

## **ACCOMMODATING DIFFERENCE? BRITISH TRADE UNIONS AND POLISH MIGRANT WORKERS**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This article examines and evaluates the experiences of British unions in recruiting and organizing Polish migrant workers. It concludes that while British unions have been pursuing a range of relevant initiatives that seem to address key challenges confronting the recruitment and organization of such workers, these initiatives embody a number of significant weaknesses that cast doubts over their long-term outcomes.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Against the background of a dramatic decline in union membership, organization, and recognition in Britain over the past three decades, a burgeoning literature has been developed on what unions can do to “renew” or “revitalize” themselves. At risk of oversimplification, this literature can be seen to encompass two distinct, but not mutually exclusive, strands. First, there is a strand that focuses attention on the nature and potential value of a number of different “generic” types of union strategies, such as “partnership,” “organising,” “servicing,” and diversity, social movement, and community unionism (Cunningham & James, 2010; Heery, Healy, & Taylor, 2004). A second strand centers on a consideration of the challenges unions face in expanding their membership among particular underrepresented

categories of workers, such as part-timers, temporary workers, ethnic minorities, women, and young people, and how these challenges might be addressed (Healy, Bradley, & Mukherjee, 2004; Healy & Kirton, 2000; Payne, 1989; Walters, 2002).

Recently, this second strand of work has expanded to encompass a greater focus of attention on the position of migrant workers. That it has done so is unsurprising given the extent of recent labor migration to the UK, notably as a result of the arrival of large numbers of migrant workers following the accession into the European Union (EU) on 1 May 2004 of eight countries— the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia, henceforth referred to, in line with common practice, as the A8 countries. Indeed, the inflow of workers from these countries in the period after their accession was such that it made a substantial contribution to the largest ever in-migration to the UK on record (Salt & Millar, 2006).

However, the importance of the new migrant community to the future of the British union movement extends beyond the simple fact of its current numerical size, as a result of two further and related factors. First, there is evidence available to indicate that the propensity to unionize among young people is higher among those who come from a family background marked by pro-union sympathies (Blandon & Machin, 2003). Second, projections suggest that not only will just under half of the UK population growth during the period 2006–2031 stem directly from net immigration, but that a further 23% will arise indirectly from it (House of Lords, 2008). Thus, taken in conjunction with the size of the current migrant workforce, these factors serve to suggest that the union movement's future health is likely to be intimately connected to its ability to expand its membership among members of this workforce.

How such an expansion can best be achieved is therefore a question that is potentially of the utmost importance to the union movement, particularly given that the challenges unions face in this area overlap with a number of other challenges that they are facing in the “new economy of work,” including the difficulty of expanding the union presence among small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), temporary workers, and ethnic minorities more generally. The fact remains, nevertheless, that systematic knowledge about what British unions have been doing to recruit among the members of the new migrant workforce, and to what effect, currently remains relatively limited, as does the literature more generally on the relationship between unions and migrant workers (McGovern, 2007).

Against this backdrop, the present article draws on a recent study of British trade union initiatives designed to expand membership and organization among Polish migrant workers. It does so with two related objectives in mind. The first of these is to use the findings to shed light on the nature of the initiatives currently being pursued and union experiences of them. The second is to explore how far there are grounds for believing that the initiatives concerned provide a basis for achieving a substantial, and sustainable, expansion of union membership and organization among Polish migrants.

What follows is divided into four main sections. In the first, attention is paid to the opportunities for union recruitment and organization among Polish migrant workers in Britain, and the barriers to this. The next two sections provide details of the methodology of the study drawn upon here and its main findings. Finally, the fourth section uses these findings to critically discuss the prospects of the British union movement securing a substantial, and sustainable, expansion of membership and organization among the Polish migrant workforce.

### **BRITISH UNIONS AND POLISH MIGRANT WORKERS: THE OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES**

There is no question that the British union movement nationally has acknowledged the importance of expanding recruitment and organization among migrant workers in general and Polish workers in particular. In the case of the latter, for example, the Trades Union Congress (TUC), the main union federation in Britain, has commissioned a number of studies of these workers' labor market needs and positions, as well as the challenges and opportunities they provide to unions, and has also supported a small number of regional projects focused more directly on improving union membership and organization among them (Anderson, Ruhs, Rogaly, & Spencer, 2006; Fitzgerald, 2006, 2007, 2008; Fitzgerald & Hardy, 2010).

This focus of attention on the Polish migrant workforce can, at one level, be viewed as a logical progression of the TUC's long-standing antiracism and antidiscrimination policies (Wrench, 2004) and opposition to immigration controls (Avci & McDonald, 2000; Krings, 2009). It can also, however, be seen more narrowly as a reflection of a wider recognition that unions need to do more to organize among migrant workers and other "marginalized groups" (TUC, 2008). Indeed, it has been argued that the adoption of a relatively inclusive stance toward immigration on the part of the British union movement has itself been influenced by the fall in membership that it has experienced in recent decades and the awareness this has generated of the need to take more seriously the needs and interests of marginalized groups, including black and minority ethnic (BME) groups (Wrench, 2004).

