# Integrating or organising migrant workers?

# Identities, educational initiatives and new alliances for trade unions in the UK

**by**

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## Abstract

The issue of migrant workers’ organising and integration into trade unions in the UK as well as in other European countries has been considered only marginally. The British industrial relations tradition tends to frame workers with migrant background in terms of ‘ethnic minorities’ to be organised as a (national specific) separate group or as simply workers member of industry-based branches. This paper aims to supersede this approach by providing an original comparison of the strategies of three major UK unions (Unison, Unite, GMB) to include migrant workers in their structures at a time of critical change in labour migration into the country. Our comparative approach across national unions allows us to highlight limits and potentials of ongoing experiments by trade unions attempting to change their structures, policies and coalition strategies to respond to those among the most compelling challenges of our global times: the growing mobility of labour and the increasing fragmentation, diversification and precarious nature of the workforce.

## Purpose

The objective of the research from which this paper draws was to explore the extent to which trade unions, in collaboration with other civil society actors are developing organising approaches to incorporate migrant workers. In this paper the authors focus on the UK case to explore limitations and potentials of some unionisation efforts conducted by three major trade unions to organise workers in service sectors with high levels of migrant employment.

## Design/methodology/approach

Data were collected as part of a wider cross-country research based on more than twenty case studies on labour and community organising campaigns around migrant workers in low-paid jobs. Participant observation and in-depth interviews were the main research methods. For the purpose of this paper, successes and shortfalls of the organising efforts by some large UK trade unions (Unite, GMB and Unison) are considered focusing on three dimensions: the identities around which fragmented migrant workforces are united and how these are reflected in union structures; the educational tools employed by unions to actively include migrants; the nature and dynamics of the coalitions built in the larger community to organise migrant workers.

## Findings

A comprehensive approach by trade unions to migrant workers’ integration is still missing in the UK. The studies reveal how in most cases, the unions have sought ‘structural’ solutions to deal with migrant issues, such as setting up ‘migrant units’. However, a stark division between union’s bodies tackling migration issues and industry-based branches focusing on organising workplaces appeared to weaken unionisation processes. Moreover union efforts to include precarious migrants are limited due to the dependence on ad-hoc government-funded projects. Concerning union educational initiatives, we found a weak link between (individual) service provision and organising models. Finally, the wider labour-community alliances appeared instrumental to strengthen union membership and tended to be short-term, thus failing to engage migrant workers on longer-term basis. Relatively more successful campaigns emerged in correspondence with unions’ larger alliances with migrants’ community groups and other social movements supporting migrants’ rights.

## Research limitations/implications

The tendency of UK unions to organise migrant workers as nationally separate groups or to bypass their specific problems as migrants, urges labour organisations to make their structure more porous and inclusive towards highly diverse workforces acknowledging their specific vulnerabilities; improve the existing educational tools to promote the self-determination of their migrant constituencies; expand the range of coalitions in the community beyond a persisting workplace focus. An improved relationship between migrant-targeted single projects and the occupation or industry- based union branches would allow to overcoming the false dichotomy between work and migration issues and broaden the agenda of organising campaigns around migrants’ conditions.

## Originality/value of the paper

There has been little comparative work on union attempts to bring migrants into their organisations. This research attempts to overcome this omission by examining different unionisation campaigns and how trade unions are changing their structures and strategic alliances with community groups to improve the conditions of low-paid migrants.

## Key words

Migrant workers, trade unions, union-led learning, community coalitions, integration, engagement

## Introduction

As a result of the neoliberal economic climate of the last few decades, and the increase in war and natural disasters around the world, we have seen a considerable increase in the migration of workers. The desire for a better life, or even as a means to survive has seen the global movement of workers expand such that there are now an estimated 214 million migrants (IOM 2011). Many of these workers are in low-paid jobs in unregulated sections of the labour market where they are often segregated from indigenous workers (Wills et al. 2010). As such, they are vulnerable to considerable exploitation and abuse, where their jobs are precarious and without the benefit of union protection. Increasingly, unions around the world have recognised that in order to protect their members’ interests and challenge levels of exploitation there is a need to draw migrants into union membership (Holgate 2012). This has led to debate about the way unions can develop new tactics to organise migrants into unions and community-based organisations (Fine 2005; Gordon 2005; Hayes 2009; Holgate 2005; ILO 2004; Milkman 2000; Moore et al. 2009; Rogaly 2008). Despite increase reporting of individual case studies of organising migrant workers and some encouraging small-scale organising work being done by unions and community groups, there has been little *comparative* work on union attempts to bring migrants into their organisations. This research attempts to overcome this omision by examining a series of trade union campaigns, by different unions and asking what are trade unions doing to bring low-paid migrants into the UK union movement?

