

# **Unions, learning, migrant workers and trade union “revitalisation” in the UK**

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**Dr Stephen Mustchin**

**University of Manchester**

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**Dr. Stephen Mustchin**

## Introduction

This article explores the linkages between two key areas of activity that trade unions in the UK have been increasingly involved in over recent years: firstly, involvement in the provision of training and education for their memberships; and secondly, organising activity that has the purpose of raising union membership and representation levels among migrant workers. The paper is based on primarily qualitative research which sought to address the wider relationship between union involvement in learning and union “revitalisation” strategies. Much of the emphasis in the literature on union “revitalisation” relates to union organising strategies aiming to increase membership levels overall and to attract demographic groups that have historically been underrepresented among unionised workers (Behrends et al, 2004; Milkman, 2006). Organising strategies that have involved non-union actors and sought to involve other campaigning organisations under the rubric of “community unionism” have also had some prominence within this literature on union “revitalisation”, both in the UK (Wills, Simms, 2004; McBride, Greenwood, 2009) and the US (Fine, 2006; Milkman, 2006). An extensive literature has also developed focusing on the relationship between union involvement in learning and broader processes of “revitalisation” (Forrester, 2001; 2004; Moore, Wood, 2004; Moore, 2009; Munro, Rainbird 2004; Wallis et al, 2005; cf McIlroy, 2008). Union involvement in learning has been highlighted as having the potential to attract “new” constituencies to union membership, including migrant and BME workers (Moore, Wood, 2004; Rainbird, Munro, 2003). This involvement in learning is premised on a degree of cooperation with the state over accessing funding and the setting of priorities, and so a range of competing processes involving actors with differing interests are apparent within this field of activity.

There is a burgeoning literature on union organising and migrant workers, in particular since the accession of eight central and eastern European states to the EU in 2005 and the subsequent influx of workers from these countries to the UK (Anderson

et al, 2007; Fitzgerald, 2009; Fitzgerald, Hardy, 2009). While this increased academic and practitioner focus on migrant workers and their relationship to unions has been taking place, unions have also been heavily involved in state fostered programmes seeking to improve access to education and training for their members. The relationship between this activity around learning and concurrent strategies aiming to organise migrant workers has as yet been relatively less explored (c.f Heyes, 2009; Moore, 2009: 16). Problems highlighted in linking the learning and organising agendas include the limitations of working with employers in a context of insecure employment, as well as instabilities built into the changing criteria for accessing state funding (Perrett, Martinez Lucio, 2008: 624). The linkages unions have made between these two ostensibly separate areas of work raise important questions around the services unions are able to provide to migrant workers and which may therefore attract them to union membership. The role of union initiated learning activity within networks of organisations that may be conceptualised under the broad heading of “community unionism” is also an important one to consider. This allows for an analysis of the role of the state (in the form of state agencies and public funds) within union organising activity that often emphasises autonomy, grassroots activity and bottom up approaches to securing social justice and improved employment conditions for workers. A variety of contradictions are therefore apparent in the union activity focused on within this article, in terms of nominally bottom up, membership driven union activity which has been supported and maintained to an extent through funding and support made available through unions working with the state and its agencies. Key findings from this research include, firstly, apparent tensions within unions, between unions, and between unions and the TUC over learning, the allocation of resources and using learning to support organising; secondly, issues arise between unions, their traditional workplace focus and attempts to engage with community organisations and campaigns; and thirdly, problems arise from the contingent nature of state funding and the priorities determined by government that may counter or contradict the interests of unions and workers in relation to learning and the wider question of union representation and their regulatory role.

The overall research question addressed by this paper is: what relationship does union involvement in learning have with organising strategies attempting to stimulate membership levels and activism among migrant workers? A subsidiary question to this is: how is this work affected by the structures and internal politics of

unions and the influence of the state? The paper is structured in four main sections – firstly, the relevant literature is discussed, followed by a description of the methods used and data collected, followed by a discussion of empirical research, discussion and conclusions. The empirical data includes case studies that demonstrate a range of significant outcomes from union involvement in learning and its integration with broader union organising strategies and campaigns. However, numerous complexities and tensions are apparent in this activity that derive from the characteristics of the target workforces themselves, difficulties associated with internal union politics, and the problematic nature of unions working (to an extent) in tandem with the state, in this case mainly through funding made available through the Union Learning Fund (ULF).

In a highly critical discussion of union involvement in learning, McIlroy (2008) dismisses possible links between learning and union “revitalisation”:

The evidence produced for the impact of learning on activism, recruitment and organising does not transcend the prima facie implausibility of these courses as a substantial ingredient in revitalisation...If learning constitutes a significant route to revitalisation, it is difficult to comprehend why the TUC does not qualitatively expand courses which address revitalisation rather than relying on the side effects of courses which do not. (2008: 305)

The funding made available, and the consequent influence of the state, is highlighted by McIlroy as determining the arguably narrow focus of some of the learning being promoted through union auspices. It is argued that, because of these extraneous constraints and relatively weak union influence over learning within this framework, it is unlikely that unions will be able to assert a more radical agenda that contributes towards organising processes and, by extension, processes of union “revitalisation”. A further issue arises around unions adopting a more market-oriented focus based increasingly on service delivery and a more customer oriented approach, and the intersection of this agenda with more traditional union concerns around the workplace and more universal notions of class are important to consider when analysing developments such as increasing union involvement in learning (Martinez Lucio, Perrett, 2009: 331). The paper makes a timely contribution to ongoing debates in the industrial relations literature on these issues and builds on the extant literature both empirically and theoretically, firstly by focusing on areas of union activity that have been arguably underemphasised in academic discussion (namely the relationship

between union involvement in learning and organising strategies focused on migrant workers); and secondly by addressing wider questions raised by union activity that emphasises self organisation from the bottom up that is, paradoxically, supported and facilitated to an extent by trade union and state bureaucracies.

