

# Assessing Union Organizing in the United Kingdom: Caught Between a Rock and a Hard Place

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## Abstract

This paper presents an assessment of the union organizing agenda in the United Kingdom. It considers the origins and recent developments of organizing and examines how the union movement has sought to operationalize organizing as a tool for revitalization. We seek to tease out a twofold argument that is sensitive to both external and internal dynamics and politics. First, we examine the way in which organizing has become contextualized within the specific regulatory dimension of the United Kingdom and the priority that has been given to recognition campaigning to the relative neglect of wider political perspectives around union identity, purpose, and societal status. Second, we suggest there has been a tendency to isolate the strategic development and capacity of organizing within the broad operational imperatives of unions—a process that can, unintentionally, reduce goals and purpose to specific sets of tactics and techniques. We argue that organizing should be seen as a template for developing narratives that allow unions to focus around new forms of progressive trade union services and a shared repertoire of activities across organizational structures.

## Origins and Development of Organizing in the United Kingdom

The “turn” toward organizing became pronounced in the United Kingdom beginning in the mid-1990s in terms of union practice, industrial relations policy, and scholarly engagement. At the level of union practice, this was exemplified by the establishment of the Trade Union Congress (TUC) Organizing Academy in 1998 (see Heery et al. 2000a, 2000b), which takes in

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a small number of trainees each year and offers them a year-long program in the skills of organizing. Alongside this central initiative, a number of individual unions also started to take a more strategic approach toward building their organizing capacity. At the broader policy level, the practice of organizing has been supported by a changing opportunity structure for trade unions since the election of the Labour government in 1997, providing unions with the potential avenue to organize within even hostile environments by using the law to push recalcitrant employers to establish systems of representation and bargaining (Gall 2003; Wills 2003).

These developments in policy and practice have led to increased academic interest in the theory, practice, and outcomes of organizing. This has included commentary on the “credibility” of organizing compared to other union strategies, such as servicing (see de Turberville 2004); macro evaluations of developments in organizing and union recognition campaigns (see, for example, Gall 2007); and, in the British IR tradition, detailed qualitative case studies of specific union organizing and recognition campaigns (Simms 2003; Wills 2003). Kelly’s (1998) mobilization framework is typically taken as the prime conceptual point of departure.

The value of organizing is, of course, situated in terms of its potential to renew or revitalize trade unions and, in the U.K. context, contribute to reversing a period of decline that now stretches for almost thirty years. In this regard a variety of data sources and indicators can be scrutinized to potentially assess the efficacy of the “turn to organizing.” Since 1998 some 250 trainees have entered the TUC Organizing Academy. According to Heery et al. (2000a), the majority of trainees have remained in the union movement. Trainees overwhelmingly have been drawn from five unions, ISTC/Community, GPMU (Graphical, Paper, and Media Union), USDAW (Union of Shop, Distributive, and Allied Workers), Unison, and, most recently, the CWU (Communication Workers Union). According to Heery, Delbridge, and Simms (2003), during the first five years of the academy its trainees “targeted more than 1200 employers, added nearly 40,000 new members and identified nearly 2000 new activists. They have also established membership at 600 greenfield sites and helped secure or raise the question of recognition for more than 300 bargaining units” (9). Academy organizers have contributed to the diffusion of organizing principles within the overall strategic priorities of sponsoring unions, although the degree of commitment to the specific techniques of the Organizing Model vary by union (Heery et al. 2003). Trainees have been impressively drawn from underrepresented groups, such as women and young workers, although the annual intake has declined in recent years—from an average of around thirty a year during its early years to around twenty most recently.

Between 1995 and 2005, 3,003 new recognition agreements were signed.

Gall (2007) estimates that around 1.2 million workers were covered by these new agreements. Recognition agreements increased each beginning in 1995, culminating in 525 and 685 new agreements in 2000 and 2001, respectively, when the Employment Retention and Advancement (ERA) provisions were first introduced. Since 2001, however, the number signed each year has declined, as the recognition campaigns have faced harder cases and more intransigent employers.