The UK case studies are analysed focusing on two of the questions proposed for the stream on trade unions and the equality-diversity-inclusion agenda: what recruitment and organising initiatives are trade unions developing to attract ethnic minorities, migrant workers and groups at risk of social exclusion and what are the roles of union education and union-led learning in promoting the equality, diversity and inclusion agenda? To answer these questions we focus on three dimensions – identity, education, and labour-community coalitions – to assess how these impact the way unions organise migrant workers. First, we consider how unions ideologically approach the issue of migrant workers. How do they, for example, conceptualise union organising in terms of equality and diversity, and does this impact on the way they strategise campaigns? We also explore the identities around which to unite fragmented workforces and examine whether unions consider migrants as people with specific vulnerabilities or simply as workers. Second, which tools do unions use to include migrant workers into their structure? Here we emphasise the union learning and educational initiatives. What kind of tools, methodologies, and structures are in place and how do they work? Thus we focus on the nature and dynamics of labour-community coalitions where we look at the geographies of union organising and the extent to which spatial dynamics played a role in the organisation of migrant workers. Finally, how does the role of identity and union learning initiatives play out in concrete practices?

## Methods

This paper is based on a 3-year comparative research project regarding migrant workers’ integration into trade unions in the US, the UK, France, and Germany[[2]](#endnote-2), although for the purpose of this paper our focus will remain on the UK. The aim of the research has been to explore the extent to which trade unions, in collaboration with other civil society actors, are (or are not) developing organising approaches that seek to incorporate migrant workers in trade unions and in broader society. More than twenty case studies were conducted between 2007 and 2010 on union organising campaigns and labour-community collaborations revolving around the working conditions of migrants in low-paid jobs. Our analysis is based on original field research that has been conducted mainly through participant observation and in-depth interviews, focusing on campaigns and unionisation efforts in different workplaces and industries with a substantial presence of migrant employment (from service jobs including cleaning, hospitality, care work, taxi drivers, to more traditional factory work including poultry, metal workers and residential construction).

While a multiplicity of relatively successful techniques of organisation and incorporation of migrant workers by labour and community organisations have emerged from our research across countries and sectors, one major reflection is that the very notion of immigrant workers’ ‘integration’ into trade union and society needs to be problematised. Most of the jobs where migrants are employed are characterised by heightened levels of fragmentation, subcontracting and overall degradation of terms and conditions of employment (Wills et al. 2010).While the diversity of issues, constraints and challenges for unions to engage minorities and migrant workers makes it difficult to assert any straightforward process of convergence or divergence between the national cases, a striking element in common lies in the fact that in most of the cases (independently from the national or the industry context) migrant workers suffer specific work-related issues as compared to the rest of the workforce, and encounter particular barriers to accessing collective bargaining in their workplaces and particular forms of marginalisation in the communities where they live (Herbert et al. 2008; Holgate et al. 2011; Holgate et al. forthcoming; McDowell et al. 2009). Taking into account these specific issues and demands requires a re-thinking of traditional forms of industrial organising, including matters of representation, agendas, political/social identity and coalition building (Tattersall 2010).

The campaigns that were the main focus of the UK case studies were the Justice for Cleaners campaign led by The East London Citizens Organisation (part of the community based organisation London Citizens) and Unite; the Filipino care workers campaign led by the public sector union Unison; and the hotel workers campaign led by the Hotel Workers branch of Unite and London Citizens. We do, however, make reference to other case studies that have formed part of our research in this area over many years such as the GMB’s establishment of a migrant workers branch in the south of England. We focused on three of the largest trade unions (Unite, GMB and Unison) and their strategies towards migrant workers as they were the most likely, as general unions, to be the unions covering the largest sections of the labour market where migrants are to be found.

In the first case study the community-based organisation The East London Citizens Organisation (TELCO) kicked off a living wage campaign, revolving around the poor pay and working conditions of cleaners at big banks at Canary Wharf. The broad public support and small victories attracted the attention of the unions. In 2004, Unite the union (then still the Transport and General Workers Union before merger) started the Justice for Cleaners campaign to unionise the cleaners at Canary Wharf and later, the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers (RMT) also started a cleaners’ campaign among migrant workers. In the second case, the public sector union Unison joined a Filipino advocacy group in challenging new UK policies on work permits. Unison’s key tactic in this campaign was lobbying MPs to achieve substantial change in the immigration policy. Unison’s involvement with the Filipino care workers is principally a push for economic integration of those migrant workers into the UK labour market. As a result many of the Filipino migrant workers became members of the union. Thirdly, the hotel workers campaign was led by Unite and London Citizens. Together, the union and the community-based organisation attempted to unionise low-paid, precarious migrant workers in large hotels belonging to the Hilton and the Hyatt international chains. The campaign ended in a failure, mainly because of the inadequate involvement of the migrant workers themselves and the fact that Unite’s Migrant Workers Support Unit has only weak ties with the hospitality branch of union.