### Union “revitalisation” and union involvement in learning

A range of different strategies have been adopted by trade unions which share the common goals of reversing declining membership levels and reduced influence as measured by bargaining coverage and political status. These strategies include organising; organisational restructuring and union mergers; coalition building with social movements; partnerships with employers; political action; and international links (Frega, Kelly, 2003: 9). Strategies adopted by unions aimed at revitalising their fortunes have additionally been conceptualised as consisting of four broad dimensions; firstly, the “membership dimension” concerns efforts to increase union membership, density and the composition of membership; an “economic dimension”, including bargaining power and the ability of unions to impact on the distribution of wealth; a “political dimension”, or unions’ ability to influence the policy process “through traditional or innovative methods”; and an “institutional dimension”, concerning the internal dynamics and organisational structures of unions and their capacity to adjust to new strategies and contexts (Behrends et al, 2004: 20-22). “Revitalisation” is seen by the latter authors as an ongoing and incomplete process, rather than one with a fixed end point. The overall study from which this paper is drawn addresses the impact of union involvement in learning on each of these four dimensions of union “revitalisation”. This paper specifically addresses the membership and institutional dimensions of change within unions, and the relative position of union involvement in learning to these processes.

The organising model of union activity (e.g Bronfenbrenner et al, 1998) is chiefly concerned with unions “shifting priorities away from servicing current members and towards organizing new ones” (Milkman, Voss, 2004a: 7). This is to be achieved in part by encouraging members to handle shopfloor problems, freeing up union staff to organise externally, and through “building programs that train members to participate fully in the work of external organising” (Ibid). This directly addresses the “membership dimension” of union revitalisation (Behrends et al, 2004: 20). An

important facet of this dimension is change in the composition of union membership, based on the notion that unions need to reach out to new constituencies in order to gain strength.

Union activity such as servicing and the provision of training can, then, support and contribute to organising strategies if they are directed towards greater participation and a move away from an officer-led model. In the US, the adoption of organising has had mixed results, with some indication that notions of engaging members and building commitment to the union had given way to a narrow focus on resource allocation, recruitment and the top-down management of campaigns, so that the problems inherent to the servicing model, “namely a disengaged apathetic membership, are exacerbated.” (Hurd, 2004: 11-12) There is, then, seemingly a need within organising campaigns to ensure activists are adequately trained and equipped to participate effectively, and so union involvement in learning has a potentially highly significant contribution to make towards broader processes of union organising. There is a contradiction inherent to this intersection of learning provision and organising, as the former is likely to be led by union officers with state support, which counters the notion of organising developing in a more autonomous, member-led fashion. Tensions between marketised service provision by unions and more traditional concerns relating to notions of class and the workplace are also apparent within this activity (Martinez Lucio, Perrett, 2009:331), and are developed further in the analysis below. The utilisation of sources of support such as the ULF and the focus of particular services on specific, vulnerable groups of workers (and especially the relative effectiveness of these approaches) demonstrates the extent to which new union strategies have been effective or otherwise in organising within “new” constituencies of workers, and also any effect that sources of state support may have had on improving the representation of vulnerable workers in an otherwise largely deregulated system.

### Unions and migrant workers

Migrant workers as a group have been identified as a constituency that could contribute to the revitalisation of this “membership dimension” – the role of migrant worker organising as a means of revitalising unions has been highlighted in some of the US literature on the subject (Milkman, 2006; Fantasia, Voss, 2004: 120/121). A

central facet of these campaigns has involved engaging other organisations in the community including churches, political organisations, student organisations and similar bodies “to participate in labor’s struggles and to undertake their own campaigns to improve the dismal state of low-wage workers in the United States” (Ibid). Fine’s (2006) study of immigrant worker centres in the US, although broadly positive, identifies the weaknesses within the worker centre phenomenon including financial instability, unstable memberships, and some suspicion on behalf of established unions due to a lack of control over these new movements which may be seen as rivals – the practicalities and political dynamics of community based organising are far from unproblematic (2006: 252). Migrant workers have, though, been integral to the development of these centres, and the relationship between these groups of workers, worker centres and the established labour movement is a key dynamic that needs to be analysed further in the case of the UK.

The labour movement in the UK has seen a range of historical tensions over immigration, particularly since 1945: “In some senses, the labour movement led by example in challenging the politics of racism; in others, it continued to replicate the institutional racism which had been constructed over some hundred years” (Lunn, 2007: 87). In recent years, there has been a concerted effort by many unions and the TUC to engage more with migrant workers as a constituency. Migrant workers frequently face widespread social and economic exclusion, often working long hours, multiple jobs, and facing problems outside of work relating to housing, welfare and more (Datta et al, 2007: 425/426). They were also found in the latter piece of research to be more likely to belong to faith based organisations rather than civil society organisations including trade unions.