At an aggregate level, it is evident that the increased organizing effort on its own has not reversed the long-term decline of trade unions. Trade union density in the United Kingdom was 28.4 percent in 2006, around half the high tide of 1979. Decline has continued across nearly all union vectors since 1997, in both the private and public sectors. Density levels in the private sector are down to just 16.6 percent, although unions remain present in around one third of private-sector workplaces. There has been a decline of 9 percent in aggregate density since 1997, and 2006 was the “largest annual percentage point decline since 1998” (Grainger and Crowther 2007, 2).

While national aggregate data provide some insights into general levels of unionization within the economy, they reveal little about the impact of organizing within specific unions. Looking at the United Kingdom’s largest unions, those with 100,000 members and above (with the exception of the retail trade union USDAW), private-sector unions experienced falls in membership while public-sector unions grew. Aggregate gains and losses, regardless of organizing and new recognition agreements, are thus heavily shaped by fluctuations in private- and public-sector employment: As Gall (2007, 85) observes, 1.1 million jobs were lost in U.K. manufacturing between 1997 and 2005, compared to an increase of just over 700,000 jobs in the public sector.

Drawing conclusive analytical inferences from such data is far from straightforward. The general conclusion, as in the United States, has been that the turn to organizing has not provided the basis for revitalization envisaged its proponents. It is not always clear whether the problem lies in the nature of organizing strategies per se, the lack of resources, or the fact that the challenges facing organized labor are greater than were at first imagined. If we move beyond an empirical assessment of union statistics and start exploring the meaning and nature of organizing more generally, we would argue that the debate has been hampered by some contextual, strategic, and practical limitations. These are explored in the remainder of this paper.

### **The Context of Organizing in the United Kingdom: Regulation and Identity**

There is an urgent need to reappraise the organizing model in the United Kingdom in relation to the context and nature of such strategic turns. Hyman

(2007) has argued that while it is critical for unions to review their processes of strategic capacity, this tends to occur without a re-imagining of the purpose and identity of the trade union movement. He draws from Kelly (1998) to point out that the framing of workers' perceptions in relation to the problems that afflict them is, quite rightly, a vital dimension of any organizational approach or strategy; however, "If [workers] blame employers or governments for their predicament but have no conception of alternative policies, they may protest but are unlikely to prevail" (Hyman 2007, 207). With hindsight, organizing appears to be disconnected from such broader concerns. It looks like a strategy without a mission and ideology attached to it—something to do with getting members in a local factory but not "building upwards." How this affects actual outcomes is very difficult to say, but it means that the problem may not rest with the strategy and tactics of the organizers, or their academics, *per se* but rather with the overall political and organizational contexts within the unions.

If we develop this point in relation to U.K. assessments, we find that organizing activity is linked almost entirely with union recognition campaigns. Indeed, despite a general consensus on the limitations of the new statutory procedure for recognition in the United Kingdom, in effect we have seen that the contours of regulation and the institutional systems of employment relations—or the lack of those contours as appears to be the case—mediates the processes and outcomes of organizing (see Locke and Thelan 1995). This contextual point also mediates the manner in which union identity and policies are framed in relation to organizing.

The debate on organizing has drawn heavily from the work of John Kelly (1998) on mobilization theory, but the link with the broader dimensions of the political have been engaged with to a lesser extent. Wills and Simms (2004) have tried to expand the debate in terms of the notion of community unionism, but overall the broader context and issue of mobilization at the level of the state or within society is absent. Heery (2002) uses mobilization theory but sees it as a model or framework for understanding microlevel campaigns on particular recognition-related issues. Hence, the link between political mobilization and organizing is not a central feature of the discussion; instead, the focus tends to be on the micro level. Why is the lack of discussion of political dimensions important? First, it means that the role of other actors and community organizations is not so salient in the calculations surrounding organizing campaigns, or at least its analysis. The question of recognition, and particular moments in terms of the interface with employers, continue to configure and mould the nature of trade union action (as discussed above) and the spaces around which trade union action occur. Second, it means that the political visibility of trade unions and the way they are understood in social terms is rarely discussed.