## Identity: organising migrants as migrants or simply workers?

During the research we were interested in exploring issues of identity and this led us to question how do trade unions think about migrant workers and are they constrained by a certain ideology of what constitutes trade union activity? To what extent are workers’ identities taken into consideration in organising campaigns and to what extent are issues of equality and diversity central to the thinking of trade union practice? Our thinking in this area and particularly our engagement with the concept of intersectionality to understand migrants’ multiple identities and experiences of oppression (Crenshaw 1989; Lutz et al. 2011) has taught us to question whether unions are still ideologically committed to a class-based analysis of workers’ exploitation where other aspects of workers identities are deemed secondary (or in some cases ignored). If the latter is true, then it is likely this will impact upon the way in which organising of migrant workers is carried out in practice.

Our case studies show that all three unions had set up internal structures to deal specifically with migrant workers’ issues. Unison received funding from the Union Modernisation Fund[[3]](#endnote-3) to establish a ‘Migrant Workers Participation Project’, staffed by a 3-person unit within its national office. Unite also received money from the same source to set up a ‘Migrant Workers Support Unit’, and the GMB created a local Polish sub-branch in Southampton to accommodate the growing number of Polish workers in the region. Setting up a separate migrant workers’ branch organised around the nationality (the vast majority of the members are Polish workers) aroused some controversy with other unions. Some unions blamed the GMB for having a separatist, rather than integrative approach, even though according to the Regional Secretary of the GMB this branch should be considered a ‘holding branch’. Once the confidence of the workers is raised, they should transfer to local union branches (Interview branch secretary, June 29th, 2009).

In our study of Unite’s Migrant Workers Support Unit (MWSU), our findings illustrate a political distinctive choice in the overall approach of the union. The decision of the union to link the MWSU with Unite’s organising department reflects the union’s focus on organising and grassroots mobilisation and on *equal* rather than *special* treatment. Indeed, ‘while efforts are not specifically directed at organising migrants, migrants in fact make up the majority of the workforce in those sectors’ (Tapia 2011: 7). In this regard a contradictory pattern emerged in the policy and structure of the union in that, at the time of the research, Unite had almost ‘externalised’ all the services related to migrant workers to a temporary unit specifically set up to deal with migrants’ issues. Established in 2007 for the duration of two years, the MWSU was part of Unite’s national organising department. The unit consisted of a series of tailored services for migrant workers such as a ‘help line’ with interpreters for migrant union members with language difficulties and the development of ‘advocacy activities’ to influence the government’s immigration policy. While the main concern of the MSWU was to offer services and educational training that would match migrant members’ requirements, an interviewee also emphasised that the unit adopted Unite’s general principle that ‘the whole point of a union is to have freedom of association and to bargain collectively no matter where you are from (Interview with support worker, MWSU, October 2008). In fact, the strategy of the union is to focus on migrant workers *as workers*, trying to identify ‘deeply felt, widely felt, and winnable issues.’ Thus on the one hand the MWSU raised the question of migrants’ specific problems as migrants, yet on the other it did so within the union’s overall ‘universalistic’ philosophy of treating all workers as workers.

However there are advantages and disadvantages to considering migrant workers simply as workers, rather than as workers with specific and differing needs or issues to other workers. On the one hand this approach is very important in terms of advancing migrants’ equal treatment with the other workers, independently of their ethnic origin and migration status. This is particularly critical considering the difficulties encountered by migrants (especially those outside the EU) to come and work legally in the UK given the restrictive immigration policies. On the other hand, the specific conditions experienced by migrant workers as non-citizens require trade unions to take seriously the implications of migrants’ uncertain status; on their recruitment as well as on the unions’ own bargaining and educational strategies.