Migrant workers within this study chiefly consist of more recently arrived workers from within the EU and non-commonwealth countries, as opposed to the more established patterns of post war migration from within the commonwealth in the post-war period. While migrant workers are a diverse and heterogeneous group, covering a spectrum from casual agricultural labourers to highly paid professionals, common issues of exploitation, low pay and exclusion at the lower end of this spectrum suggest a need for unions to support and represent them in order to improve conditions for the most vulnerable in the labour market. The role of learning in supporting community based organising approaches, especially using ESOL provision in workplace learning centres, has been identified in studies of the union Community,

formerly the ISTC, as having the potential for promoting a connection between unions and migrant workers, indicating the potential that learning has for supporting broader union organising objectives (Martinez Lucio, Perrett, 2006: 10/11). ESOL is argued to be crucial in helping many migrant workers to gain a degree of independence at the workplace and outside, and union reps have the potential to play an important role in engaging with migrant workers and offering information, advice and guidance on a broad range of issues relating to training and employment (Martinez Lucio et al, 2007: 18-31).

In the British context, community unionism has been adopted in some areas, although not as yet in an especially widespread way. It is argued that coalitions with local organisations such as community groups and religious organisations are suggested as a means of building representation (Wills, 2001a: 30). Examples of this kind of work can be seen in that of The East London Communities Organisation (TELCO, which was the precursor organisation to London Citizens) (Wills, 2001b) and Battersea and Wandsworth Trades Council (Wills, Simms: 2004). The indication is that this kind of union organising activity is still relatively rare, with voluntary organisations cited as a cause of internal union transformation in only a very small number of cases according to survey evidence (Heery, 2005: 103). There has been little research to date on links between community organising and union involvement in learning (cf Heyes, 2009; Wallis et al; 2005), and this area is worthy of further investigation.

### Unions, learning and migrant workers in the UK

As mentioned above, migrant workers are a diverse and heterogeneous “group”. They are employed in diverse sectors of the labour market, from less skilled jobs to the professions. This study focuses largely on relatively “new” groups of migrant workers in the UK, mainly concentrated in low paid service sector employment. According to the Labour Force Survey, there were in 2008 3.8 million workers in the UK born in a different country (ONS, 2009: 8). There have been high numbers of workers from the eight countries that joined the EU in 2004 coming to work in the UK, with 41% of the 670,000 national insurance numbers allocated to adult overseas nationals given to workers from these eight countries in 2008 (Ibid: 14). While there is some evidence that numbers of workers from these countries coming to the UK has fallen recently



(the Workers Registration Scheme data for workers from these eight countries indicates a 25% fall in approved registrations between 2007 and 2008), it can be seen that this is a significant new constituency within the overall UK labour market (Ibid: 15). There is a wealth of evidence that migrant workers from Central and Eastern Europe working in the UK are often employed on low rates of pay in jobs that do not match their skills and work experience gained in their home countries (Anderson et al, 2006; Mackenzie, Forde, 2007; Martinez Lucio et al, 2007). The opportunities to earn higher wages in the UK than they would doing their established jobs in their home country, along with the opportunities this presented in terms of learning English, have been identified as the “trade offs” for these workers that mitigated some of the more negative characteristics of their employment circumstances (Anderson et al, 2006: 63). English language ability appears to be a key variable in how these workers deal with problems faced at work – from survey evidence, those who had less of this ability were more likely to attempt to deal with problems at work individually, while those with better English skills were more likely to approach outside bodies for advice and support with these problems (Anderson et al, 2007: 17). Further research on Polish workers indicated that their motivations for working in the UK were largely financial and their intentions were generally to stay for relatively short amounts of time. The chance of learning English was cited as a key secondary reason beyond this for working in the UK (Meardi, 2007: 50) The levels of exploitation faced by migrant workers have been identified as a source for potential mobilisation (Ibid: 54), which unions could potentially address and harness.

There is also evidence of considerable levels of awareness of and interest in joining unions among migrant workers from these countries (Ibid: 18), but as migrant workers are often concentrated in low paid, casualised employment where union membership is low in general, they are a group of workers with below average incidences of union membership (French, Mohrke, 2006). Case study evidence where unions paid relatively little attention to diversity and focused on their core workforce of organised, local workers at the expense of migrant workers demonstrates the potential for workforce segmentation and the creation of core-periphery divides which are reinforced by the difference in nationality between groups of workers (Meardi, 2007:53) Union strategies aimed specifically at migrant workers face two main challenges – firstly, the resources needed to support such strategies are significant and unions, many of which are facing financial constraints, may struggle to maintain this

activity in the future; and secondly, there is a risk that, by focusing specifically on migrant workers, there may be a subsequent tension in how local union members view what might be perceived as the union favouring one section of the membership over another, exacerbated by the perception that local workers are in some senses in competition with migrant workers (Fitzgerald, Hardy, 2009:16)

The TUC and many of its constituent unions have placed considerably greater emphasis on organising and supporting migrant workers in recent years. This has been reflected in the political sphere, where unions and the TUC were consulted relatively closely in the wake of the influx of workers from the A8 countries after 2005. This consultation process seems to have allowed for some (limited) gains in terms of employment protection, including strengthened control mechanisms for preventing illegal employment and exploitation of migrant workers being introduced as a consequence (Galgoczi et al, 2009).

