprung up in the last 18 months and is growing rapidly. SIPTU, which is an Irish general union (similar to the TGWU) aimed at and says it has achieved 15% membership among migrants since that was their proportion of the Irish labour force.

Another recent example of Union/Community engagement was Gate Gourmet. Several hundred workers at this airline meals company based outside Heathrow were summarily sacked in August 2005 but, after a very high profile TGWU campaign the vast majority got their jobs back. The workers were almost all Sikhs, many originally from the same area of the Punjab, who lived in Southall, West London. Their community worked very closely with the union in the campaign, helping with translation and meeting facilities. The local Sikh temple was the only place big enough for mass meetings. The TGWU has recently recruited over 100 new union organisers as part of a major national campaign and many of these are from ethnic communities, chosen for their ability and experience in working with communities.

### Discussion

It is striking how many examples of successful community/union links involve both workers who predominantly live in a close community and faith based groups – for example the catholic and Methodist church, Muslim groups and Sikhs. Union meetings have frequently been held in churches, mosques and temples. One reason may perhaps be a shared (by unions and faith groups) broad commitment to social justice (rather than, say, a narrow concern about a particular issue); another may be the importance of faith to poorer workers, the unskilled and recent migrants – all “vulnerable” workers who are often the focus of union campaigns.

Some argue that union/community relations should be far stronger and see the weakness of e.g. Trades Councils as further evidence of the decline of trade unionism – ignored by the vibrant and growing third sector. Others see it differently, arguing that bread and butter union issues like pay and conditions will rarely need to involve the community but when they do (for example over major crises like closures) both sides readily come together. Many union activists and officers have had previous experience in community activism and many are often also active outside work in their community and faith based organisations. It can be argued that the fact that unions and community organisations are not always working closely together does not mean they do not have a strong underlying relationship. Many in unions also see the trade union movement as stronger and often much better organised than the often-volatile community sector.

Some American unions argue for the concept of “community unionism”, believing that unions should not be defined by the willingness of employers to recognise them and should wage their campaigns as much “in the court of public opinion” as in the workplace. Amanda Tattersall, an academic based at Sydney University, working in America, has argued for a concept of community unionism<sup>2</sup> which can operate in three ways:

- Unions in coalition with community organisations
- Unions and community groups working together in a broad alliance to advance community or class interest or the interests of people with a specific identity
- Place-specific strategies where unions seek to work across a specific area, using local support to enhance union influence.

While that is a helpful framework, the sheer variety and complexity of potential relationships and campaigns makes any attempt at theorising difficult. For example another way of looking at the union/community relationship is simply to imagine a typical x/y graph with one axis being the degree of instrumentality/narrowness/specificity of the issue and the other axis how broadly based is the union/community organisation. While there would be a broad correlation between the two factors there would be many exceptions.

The December 2006 issue of the British Journal of Industrial Relations, timely as ever, is devoted to discussion of “New Actors” in Industrial relations, including community organizations. There are articles on the USA and Australian experience but much less on the UK. This may be significant. It seems that there is a more lively tradition of Union/Community engagement, particularly in the USA, born of the Civil Rights movement, a stronger culture of anti-unionism from employers and different patterns of employment law and labour mobility.

Overall, it is clear that, while “traditional” (i.e. Trades Council) forms of institutional community unionism may have declined in the UK, there are many examples of strong joint campaigns and new forms are springing up (some of these learning from the USA experience) such as community boycotts, shareholder or pension trustee lobbying, living wage campaigns, viral e-mail campaigns and web based campaigning – all using some of the opportunities presented

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<sup>2</sup> A little help from our friends, Amanda Tattersall, 2006, paper posted on Union Ideas Network website.

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by new forms of IT communication and some of the skills and energies of new younger activists. The TUCs Organising Academy aims to recruit and train new union activists with these skills and has recently launched a successful course aimed at teaching existing union officials and activists about community unionism. Unions are becoming more aware of the need to maintain good links with community groups, and the need to understand their issues and offer support. Without that strong relationship there will be little basis on which to call for community support when unions need it. It is difficult to plan or predict exactly how community unionism will develop. It is likely to be more fluid and variable than in the past. It will never be the foundation of union organisation – that will always remain the workplace – but building strong alliances and learning from each other will be crucial to union renewal.

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