This ambivalence between an universalistic and a particularistic approach to migrants’ organising (and the division of labour between union structures dealing with migration and work issues), reflects wider contradictions that trade unions confront when they try to implement their equality and diversity agenda. These appeared clearly in the context of the unsuccessful hotel workers campaign led by Unite between 2007 and 2009 and the broad-based community organisation London Citizens.[[4]](#endnote-4) Even though Unite operates at a sectoral level, the hotel industry in London was formally not included among the sectors targeted by the union’s organising department although it has been the subject of organising campaigns in the past (Wills 2004)[[5]](#endnote-5). This formal exclusion was reflected in the lack of a proper and sustained relationship between the MWSU within the organising department and the lay led hospitality branch. Despite the fact that the vast majority of the hospitality branch’s membership consists of people with a migration background and by so-called new migrants from EU Accession countries, migration-related aspects were largely left unspoken in branch meetings. Many issues researched by the MWSU, such as the effects of policy and migration regulation on the labour market, the free movement for migrant workers from the Accession countries, the implications of migrants’ juridical status on their working conditions, were generally not discussed in the local branch despite the fact that they were populated by workers with such issues. At the same time the MWSU, rather than improving the collaboration with the branches and involving and developing more migrant activists, risked becoming ‘too academic’, by engaging more with policy circles than with migrants’ communities (Interview with support worker, Migrant Workers Unit, October 2008, Alberti 2010). In this sense, Unite only organised migrants when they happened to be the majority in certain industrial sectors, rather than as a specific strategy to bring them into the union as migrants. Within the industrial focus, the union has capitalised on the migrant constituency because of its numerical predominance and not because they are precarious workers that are particularly exploited and need to be organised. As Holgate (2009b: 11) emphasised in her concluding remarks about the cleaners campaign in London:

‘It is also important to consider the extent to which the organisation of migrant workers was or is a conscious decision based on them being migrant workers. Might it not be that the unions, in particular, are primarily concerned with organising them as workers due to their position in the labour market and their majority status in some sectors, rather than a primary concern to organise migrant workers per se because of their particular vulnerabilities? Certainly it is easier to make an argument with current union members about the former rather than the latter’.

However, the Justice for Cleaners (JFC) Campaign in London was a relatively positive example of mobilising migrant workers. While originating in 2001 from the living wage campaign promoted by the civil society organisation London Citizens, the Justice for Cleaners Campaign developed across different sectors (building services in banks, universities and the London’s underground) and was endorsed by other unions, including Unite. Unite mobilised migrants on the basis of migrants’ broader social concerns and their political identities, expanding the campaign agenda to the inclusion of immigration and social issues beyond workplace issues. For instance in the case of the living wage campaign at SOAS University, the cleaners were not only guaranteed the living wage but also union recognition, improved holiday and sick leave, time off for training and English classes. In June 2009, 3000 cleaning members in London were registered and formally organised into a specific branch just for cleaners as part of Unite. The organiser, a migrant worker himself, endorsed a human rights discourse under the idea that migrant workers (still gathered on sectoral basis) should go beyond ethnic divisions and fight for improved conditions as a particularly vulnerable part of the workforce (Interview with Jose, JFC organiser, Holgate 2009b).

Even though the living wage constituted a key demand as well in the context of the hotel workers campaign, in that case the organising effort remained focused on the workplace. Unite the union, despite its collaboration with the community-based organisation London Citizens appeared unable to extend the agenda so as to include migrant-specific issues and other social needs of the hotel workers (the most of whom were migrant) beside strictly workplace-based issues (regarding changes in the contract, imposed flexi-time, bullying and harassment by mangers). The campaign in London’s hotels showed the limits of considering migrant workers during organising drives as simply workers and more widely, the great difficulties in going beyond the workplace and expanding the struggle into the community.

Our findings appear to show that the issue of organising *migrants as migrants* versus organising *migrants as workers* is directly intertwined with trade unions’ ideological approach to what they are and for what purpose they exist and leads back to our earlier consideration of an intersectional approach to union organising. This then leads us to consider whether or not this affects their capacity to build alliances in the larger community that valorise migrants’ multiple experiences of discrimination, social needs and sense of belonging in their wider lived experiences beyond the workplace. In this regard a different example of how it is impossible to organise and unite workers on the basis of their migrant identity and around issues that exceed the workplace comes from the public sector trade union Unison. In the context of the campaign around care workers Unison successfully engaged with the Filipino community and did so also as it set up the Filipino migrant nurses network in Scotland (Tapia 2011). The care workers campaign, lobbying the government to obtain visa for care workers alongside the Alliance for Filipino Organisations, Kanlungan, resulted in thousands of new Unison members, while the social space set up in Glasgow to support migrant nurses increased Unison’s outreach to the Filipino community. This may show how, from the trade union perspective, engaging with a single ethnic community group offers easier access to and recruitment of new members from migrant communities than with a multi-ethnic community. In addition, it may appear more sustainable to incorporate migrants within single occupations than across sectors. However, as the Unison case demonstrated, a limit of this type of community unionism persists in that the union remains mainly a ‘service provider’ in the eyes of the workers, thus lacking significant impact in terms of migrant workers’ participation in the activity of the branch. In this sense an improved relationship between migrant-targeted single projects and the occupation or industry- based union branches at core of many unions’ structures would allow to overcoming the false dichotomy between work and migration issues and broaden the agenda of organising campaigns around migrant workers’ particular conditions.