This is a salient point because trade unions are joined for a variety of reasons (some instrumental and some related to political and justice-oriented issues). Political mobilization or campaigning can indeed raise public perceptions of unions (Kelly 2005) and help connect organizing campaigns. How organizing is linked into a renewed, mobilization-based and grassroots view of the trade union is rarely seen as a legitimate research question or basis for discussion in terms of praxis. Rather, organizing is often approached in a technical and, dare one say, bureaucratic manner: a re-engineering of strategies (or tactics) but not, as Hyman (2007) suggests, identities.

### **From the Organizing Model to Organizing: Some Alternative Benefits**

There have been some curious by-products of organizing. First, it has allowed the TUC to create a hub for the regeneration of trade union activists and professionals across all unions. This has proved a useful exercise in bureaucratically *re-engineering* the “aging” trade union movement and creating new reserves of expert knowledge. Second, organizing has had some cathartic qualities. It marks a break with the difficulties of the Thatcher epoch in terms of decline and political intervention from the state. Its development marked an important moment of reclaiming the offensive and creating a common purpose for union proactivity and agency. Third, it provides an important narrative for renewal. It is a shared repertoire that allows trade unions to focus around new—and perhaps even traditional—concepts and actions. Organizing can act as a template that allows the current moment of change in political and social terms to be confronted with a vision of purpose, albeit a limited vision at times, which is more tactical than strategic.

In terms of internal relations and contexts we need to complement any discussion about bureaucratic imperatives and organizational narratives with one that considers how organizing has developed in relation to other strategies. This is not an insignificant point due to the fact that organizing is often cloaked in a discourse of equivalence (Laclau and Mouffe 1995)—that is, in opposition to strategies such as servicing or partnership. Yet, in practice, unions have been experimenting in recent times with a number of different approaches, often combining them. Thus, Heery (2002) cautions against establishing a zero-sum analysis between organizing and partnership campaigns and strategies. He shows how conceptually they were the twin faces of a renewed 1990s approach to engage with workers and employers on a more proactive and engaged basis. The reality of organizing and mobilizing may require creation of links across different facets of union activities. Hence, we need to start thinking in terms of how trade unions have linked this new template of organizing into other

strategies. Our paper develops this through examples of how organizing links with broader strategies around the learning agenda and community unionism. The failure to combine and construct a broader and more engaged view of organizing across various other “trade union fronts” is the issue. Therefore, organizing is best seen as a logic—a narrative—that can sustain and tie together different aspects of new forms of trade union revitalization. In some cases this has emerged, but it is not generalizable. This failure to connect at the micro level is exacerbated by the failure to connect at the macro and political levels, as discussed previously.

## Conclusion

We feel it is ill-advised to make strong conclusions in terms of statistics. Gall (2007) makes it clear that we do not know what the future would have been without the strategy of organizing. In the United Kingdom what emerges is a failure by unions to connect organizing with a broader political approach and re-invigorated identity. Organizing often occurs within a relative political vacuum. The fixation with recognition means that it is not elaborated in terms of long-term campaigning and community- and socially based strategies. What we see is that internally it has generated outcomes and links for unions in structural and strategic terms, but externally it seems to be disconnected as a strategy. It is also unwise to take what is in effect a managerialist and empiricist view of trade union initiatives, which de-contextualizes them and imbues them with a level of significance that is beyond their capacity. Thus, organizing is best seen as a logic that can establish the needed links between different aspects of trade union revitalization. . It provides a template for engaging with broader community-, learning-, and locally based strategies regardless of the pitfalls many have identified.

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