At another level, however, the focus on Polish migrants can be seen as a more straightforward pragmatic response to the sheer scale of the inward migration that occurred following the gaining, by workers from Poland, as well as from the other A8 countries, of access to the UK labor market. This inward flow, during the period May 2004 to December 2007, saw over 750,000 A8 nationals register for employment in the country, with by far the largest proportion coming from Poland (House of Lords, 2008).

Clearly, given its numerical size, the Polish migrant workforce offers a potentially fertile ground for union recruitment and organization. This is even more apparent when account is taken of clear evidence that many within this workforce

occupy relatively disadvantageous labor market positions and hence work in contexts that could well make union membership attractive. Thus, the vast majority of recent A8 migrants have been found to be employed in low-paying jobs, jobs paying only around the minimum wage (House of Lords, 2008), and in jobs where working conditions more generally are often poor (McKay, Craw, & Chopra, 2006). Indeed, there is clear evidence that significant numbers of them have been subjected to what can only be described more generally as exploitative conditions of employment (Citizens Advice Bureau, 2004; TUC, 2008). This point is underlined by the fact that Polish workers have constituted the largest national grouping of labor operating in the areas of employment governed by the Gangmasters Licensing Authority, namely, agriculture, horticulture, and associated processing and packaging industries (Geddes, Scott, & Nielsen, 2007). This Authority having been established in 2006 to regulate labor standards within employment agencies operating in sectors where large numbers of temporary migrant workers were utilized and where concerns existed regarding the exploitation of such workers.

The potential for union recruitment, however, exists alongside Labour Force Survey data showing that actual union membership among Polish migrants is very low, standing at just over 3% (Anderson, Ruhs, Rogaly, & Spencer, 2006). It would therefore seem on the basis of the available evidence that the British union movement has to date struggled, at the aggregate level, to achieve a substantial membership presence among them.

This low level of union penetration can be viewed as the product of a number of barriers that unions face in seeking to recruit and organize among the members of the Polish migrant workforce. These barriers, or challenges, can be linked to three categories of factors that the existing literature suggests influence significantly the joining behavior of potential union members (Turner, D'Art, & Cross, 2009; Turner, D'Art, & O'Sullivan, 2008). First, there is the extent to which union membership is available and encouraged via surrounding "social norms" (Corneo, 1995; Green, 1990). Second is the degree to which union membership is viewed as providing an effective means of addressing any existing sources of work-related grievances (Badigannavar & Kelly, 2005) and is seen as attractive in cost-benefit terms (Crouch, 1982). Third is how far potential recruits understand the role of unions and are attitudinally supportive of this role.

The largest proportion of the Polish workforce is, for example, based in little-unionized parts of the private sector, such as retail/hospitality, construction, and "other services" (Drinkwater, 2008). In addition, it would seem that a substantial proportion of the members of this workforce, perhaps over half, are in temporary employment (Home Office, 2008), a feature that points to the important role that, again, largely nonunionized employment agencies play in providing them with access to employment (Anderson, Clark, & Parutis, 2006; Geddes et al., 2007).

The scope for unions to expand their membership significantly through in-fill recruitment within workplaces where they are already recognized would consequently appear to be highly constrained. As a result, the achievement of such an expansion would seem necessarily also to require the building up of membership at the workplace level in the absence of already existing recognition or the building up of membership through “beyond the enterprise” recruitment (Heery et al., 2004). These sources of expansion must, however, themselves be viewed as problematic, given how unions have struggled, even against the background of a statutory recognition procedure, to expand union organization within nonunionized workplaces in general, and in SMEs in particular (Kersley et al., 2006), and the limited role that community and social movement unionism has so far played within British union renewal strategies (Perrett & Martinez Lucio, 2009; Wills & Simms, 2004). This limited role so far of community and social movement unionism can, however, be noted as existing alongside evidence highlighting the important role that faith-based organizations often play in providing support to low-paid migrant workers (Datta et al., 2007).

Such problematic features of the employment situation of Polish migrants, in turn, exist alongside a number of other factors that can pose problems for union organizing attempts. At the time of registering for employment, for example, the majority of Polish migrants expressed an intention, admittedly often subsequently changed, to stay for less than a year (Spencer et al., 2007). This is a potentially important characteristic, given the evidence that the propensity of migrant workers to unionize is influenced by the length of time they have spent in the host country and the extent to which migration is viewed by them as being permanent (Waldinger & Der-Martirosian, 2000).