Taking into consideration migrant specific issues also involves the question of the educational tools and the structures that trade unions need to set up to effectively include in their ranks migrant workers. These educational initiatives may include language and IT courses, free skills classes, information about freedom of association and rights at work, broader legal knowledge around anti-discrimination and migration policies, etc. The next section will consider recent initiative undertaken in this field by some of the trade unions under examination.

## Union learning and educational initiatives to include migrants

Another way that migrants have been brought into the unions is through union learning initiatives. The Labour government established the Union Learning Fund in 1998 to ‘promote activity by trade unions in support of the objective of creating a learning society’.  Its primary aim was to develop the capacity of trade unions and union learning representatives (ULRs) to work with employers, employees and learning providers to encourage greater take up of learning in the workplace (Unionlearn 2011). ULRs are a new type of union activist and these reps are more likely to be women, blacks, young, or recent hires’ (Stuart et al. 2010; Tapia 2011). Currently in the UK there are about 24,000 union learning reps, and they are given paid time off by the employer in order to undertake their role in a similar way to health and safety reps and shop stewards. One way in which learning has been utilised to reach out to migrant workers is through English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes. During a campaign to organise care workers led by Unison and the Justice for Cleaners campaign by Unite these have been critical channels to encourage migrants to join the branches. However, while a major tool for recruitment, we found that offering language classes often remained limited to a model of service unionism that did not appear to succeed in making the same workers more actively involved at the level of the workplace or of the campaign at large. However there were some more positive examples.

An effective example can be found in the case of the GMB where its focus on training and education ‘sparked the interest of migrants’ through free skills and ESOL classes with concrete results in terms of membership. One case study in our research demonstrated that more than 500 of the 600-700 migrant workers who have taken ESOL classes have joined the migrant workers’ trade union branch in Southampton in southern England. As Tapia (Tapia 2011: 8-9) emphasises the attempt has been successful in so far as the GMB migrant workers sub-branch ‘appears to have led to a much higher attendance than is usual in union meetings and a greater number of activists’. However the GMB was clear that the creation of a ‘sub’ branch for Polish workers should be considered as a transitional process that will eventually lead to these workers becoming fully integrated into the union.

Furthermore, another important channel to promote migrant workers’ activity within the unions has been through the Labour government’s Union Modernisation Fund. Designed to support innovative modernisation projects to contribute to a transformational change in the organisational effectiveness of trade unions, the Fund offered support for projects involving vulnerable workers. Although ‘vulnerable workers’ are not necessarily defined as migrants, in fact various trade unions have used the funds, allocated from the government between 2005-2009, to organise migrant workers. For instance, they have been used by Unite for their Justice for Cleaners campaign, and by Unison to set up a Migrant Workers Participation Unit. However, with the new Conservative/Lib-Democrat government, the funds have been abolished showing the intrinsic limit of a union policy dependent on government’s financial support. Yet our findings show that the use of education services and training provision by trade unions appears as primarily a tool of recruitment to bring in new members into trade unions. The fact that, in most of the UK cases training and educational activities have been provided within the boundaries of industry-based branches may constitute a further limit to the success of these educational programmes. Furthermore, these educational services are often dependent on ad-hoc government funded projects, again limiting their success and sustainability. Indeed the UK model of union learning and educational activities for migrants differs substantially from the approach of the worker centres movement in the US (Fine 2006) where the latter appears to be based on a wider understanding of workers’ oppression, empowerment and self-development around work issues and broader social justice struggles in their communities. While workers centres have been set up along different lines (the ethnic segregation of a certain migrant community in a particular neighbourhood, the occupational group suffering particularly precarious conditions, or as a coalition of different community organisations) they have variously experimented with critical pedagogies such as popular education techniques inspired by the work of Paulo Freire to raise awareness among migrant and marginalised groups (see also Roca-Servat 2010)

## Having considered some of the agendas, educational strategies and organising models endorsed by trade unions in the UK to involve migrant workers into their structures, we now turn to examine the very nature and dynamics of the social and political coalitions in which these strategies have been undertaken.