At more local and regional levels, there has been considerable activity driven by unions attempting to organise migrant workers, including various unions establishing links with the Polish Catholic church in the UK in order to gain access to Polish workers (Fitzgerald, 2009), and with Unite - TGWU<sup>1</sup> and Unison in London establishing links with the London Citizens community activist network in order to improve their ability to organise among BME and migrant workers (Holgate, 2009). In the latter example, Unite - TGWU had begun investing in organising in conjunction with the London Citizens campaigns from 2007 onwards. However, this work has been shown to be problematic and potentially vulnerable in that it relies on the support of a few key individuals within the union in the face of a degree of opposition from others within their organisation. Some in the union had criticised this work as being resource intensive, and unlikely to deliver a return on the union's investment through increased collection of membership fees, the development of stable union organisation, and establishing recognition for bargaining purposes. A further problem identified with this work was a perception among some within the union that, by organising around labour market issues, London Citizens were encroaching on the union's established sphere of influence (Holgate, 2009: 59-60). These studies (Ibid; Fitzgerald 2009) have both raised potential threats to migrant worker focused activity deriving from the challenges in sustaining it and financial pressures felt acutely by

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<sup>1</sup> The TGWU and Amicus merged in 2007, but at the time of fieldwork the merger process was still ongoing, hence the use of "Unite – TGWU" to denote that section of the ostensibly merged new union.

unions in an overall period of membership decline. This study builds on the literature on community unionism through a case study of learning activity directly linked to the Justice for Cleaners campaign, and the tensions apparent in existing studies of this latter campaign are also visible in this particular area of work within the overall campaign.

While there is an emerging literature on union organising strategies and migrant workers, the role of union involvement in learning in supporting this work has as yet been under explored, with the exception of Heyes (2009). This latter study, focused on cases of Community and the GMB Southern Region's Migrant Workers branch, highlights the prominence of education and training strategies in union approaches to organising migrant workers, with ESOL classes provided through the union providing officers with increased opportunities for meeting learners before and after classes in which workers could discuss their concerns and union officers could identify where the union may be able to provide support and advice (Ibid: 191).

This paper will build on the contribution made by Heyes (Ibid) to understanding the intersections between union involvement in learning and migrant worker organising strategies, using detailed case study research to highlight how learning and organising complement each other (or not), the dynamics and tensions arising from this work, and the outcomes for workers and union organisation from the integration (or lack of integration) of these strategies. The precarious nature of this work, in that it relies on state funding that is not guaranteed to be sustained, as well as support from unions that face considerable financial pressures and demands from their existing membership, is also highlighted in the analysis of the case studies.

### Methodology

The overall research question addressed by this paper is: what relationship does union involvement in learning have with organising strategies attempting to stimulate membership levels and activism among migrant workers? A subsidiary question to this is: how is this work affected by the structures and internal politics of unions and the influence of the state? These questions are addressed through an analysis of data collected between 2006 and 2008. The research sought to explore the relationship between union involvement in learning and notions of union "revitalisation", broadly defined. The fieldwork was concentrated within unions organising among generally

low paid private service sector employees. This demographic is an important one for unions to expand into, as these less unionised sectors of the economy within the growing service sector appear to be crucial areas that unions need to organise within if processes of “revitalisation” are to be genuinely meaningful. The fieldwork consisted of 61 interviews with 74 participants, which lasted for 45 minutes on average. These interviews were recorded and fully transcribed where possible and analysed using template analysis techniques. The categories used as the basis for analysing the data were based on issues salient to union “revitalisation”, such as links between involvement in learning and activity including organising, recruitment, collective bargaining and organisational change within unions.

While the overall research from which this paper is drawn addresses this spectrum of issues relevant to union “revitalisation”, this article focuses particularly on linkages between union involvement in learning, recruitment and organising, specifically in terms of how unions had adopted strategies aimed at organising among migrant workers. The fieldwork consisted of six main sections – firstly, a section based on interviews with policymakers, educators and TUC officials, followed by two case studies in both the TGWU/ Unite and the GMB union, along with a case study of USDAW. The latter case focused particularly on the relationship between union involvement in learning and industrial relations framed around notions of social partnership, and so it is only mentioned briefly in the analysis below. The case studies consisted of 10-12 interviews each along with observation of meetings, and interviewees were evenly split between union full time officials, learning project workers, union educators and workplace representatives. Limitations of this research include the cross sectional nature of the empirical data and well established issues relating to generalising from case studies. A further issue was a lack of resources to be able to interview large numbers of migrant workers from diverse backgrounds. However, the data collected provides rich findings on the dynamics of union activity in organising migrant workers, and interviews with migrant worker union activists and officers ensure the data captures the first hand experiences of the main group of workers discussed here.

## Unions, revitalisation, learning and migrant workers – case study evidence

The following sections are based on five case studies conducted within the overall piece of research. The initial section draws briefly on findings from three of the case studies that touched on issues around learning and migrant workers, followed by detailed analysis of two case studies in particular that have these themes as their main focus. The five case studies that make up the overall study are detailed in the **Appendix**.

As will be seen in the case studies, unions have been doing considerable amounts of work in providing English classes for migrant workers, but public funding for this has been severely limited which is the main reason why more of these kinds of projects have not been developed. In the analysis that follows, the first section is devoted to general findings from across the five case study union regions, followed by more detailed discussions of two cases (learning projects run by the TGWU-Unite in connection with the Justice for Cleaners campaign, and a case study of the role of learning activity within the GMB Migrant Workers' Branch in Southampton) which were specifically focused on migrant workers.