There are also concerns that their willingness to unionize could be adversely affected by the poor reputation that unions gained in Poland during the period of communist rule and the subsequent decline in the popularity of the Solidarity movement (Ost, 2006). In addition, the fact that the majority of the migrants are relatively young, mostly under the age of 35 and concentrated in the 16–25 age band (Drinkwater, 2008), can also be anticipated to be a potential source of difficulty. For, in the context of a low overall level of union membership density, only a very small percentage of members of this age range are members of unions in Poland, with the result that they are unlikely to have arrived in the UK with any prior contact, or direct understanding, of unions (Gardawski, 2002; Hardy & Fitzgerald, 2008; Ost, 2006).

Furthermore, the widespread need for language support identified among the recent migrants means that language, as well as cultural barriers, would seem likely to confront attempts to challenge any adverse prior perceptions and understandings about the nature of British unions and the role that they play (Fitzgerald, 2006; Meardi, 2007). Potential barriers that more general research on the relationship between unions and minority groups indicates can subsequently

further act to hinder their integration into union activities once they have become union members (Greene & Kirton, 2003).

At the same time, however, all would not seem to be doom and gloom, since there is also evidence to suggest that the extent of these potential sources of attitudinal and cultural problems should not be overstated. A survey undertaken on behalf of the TUC of Polish and Lithuanian workers who had requested a copy of a leaflet giving details of employment rights and the role of trade unions in their own language, for example, found that while just 3% of the 463 Polish respondents were union members, 54% of the total sample of 508 respondents stated that they would be interested in joining a union (Anderson, Clark, & Parutis, 2006). This picture is reinforced by the fact that in an Irish survey of Polish migrant workers, 37% of nonmembers reported that they would “definitely” join a union if asked (Turner et al., 2008).

In short, then, the numerical size of the Polish migrant workforce, its concentration in relatively low-paying and low-skilled jobs, and evidence pointing to the not infrequent exposure of workers to exploitative employer behavior suggest that this workforce is a potentially fertile target for union recruitment and organization. That this is the case, however, exists alongside a very low level of current union membership and a number of potential barriers to union recruitment and organization. These potential difficulties encompass, as highlighted above, a frequent lack of immediate union availability, doubts regarding the ability of unions to resolve issues of concern at the workplace level, attitudinal awareness, and language difficulties. But these challenges and barriers do exist alongside some evidence suggesting that many Polish workers may, in principle, be supportive of unions and the idea of joining them.

## METHODOLOGY

The data drawn upon here come from three main sources, in-depth interviews with union staff, searches of the Web sites of the Trades Union Congress and those unions in which interviews were carried out, and a range of documentary evidence obtained from these Web sites and other sources. Some use was, however, also made of information gained from the Web sites of organizations concerned with migration-related issues; attendance at several meetings connected to a migrant workers’ branch established by the GMB union in Southampton; visits to a new multiunion learning project at Gatwick airport and informal discussions with staff and activists involved in this; and attendance at relevant conferences and seminars, together with informal conversations with union officials and activists, as well as Polish migrants themselves, during the course of these conferences and seminars.

The interviews and Web site searches were conducted with a view to obtaining information on (a) the existence, and nature, of any specialist organizational units/positions that had been established to develop policy and/or coordinate

activities in relation to the organization of migrant workers; (b) materials that had been prepared specifically for such workers, such as information about the union and its activities and written advice about employment, social security, and immigration rights, and how far these were available in languages other than English; and (c) particular initiatives that had been undertaken to expand recruitment and organization among migrants, and the degree to which these had been successful.

In all, 28 interviews were conducted. The decision to utilize interviews rather than adopt a survey-based approach reflected the exploratory nature of the research and the widely accepted view that such research, encompassing as it does “why” and “how” questions, is best pursued via the adoption of a qualitative approach (Maylor & Blackmon, 2005; Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 1997).

Those interviewed included a range of officials from a number of Britain’s largest unions: Community, GMB, Unite–Transport and General Workers’ Union (TGWU), Unite–Amicus, the Union of Construction, Allied Trades and Technicians (UCATT), UNISON, and the Royal College of Nursing and, more particularly, project workers, organizers, and several migrant worker activists directly involved in initiatives aimed at recruiting and organizing among Polish migrant workers. They also included the president of the Federation of Poles in Great Britain, an organization that was found to have been actively collaborating with a variety of unions, representatives from several Polish community groups, a manager from an employment agency involved in a collaborative partnership with Community in relation to the provision of English language classes for migrant workers, and the secretary of a Polish Catholic Centre that had been undertaking joint work with Unite–Amicus. The interviews lasted between one hour and two and a half hours. All were recorded and subsequently transcribed for analysis.