## Community-labour coalitions

In recent years we have seen an increase in literature around the notion of community unionism and the way that unions could (and should) aim to work more closely with the communities in which workers live their lives (Defilippis et al. 2010; Holgate 2009a; McBride and Greenwood 2009; Swarts 2008). As such, as part of our research, we asked what kind of labour-community alliances were formed during organising campaigns among migrant workers and if so, how and why did they work, were they able to successfully build solidarity among different groups of workers, and to what extent was equality and diversity an ideological driver? In describing the Justice for Cleaners campaign, Holgate (2009a) observes three major challenges between the community organisation London Citizens and the trade unions: territory (unions feeling threatened by community substituting them on workers organising); working in coalition with London Citizens, the latter consisting of faith organisations (and union’s concern about the damaging attitude of some religious leaders such as those towards women’s reproductive rights, issues of sexuality and upholding of patriarchal values); and, finally, structures (unions’ structures being fairly tight and not fitting with the more relaxed and informal methods of community organising, where, for example, London Citizens’ decision-making processes are often considered undemocratic by unions).

Thus on the one hand there are the tensions emerging between the different approaches and political cultures of the organisations collaborating to advance migrant workers rights. On the other hand the possibility of successful labour-community coalitions depends on the capacity of both labour and community institutions to work collaboratively to promote migrants’ workers participation and improve their lives at work and in the community. A positive collaboration and mutual openness is also hindered by suspicion that one or the other organisation profits to pursue ‘opportunistic recruitment’, mainly in terms of rapidly being able to increase its own membership on the back of the work of the other organisation. The UK case studies illustrate that it is more often the union that ‘goes to the community’ to reach out to migrant workers rather than a genuine desire for coalition or collaboration and mainly because of recruitment interests (rather than the community searching funding and support from the unions). Again this takes us back to the issue of identity and the purpose of union organising and the way unions perceive their members’ interests. Are these narrow and sectorally based or are they more intersectional incorporating the wider experiences of migrant workers’ lives? Taking the latter approach requires a different ideological approach for unions if unions are to engage with the working lives of migrant workers. In the case of the hotel workers campaign, one of the main shortfalls was that workers did not feel involved in the campaign and were put under pressure by both Unite and London Citizens to recruit more members into the branch (Alberti 2010). None of the organisations appeared interested in building long-term and larger coalitions with grass root groups around migrant workers’ organising beside that specific campaign. In contrast, at a certain stage of Unite’s Justice for Cleaners campaign, there was effective involvement of community organisations including Polish, Portuguese, Spanish speaking migrant-based organisations and social movements such as Papers Please and None is Illegal. The latter are grassroot groups that are engaged in the battle for migrants’ rights and seek to expose employers who exploit the greater vulnerability of undocumented migrants. Involving a different range of allies in the community and across social movements for justice as well as workers across sectors, political pressure can successfully be put on employers even if traditional recognition agreements via trade union ballots are not secured. This was showed by research comparing recent experiments of union organising in the UK with those in the US (Heery and Simms 2008).

Our findings suggest that community level approach is key in organising migrant workers especially if the workforce is scattered in different places as a consequence of subcontracting. In those cases it is impossible to find a ‘workplace unit’ from which to build a sense of unity between workers and reach out to new recruits. Even within the public sector, waves of privatisation and externalisation of services render it more difficult to organise workers on a workplace level. As Tapia(2009: 18) highlighted in the context of the care workers campaign led by Unison: ‘the branches, physically situated in local authority buildings and big hospitals, are not used to organising migrant workers, who work mainly on the periphery of the public sector. Today, many public service jobs, such as street cleaning and care work, are contracted out by the local council.’

Since the practice of subcontracting disperses workers throughout different worksites under multiple employers, workplace-based organising becomes difficult. Instead, the associational power built with the wider community allows the campaigns to target not the immediate, visible employers, e.g. the subcontracted cleaning companies, but the real building owners and business tenants through ‘in your face’ street protests (see Waldinger et al. 1998, Bronfenbrenner et. al 1998). Indeed, it has been around the demand for a London Living Wage where there has been the greatest interaction and collaboration between trade unions and community organisations. One way to tackle the fragmentation of the workforce in sectors with high migrant employment such as cleaning and hospitality is through living wage campaigns aimed at bringing in-house and subcontracted workers together (Evans et al. 2007). For instance in the hotel workers campaign the ‘pay claim 2009’ was chosen as part of the living wage campaign because this is considered a particularly suitable strategy for organising workplaces with high levels of subcontracted work. In this sense, the living wage campaign can be considered a form of ‘community unionism’ in that its aim is to exert pressure on employers to win a living wage for all sub-contracted as well asin-house staff (Holgate and Wills 2007). It appeared however, during the course of the campaign in the Hyatt hotels, that the focus on the London Living Wage was not sufficient to bridge the distances and tensions between the different categories of workers, namely those employed through a ‘third party agency’ and those directly employed by the hotel. Indeed during the union organising effort at the Hyatt hotel, the tensions between these two categories of workers were not alleviated by the politics of the union branch, nor by that of London Citizens. Both the organisations maintained the ‘reduction of agency work’ as one of the key demands of the campaign while failing the involvement of migrant agency workers in the recruitment process. The leaders rather appeard to play ‘established’ in-house workers against the ‘new comers’ employed by the agencies, considering the latter intrinsically uninterested in trade union involvement (Alberti 2010).