### Case studies – TGWU, GMB and USDAW

The case studies discussed here show numerous examples of usually small scale projects where learning, particularly ESOL, had been provided through the union for migrant workers and contributed in various ways towards improving membership recruitment and levels of participation within the respective unions. ESOL provision tended to take the form of relatively small scale pilot projects which were difficult to sustain as funding for ESOL had been reduced drastically. In the USDAW case, interviewees noted that there was considerable demand for ESOL. Some pilot schemes had been set up in distribution and manufacturing, in some cases with the employer rather than the state as the funder, but this work was difficult to sustain given the financial constraints. Learning had been used to support the organisation of migrant workers and BME workers in the GMB in the North West, but the work had faltered. This was mainly due to the withdrawal of funding, but also due to a degree of distrust of these relatively autonomous projects from senior regional officers, leading to them not being prioritised for internal union funding when pockets of external

funding supporting them ceased. This process was also complicated by migrant workers in some cases reportedly feeling somewhat patronised by the offer of English classes from project workers, even though high demand for ESOL that was difficult to meet was reported in all of the other cases.

Promoting learning among migrant workers was frequently said to have been very difficult. A learning project worker described an attempted promotion of courses they had delivered:

I went in and did a briefing, on the night shift, where a lot of the Polish workers were, and the attitude that came back was, ‘Does she think we’re stupid, or what?’ Because I was talking about basic English and maths and ESOL... but I did it around English and maths because there were English workers and Polish... you don’t want to divide them and have the English ones saying, ‘Well, she offered *them* this, but she didn’t offer *us* anything’. So, I offered both. But they took it on board as being a criticism of their levels of English...rather than an opportunity. (3.1.8 – 18)

This had been less of a problem where organisers from a particular demographic were used to recruit among those with a common language and background. This supports the tenets of some of the literature on organising that advocates the use of “like for like” recruitment (Bronfenbrenner et al, 1998). This principle seems to have also been effective with learning project workers when it comes to the promotion of learning to migrant workers, indicating some commonalities between approaches to organising in general and in the more specific area of union involvement in learning.

ESOL had been used successfully as a tool for supporting and organising migrant workers. In the Unite - TGWU North West case study, ESOL had been delivered by union tutors for mainly Polish drivers, and their employer had paid the union to come in and do these courses, which had provided a basis for the union to set up learning centres in bus depots. This approach had been adopted nationally by the TGWU through their agreements with the dominant firms in the sector such as First, Stagecoach and Arriva. This was partly due to new regulations on driver competencies that stipulated drivers must have a certain level of English language ability, and is an example of the union providing services to migrant workers in a way that encourages them to join the union. The support to former students given by the TGWU tutor/ project workers in terms of advice on employment and welfare issues is a demonstration of how union officials with a remit around learning seem to become

involved in a far broader range of issues than their main remit suggests. This echoes findings elsewhere (Martinez Lucio et al, 2007). Again, union provision of learning is contested, with suggestions that management in some cases had been attempting to bring in external ESOL providers other than the union to deliver this training, which the union was keen to resist. The sustainability of work like this is far from secure, due to management attrition and the unpredictability of how long management would agree to fund these courses. The drastic cuts and restrictions on public funding for ESOL that have taken place in recent years make these issues particularly contentious as it becomes increasingly difficult to resource.

ESOL was an important supportive mechanism for attempting to organise those for whom English is not their first language, with recruitment benefits identified from this activity (2.1.4 – 4/5). Funding was a huge problem, but there was clearly a commitment among the unions surveyed to providing ESOL and a view of it as having a role in improving the material conditions of migrant workers: “they’re often keen to learn English, both for work but also generally for settling into the community...for workers themselves being able to promote and maintain their independence, to reduce the chances of them being exploited...access to ESOL...is important.” (2.1.5 – 7) Despite this broad level of support and commitment, a project worker acknowledged that there was a risk associated with the union investing in the organisation of migrant workers, having noticed some resentment among local members. These members were said to have negatively compared the investment made in terms of time off and courses funded for migrant workers, with a perceived lack of attention from the union for their selves: “if you’re not doing anything for your non-migrant workers that’s going to cause you a problem...And it does...these guys get sixty hours paid English training. The English guys don’t get nowt.” (2.1.6 – 14)

#### Case studies of union organising and migrant workers

The most successful examples in this study where learning supported the organising of migrant workers can be seen in the TGWU London and the GMB Southern cases. In both of these cases, ESOL provision was part of an overall strategy to support organising among contingent workers, particularly cleaners and domestic workers, with some development of ESOL provision for migrant workers in the hotel industry.

ESOL was, in these cases, a recruitment tool, as migrant workers accessing these courses would generally join the union. The courses provided a collective space which brought together a fragmented, vulnerable workforce, which in turn provided a basis for information provision and further organising activity. Improved English skills seemed to have been significant in helping migrant workers understand their rights at work and to stand up to employer abuses, which were common. The problems of ghettoisation of migrant workers extend beyond the workplace, and the ESOL courses provided in these cases are an attempt to address this, seemingly with some success.

#### Case study: TGWU-Unite, Justice for Cleaners and Learning for Justice

This TGWU - Unite case study is of a union learning project supporting the Justice for Cleaners campaign in London. This project involves unions working alongside community organisations such as TELCO and latterly the London Citizens network in an attempt to unionise contract cleaners working in offices in Canary Wharf and the City, and also cleaners on the London Underground. The campaign is centred on gaining agreements with employers to pay a living wage for London, calculated as £7.30 per hour at the time of fieldwork. This campaign has been discussed elsewhere (Wills, 2001a; 2008), but the educational side of the project has not yet been explored in detail. The union had been providing English language classes for members of the union recruited via this campaign. The union has recruited around 2000 members in the cleaning sector in these locations – almost all of these members are migrant workers and the majority are women, and they are mostly originally from South America, Eastern Europe and Africa.