There were other elements that made the living wage campaign unsuccessful in that context. In the UK, despite the living wage being calculated every year at the city level by the Mayor’s Office, it is still up to individual employer to sign up to it. Local and national governments may promise support on a rhetorical level but in practice leaving the actual implementation of the living wage to the ‘good will of employers’ in each workplace. This is different from the US, where the living wage can be implemented in the form of ordinances for certain sectors and whole geographical areas, taking wages out of competition. Even on purely strategic level as a field of collaboration between unions and community groups, it makes a significant difference if City Councils can be lobbied to adopt a living wage in the form of a local ordinance that then becomes compulsory to all employers in one area. During the hotel workers campaign, both London Citizens and Unite shifted their strategy from grassroots organising and workers’ leadership development to a ‘politics of incentive’, symbolically awarding individual employers that pay their employees the living wage. By privileging the negotiation with employers, the organisations abandoned their attempt to organising workers on the ground. Moreover, where liaising with local authorities and employers is privileged over organising, workers are bypassed and the questions of migrant’s political education and engagement are left aside.

**Summary**

Our findings, although still tentative, show that a systematic and comprehensive approach by UK unions to the integration of migrant workers is still missing and that efforts are limited partly due to internal debates and the dependence on ad-hoc government-funded projects. Furthermore, in most cases, the unions have sought ‘structural’ solutions to deal with migrant issues, such as setting up migrant units within the unions, or in the case of the GMB, a specific migrant workers’ branch to accommodate needs specific to migrant workers. Since there is a stark division of labour between the migrant support units, handling strict migration issues, and the union branches, focusing on organising workplaces, a false dichotomy between work and migration issues is being reproduced. Unions thus tend to dismiss the issue of intersectionality, or the fact that migrant workers, in particular, experience multiple identities and forms of oppression, and rather focus on migrants as simply workers, almost entirely neglecting or externalising the migrant workers’ other – particularly vulnerable – social dimensions. Furthermore, the three UK unions – Unite, Unison and GMB – have tended towards a project-based approach to organising and involving migrant workers in their union structures, mainly through specific learning and educational initiatives. In terms of the different educational strategies used to integrate and increase employees’ voice in unionisation efforts in the UK, the educational spaces for migrants were more or less limited to an idea of personal ‘self-development’ to increase their market strength and more generally their integration in the local community (i.e. either via ESOL classes or other forms of training for workers’ representatives) and appear in a quite individualised form. While presented as a tailored service for migrants, there is only a weak link between (individual) service provision and organising models collective in scope. Finally, while these UK unions have build coalitions with other organisations during campaigns, these alliances have been mainly ad-hoc and instrumental to strengthen their union membership base and have therefore tended to be short-term. They often use community links strategically, with the aim of increasing the union membership among the migrant workforce rather than engaging in forms of ‘reciprocal community unionism’ (Wills and Simms 2004).

The emergence of new and looser structures of migrants’ organising such as those within the civil society organisation London Citizens as compared to unions’ relatively rigid industrial branches, points to the need to create more informal environments to engage migrants on active terms rather than just providing them with services with the hope of increasing membership levels. Moreover, while we emphasise contamination between union and non-union organisations we also need not reproduce dichotomies between economic, work related and other broader social issues when it comes to organise migrant workers (and not only migrants). The different and separate use of the space of the union on the one hand (where we are all workers no matter our migration status) and that of the community on the other (where to express our desire for being member of the broader citizens community) may point to an approach that favours a strategic use of different identities, agendas, scales and coalitions to unite and strengthen migrants’ bargaining power and their active involvement into civil society and labour organisations according to the leverage in their specific context (industry, territory, existing alliances and support networks). Rather than stressing amalgamation, it may be positive to maintain these different spaces of empowerment for migrants as relatively autonomous from each other, still valorising the specific moment of intersection in terms of issues, common identities and solidarities among an increasingly diverse and fragmented workforce.