Problems were identified by union interviewees over funding this project. The main problem with the funding regime identified by TGWU interviewees was the government's promotion of an employer led system of training and learning, as exemplified by Train to Gain. This programme places the emphasis on employers to voluntarily provide ESOL for their employees: "what they're saying is that employers should take responsibility for paying for it. Which is great, yes, employers should take responsibility for paying...(but) there's a high degree of naivety in that sort of statement." (2.2.1 – 14) The main learning project worker involved with the learning component of the Justice for Cleaners campaign explained that the process of



developing learning projects was a slow one, with the initial 12 months of the project devoted to establishing relationships with employers and education providers, identifying and training ULRs, raising awareness of the learning on offer, and creating the necessary structures within the union (for example links between education department staff and those in the organising department) (2.2.1 – 9). Some of the initial work on learning within the Justice for Cleaners campaign had involved running “taster” ESOL sessions at the union’s head office, which brought migrant workers into the union’s headquarters, providing a space for these workers to interact and let colleagues of theirs outside the course know what the union was doing in terms of learning. Part of the reason for using the union’s head office in central London as the main location used for the delivery of education was that the workers targeted lived all over Greater London, so having a central location was necessary, especially given that the setting up of learning centres in the workplace would not be feasible within the cleaning sector (2.2.2 – 2).

A process of identifying and training shop stewards was also in process at the time of research, with 17 stewards and one ULR formally trained, with more planned (2.2.2 – 1). It can be seen from this that there is a considerable amount of work involved in setting up the infrastructure for such a learning initiative. Limited resources and considerable time pressures on the workers themselves, many of whom worked multiple jobs and unsociable hours, meant that setting up this infrastructure was a very gradual process. Some of these workers had, through the confidence and language skills gained via union learning projects, gone into jobs matched to their training and experience from outside the UK. This project (named Learning for Justice) is mainly funded through a three year, £184,500 ULF bid, with this money intended mainly for promotion costs, publicity and staffing. A learning project worker was employed to work on the project for its three year duration.

Unite-TGWU had approached and was negotiating with various actors on the employer side, including the CSSA employers’ organisation that represents contract service providers. Although a number of cases were cited where senior management of the contractors had given the union some approval, including for union learning work, the attitude of line managers and supervisors was said to usually be more obstructive towards the union (2.2.2 – 1/ 2). Some instances were also given of the union being invited in by employers in order to deliver education and training, including ESOL. This was particularly in the case of cleaners on the London

Underground, who needed to display a certain amount of English language ability in order to get their license to work there (2.2.1 – 8), and also in the bus transport sector as mentioned above.

For TGWU-Unite, the initial plan had been to run ESOL classes with some reference to trade union issues as part of the content. These courses were to be delivered to ESOL Entry Level 1 groups. As many of the students' standard of English was below Entry Level 1 (pre-entry) they had to abandon this as it proved too difficult – instead, more standardised ESOL materials produced by the DfES were used which covered more basic vocabulary around issues such as shopping and so on. The location of the course at the union's headquarters was significant, as it gave students the opportunity to talk to one another and take away union leaflets and documents printed in a range of different languages, so there was certainly a union identity in the course environment if not the content itself (2.2.10 – 2). Some of the students in these classes had been in Britain for 10 years and still had minimal English. Without the Justice for Cleaners campaign and the education provider being relatively progressive in being prepared to include those who may have had restrictions on their visas, and levels of English that were too low to access funding, then these workers would not have been able to access ESOL at all. These workers are ghettoised and the nature of their work leaves them isolated (cleaners tend to be sent off to work on their own in one part of a building rather than coming together very often). Coming together in classes like this provided a collective space with a strong social and political identity which helped in linking up people across London who were involved in the campaign (2.2.10 – 1).

Learning seems to be a valuable, if not critical, dimension of the campaign that builds links between activists, union members and to some extent union officials in support of the campaign's overall objectives. However, much of the value of this work is predetermined by the dynamic, community focused organising activity that the union and community organisations had been involved in for several years previously. Learning provision was a valuable addition to the resources the union brought to the overall campaign, but this activity was supplementary to more general organising which was being driven by other factors including active campaigning, strong community links and the grievances held by a particularly vulnerable and exploited group of workers. The case that follows differs markedly in that learning

provision and funding was the foundation for the associated organising activity that had developed within the union branch.

#### Case study: GMB Migrant Workers Branch

The Migrant Workers branch in the GMB Southern region is another clear example of union involvement in learning supporting organising. In this case learning played a crucial role in providing the foundations for further organising work, differing from the previous case discussed where learning was used to support organising campaigns after they were already established. Learning activity in the region was said to be well supported by the regional office of the union, with the regional education officer having close links with the union's national officers:

It feels like there's a commitment...they have seen how learning can be used to support organising, by being managed by the region, the whole management of learning is actually constituted by the senior management of the region...a model whereby learning can work for the union, rather than it being around empire building or diversion or pet projects. (3.2.1 – 11)

Within the union itself, there was said to be suspicion of those involved in learning work from some full time officials (3.2.1 – 4/5). Some of this uncertainty or lack of understanding of learning was reflected in attitudes towards ULRs: "I think there is a suspicion that it's not what unions should do, and that they should focus on industrial issues, bread and butter issues...a lot don't like the idea...they're quite defensive. But actually,...they don't know what a ULR is." (3.2.1– 8) An education official also acknowledged that learning was in some ways peripheral to mainstream union activity: "our purpose is to represent people at work, not to teach people English, it's not the union's purpose to educate people, although it is part of our rather highfalutin' purpose in the front of the rulebook" (3.2.2 – 6).

A number of interviewees said that the provision of ESOL, among other union services, had been important in convincing migrant workers of the utility of union membership, and had encouraged community organisations to engage with the union and recommend them to their constituents. Much of the literature on community organising highlights the value of engaging with religious organisations (Wills, 2001a; Holgate, 2004; 2005), and specifically the Polish Catholic church where Polish

workers were a main target constituency (Fitzgerald, 2009). However, in this case, the local Polish church would not engage and were said to be conservative with ambivalent attitudes towards trade unions, which interviewees interpreted as a legacy of cold war politics, indicating that working with faith based bodies can be more problematic than suggested elsewhere.

The primary purpose of the centre at the heart of the migrant workers branch was as a site for delivering ESOL courses, for which there was a high demand (3.2.5 – 4). Lack of English was seen as a major barrier to migrant workers being able to exercise their rights at work, as explained by a Polish project worker and organiser:

(P)eople cannot communicate...And therefore they are being exploited...very often employers rely on that to exploit people. And then when people start to understand what kind of rights they have at workplaces they can have a dispute with their employer...in English. They feel confident enough to do that...their life will change at the workplace...and attitudes of employers will change as well. (3.2.7 – 4/5)

This improved confidence deriving from better English language skills was seen as bringing tangible benefits to the workers themselves, and also to the union as workers were able to represent themselves more assertively, making them less reliant on full time officers and project workers when they had problems at work (3.2.7 – 8/9).

Again, ESOL courses, which provided the funding and main rationale for the learning centre that was the physical centre of the branch, were said to have benefited the branch's members through encouraging an improved understanding of their rights and contracts of employment, to some extent mitigating the levels of exploitation they faced at work and strengthening their position in relation to their managers. This branch was made up mainly of Polish members, with a Polish project worker employed by the union through ULF funding acting as the branch secretary. Meetings were held in Polish, as attempts to integrate non-English speaking members into the established local GMB branches had been problematic. ESOL and other services such as advice provided by the union in this case had been important in building trusting relationships with migrant workers, community organisations and networks such as Polish social clubs. Advice was available to members on a range of welfare issues such as housing, financial services, tax and benefits, and there had been debates within the union about how broad an approach to take when addressing the problems faced by migrant workers.

Practically, it was often the case that these issues overlapped considerably (for example, employment may be tied to accommodation), and so the staff in the centre worked to try and provide help on as much as they were able to. This open approach, where members to some extent could define the direction they wanted the branch to take and the resources it provided to them, along with using a “like for like” organising approach of using Polish project workers to organise Polish workers, seemed to have been key reasons as to why the branch had been successful and was growing. Funding for educational work, such as the ULF and particularly for ESOL, was at the core of this as it covered much of the cost of the community learning centre and the salary of the region’s Polish project workers. This, combined with active membership participation, has set the foundations for this initiative and the potential for it to expand, both in the city where it started and in other nearby areas as the model is planned to be extended. This is seemingly one of the clearest examples of union involvement in learning facilitating organising work analysed in detail to date, and shows the potential contribution that learning can make to organising activity more generally.

## Discussion

Three main themes are apparent in the findings from this research. Firstly, the process of organising migrant workers in connection with community organisations and union learning initiatives leads to a plethora of political tensions within and between unions, as well as between unions and affiliated organisations including the TUC. Organisational change within unions as a consequence of greater involvement in learning and the development of organising strategies has perhaps been underrepresented in the existing literature. Fisher describes briefly some of the tensions there had been over the role of educational work relative to broader organising strategies in the TGWU (2005: 337/338). These changes were said by interviewees to have led to political tensions within unions, between unions and the TUC and between unions organising in similar areas or sectors. These tensions varied considerably between the case studies. The GMB and the TGWU have histories of strong regional autonomy from the centre, and consequently learning work varied markedly between regions. Tensions existed at a number of levels in the case study unions, with several interviewees reporting that “local” union members had expressed

some resentment that resources were being, as they saw it, spent on newly recruited migrant workers as opposed to them, demonstrating the potential problems that can arise from targeting services at a section of the membership rather than more universally. This balancing act between maintaining support among the established union membership when targeting resources at newer constituencies, such as migrant workers, has been identified elsewhere in the literature (Fitzgerald, Hardy, 2009). These issues are particularly sensitive in light of the disputes over the use of posted workers in the UK deriving from the strikes in the UK energy sector in 2009. The contribution of learning to the “institutional dimension” of union “revitalisation” (Behrends et al, 2004) can be seen to be complex and sensitive, with contentious and problematic tensions arising that will not be easily overcome.