In this context it is also possible to rethink trade unions’ and civil society organisations traditional understanding of ‘migrants’ integration’ into the labour organisations. Drawing from the insights of the feminist movement (Fonow 2003) suggests to find a balance between integration and autonomy. Integration is still important for two reasons: gaining a sense of legitimacy and access to resource, while autonomy is fundamental to maintain the ‘radical edge’ of the movement. Maintaining autonomy may also help guaranteeing a continuous process of reconfiguration of alliances, strategies and institutional renewal between different organisations engaged in the battle for improving migrants’ precarious lives.

Through the examples of some of the major trade unions’ initiatives in the UK to organise low-paid migrant workers, this paper has shown how the labour movement together with other civil society groups are in the process of reshaping part of their structures and policies to include an increasingly fragmented, culturally and socially diversified workforce and to advance migrants’ conditions and bargaining power at work. Further steps are clearly required at the three levels considered in the present analysis, namely the workers’ identities, the unions’ educational programmes and labour-community coalitions around migrant workers’ rights. Expanding the range of actors in the alliances to be built at the community level so as to include migrant communities and social movement groups appeared in the case studies a particularly promising strategy in order to recognise the complex identities and multiple needs of migrants, and provide them with the social spaces, training and confidence necessary to be the protagonist of effective improvements in their working lives.

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2. Research for this paper is part of a larger project on unions and immigrant workers, coordinated at the ILR School at Cornell University by Lee Adler, Maite Tapia and Lowell Turner. Project researchers have included Daniel Cornfield, Janice Fine and Denisse Roca Servat for the US; Gabriella Alberti, Jane Holgate and Maite Tapia for the UK; Chiara Benassi, Emilija Mitrovic, Oliver Trede, and Ian Greer, Zyama Ciupijus and Nathan Lillie for Germany; and Mirvat Abd el ghani, Laetitia Dechaufour and Marion Quintin for France. Thanks also to union participants who commented on our work at a workshop in Frankfurt, November 3-4, 2011: Ana Avendaño (AFL-CIO), Wilf Sullivan (TUC), Francine Blanche (CGT), Peter Bremme (ver.di), Wolf Jürgen Röder, Petra Wecklik and Bobby Winkler (IG Metall). Academic workshop commentators included Sébastien Chauvin, Michael Fichter, Steve French and Otto Jacobi. Funds for this research have been provided by the Hans Böckler Foundation, the Carnegie Corporation, and the Public Welfare Foundation. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. The Union Modernisation Fund (UMF) is a grant scheme, launched by the previous government, providing financial assistance to independent trade unions and their federations for a limited period. It was designed to support innovative modernisation projects, which contribute to a transformational change in the organisational effectiveness of a trade union. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. London Citizens is an umbrella organisation of the civil society including trade union branches, community groups, academics and activists concerned with social justice issues and vulnerable workers’ rights. In the last decade the Hotel Workers branch became one of the founding members of ‘West London Citizens’, an alliance of 36 civil society organisations and community groups across four London boroughs. Since 2005 Unite and London Citizens (LC) have campaigned for the Living Wage and in the hotel sector since the summer 2006 when the campaign was launched in London at a demonstration outside the Hilton Metropole Hotel Evans, Y, Wills, J, Kavita Datta, Herbert, J, McIlwaine, C and May, J (2007) ''Subcontracting by stealth' in London's hotels: impacts and implications for labour organising.' *Just Labor. A Canadian Journal of Work and Society*. 10: 85-96. Holgate, J and Wills, J (2007) 'Organising Labor in London: lessons from the living wage campaign' in Turner, L. and Cornfield, D. (eds.) *Labor in the New Urban Battlefields: local solidarity in a global economy*. Cornell: Cornell University Press: 211-223. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Unite’s organising approach has been to focus mainly on sectoral workplace organising (Simms, M and Holgate, J (2010) 'Organising for what? Where is the debate on the politics of organising?'. *Work, Employment and Society*. 24: 1: 157-168) and migrant workers becoming part of the union through specific organising drives in chosen sectors of the labour market. The union was inspired by both the US ‘organising model’ (inherited in particular from the SEIU in the US), as well as by the efforts of the community-based organisation, London Citisens. The emphasis of the union is mainly on ‘organising the unorganised’ in different sectors such as the food industry (red and white meat), building services (cleaners), or aviation (low cost airlines), focusing on membership growth and the development of activists and shop stewards to achieve sufficient union density in these sectors to facilitate collective bargaining. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)