Secondly, a number of tensions and complications can be seen to arise where union learning initiatives have been integrated with community organising approaches, with the distinction between traditional workplace based forms of organising and looser, community focused approaches raising questions about union strategy and the allocation of resources. Internal political tensions arose in the GMB North West case, where learning related projects that had a community rather than workplace focus had been allowed to wind down by the regional union leadership, who had replaced the previous leadership that had fostered some of these projects. This was due to a feeling, from what turned out to be the more powerful grouping among the regional officials, that resources should be focused on the established membership rather than on community initiatives which may have only an indirect influence on recruitment, as well as a rejection of some of the localised projects that had been funded and supported by the region’s previous leadership.

The “membership dimension” of union revitalisation is most significantly contributed to by union involvement in learning through migrant worker organising projects. All of the unions analysed in this study had, to greater or lesser extents, done some work in providing ESOL to migrant worker members, which had supported broader organising objectives in varying ways. Funding difficulties were frequently cited as reasons why these kinds of projects were not more widespread. Funding for ESOL courses seemed to have considerable potential to contribute to broader organising strategies. This is a strong example of how learning, which can be conceptualised as servicing by unions, can contribute to more collectivist orientations through processes of bringing a dispersed membership together and, through the

development of language skills, raise the confidence levels of activists and their awareness of employment rights, strengthening their ability to participate in their union branch. Servicing in this instance contributes towards organising around collectivist principles, and so ESOL courses surely can not be dismissed merely as the kind of individual service provision to members which has been critiqued strongly elsewhere (Milkman, Voss, 2004a). This underpins the third major finding from this study, which indicates that the role of the state, the contingent nature of state funding, and changing government priorities and distribution of resources, are a fundamental determinant of much union involvement in learning, and while unions have been using this funding in a largely independent way that supports their existing objectives, sustaining this work and planning its future is very difficult. While this kind of relatively informal state intervention in the supply side of the labour market seems to be the preferred option of the government, it can be seen to be a poor substitute for more rigorous forms of regulation as it is often piecemeal with a short term focus.

### Conclusion

The two main cases discussed in this paper are clear examples of learning provision being integrated with broader organising activity, but there are key differences between the respective approaches taken. The GMB Southern case is an example where infrastructure such as the learning centre and project workers was used as a basis for further organising. The London TGWU-Unite case is more of an example of learning being used to support existing organising that has been made possible through very particular local community politics, through the work of London Citizens. A key difference in the case studies is that, in the TGWU-Unite case, learning is very much supplementary to a broader organising campaign driven by the union and community organisations, whereas in the GMB case funding for learning provision has allowed for the setting up of a learning centre staffed by project workers that forms the focal point of the branch. In the latter case, withdrawal of state support would presumably have deleterious effects on the sustainability of the union branch, whereas in the TGWU-Unite case learning provision appears to be a valuable service provided to members but in no way integral to the survival of the campaign in itself. The central role of the state in supporting this learning activity to an extent contradicts

visions of an organising model that is membership driven and more independent of state and union bureaucracies.

What this evidence suggests is that complex local circumstances including, *inter alia*, regional union structures, internal union politics, community politics, the willingness of employers to engage with unions over learning and the availability of funding, mean that the outcomes of union involvement in learning will be far from uniform. These contextual factors also determine the extent to which learning can be integrated into organising strategies. Some recruitment benefits and an increased level of union activism can be discerned in most of the cases discussed in this article. While caution should be taken in generalising from these findings, in conjunction with other qualitative research that indicates benefits of this type (Moore, 2009) it seems that there is now a growing amount of qualitative evidence that involvement in learning by unions has had some impact on recruiting and retaining members and stimulating union activity, particularly in terms of attracting new constituencies to union membership (namely migrant workers). This contradicts, to an extent, some of the more strident criticisms of union involvement in learning as an implausible contributory factor to union “revitalisation” (McIlroy, 2008). However, the fragility of this activity and its reliance on unstable support both from the state and within unions themselves mean that considerable caution should be taken before unequivocally concluding that union involvement in learning is likely to significantly alter the fortunes of unions in the UK. There is also arguably an inherent danger in unions relying on state funding – other sources of strength need to be drawn on through organising around more “traditional” grievances in order to secure gains from employers which would make the activity discussed more sustainable from the unions’ perspective. In the cases discussed in this article, where benefits to membership recruitment, migrant worker organising and union activism are apparent, these benefits have only been possible due to strong connections between union learning activity and more established approaches to organising, indicating that learning is unlikely in itself to be enough to achieve these objectives. While learning can support organising campaigns it is no substitute in itself for more traditional mobilisation around grievances, which still appears crucial to the sustainability of union organising activity.



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## Appendix: Overview of the five case studies

<b>Union</b>	<b>Sectors looked at</b>	<b>Migrant worker characteristics</b>	<b>Courses offered</b>	<b>Organising outcomes</b>	<b>Funding streams</b>
<b>TGWU NW</b>	Distribution	Mainly Polish/E. European	TU Education, ESOL, IT	Recruitment of migrant worker members and activists	ULF, union, some employer funding
<b>TGWU London</b>	Contract cleaning	Mainly S. American and African	ESOL, TU Education	Support for activism, courses used to bring activists together	ULF and local authority funding
<b>GMB NW</b>	Distribution	Mainly Polish/E. European	Literacy, numeracy, IT	Increased service provision for members at unionised employers	ULF
<b>GMB Southern</b>	Miscellaneous service sector	Mainly Polish/E. European	ESOL, advice sessions, IT	Migrant workers branch set up	ULF, union and local authority funding
<b>USDAW NW/national</b>	Retail	Mixed	Outside college courses	Some evidence of increased membership and activism levels	ULF and some employer contributions