In many respects, therefore, the findings reported below complement those reported in a recent article by Fitzgerald and Hardy (2010), which also explored British union organizing strategies in respect of Polish migrant workers. The findings reported here complement those reported by Fitzgerald and Hardy, first, by drawing on interviews from a wider range of unions and second, by extending the data collection to encompass not only relatively senior union officials but also union organizers and project workers directly involved in initiatives aimed at migrant workers and several migrant worker activists. To reinforce this complementarity, therefore, where quotations from interview transcripts are utilized in what follows, they will be drawn from these different constituencies of interviewees.

## FINDINGS

The findings obtained through the above sources are initially detailed through an examination of the use made of different types of “beyond the enterprise” activity. Attention then turns to the links between this activity



and organizing at the workplace level and the use made of “like for like” staffing and activism.

### **“Beyond the Enterprise” Activity**

It emerged clearly from the data gathered that unions had undertaken a range of actions to raise their profile among the members of the Polish migrant workforce, to highlight the benefits that membership can bring, and to gain access to workers. It was also clear that they had done so because migrant workers in general were seen to represent a potentially important source of new membership, as illustrated by the following quotation from one of the union organizers:

Nowadays, migrant workers represent a considerable part of our workforce. We will lose our voice in the workplace if they will not join us.

This “beyond the enterprise” activity was found to have encompassed three main strands. The first of these involved making relevant information available via publications and union Web sites. The TUC, for example, had secured agreement for those registering under the Worker Registration Scheme (WRS) to be provided with a pamphlet that covered all of the above issues and additionally produced this pamphlet in a number of different languages, including Polish. In addition, it had also launched a Web site for Polish workers in their own language and produced a guide, in conjunction with the Joint Council on the Welfare of Immigrants, that, among other things, detailed the typical problems encountered by migrant workers and how unions can respond to them (TUC, 2002). Meanwhile, similar activities had been undertaken by most of the individual unions within which interviews were conducted.

The two other strands involved supplementing such general awareness raising by seeking to gain access to Polish migrant workers through (a) undertaking educational initiatives, and (b) engaging with community groups and other organizations with an interest in the welfare of migrant workers.

### **Education**

In recognition of the language problems faced by many migrant workers, interviewees revealed that unions had been commonly involved in providing English language classes to Polish migrants under the framework of the government-funded English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) Programme. These educational initiatives, although developed independently by different unions, were found to frequently encompass similar elements. Thus, they invariably provided, in addition to language tuition, other forms of support, such as help with curriculum vitae writing and the provision of advice on housing and health care, and were utilized to distribute information on employment rights and the role and benefits of unions. In some cases they had also been supported by the establishment of community-based learning centers where access could be gained to a



wider range of training opportunities and more general union support and advice. Typically, such educational initiatives have been partly or wholly funded externally, for example, via the government-financed Union Learning Fund, local authorities, regional development agencies, and Learning and Skills Councils.

An initiative undertaken in Community's South West region provides a typical illustration of this education-based activity (Heyes, 2009). Here, Union Learning funds have been used to provide workers with free access to a 30-hour ESOL course and the possibility of subsequently taking a National City and Guilds qualification. These classes have additionally been used to provide information on the activities of the union and the benefits of joining it, and to also give participants advice and guidance on a range of work- and non-work-related matters, including matters relating to housing, health care, schooling, and possible future training and education in which they could take part. Interestingly, one of this project's "stakeholders" was a temporary employment agency that utilized the language classes provided for its own staff.

Those interviewed who were directly involved in such educational initiatives invariably reported that the initiatives were meeting a real and important need among Polish workers. The following quotation from a Polish project worker captures this view well:

The Polish, we have different needs to indigenous workers, and unions have to respond to this if they want to be attractive for us. We come here having nothing and not understanding much; we often don't speak a word of English. We need to settle first, learn the language, bring our families over, send children to school, and we need help with all this.

Such educational initiatives were further seen to be valuable in terms of the access they provided to migrant workers, a value, perhaps, most clearly demonstrated by the fact that a center established in Southampton by the GMB was reported to have around 100 workers taking courses each week. It also appeared that this center, particularly via the provision of English language support, provided a useful means of overcoming communication and cultural barriers. Thus, a union organizer commented:

A big barrier that unions have got in some areas is a language barrier. I can stand up and do this and that with hands, but then what we have done . . . with this project . . . is invaluable in relation to breaking down those barriers. And then the trust element builds up.

### **Engagement with Community Groups and Other Organizations**

A range of examples of unions working with, or through, community-based organizations was identified, including the Federation of Poles in Great Britain, the Catholic Church, local authorities, and regional development agencies.

In the North West of the country, for example, the regional development agency was found to have provided financial assistance to support the establishment of a charitable body, Migrant Workers North West, by Unite–TGWU to collate and promote “best practice” in the employment of migrant workers and the provision of support to migrant workers’ communities. Meanwhile, a number of unions, including Unite–TGWU, GMB, UCATT, and Unite–Amicus, were also found to have organized joint meetings with the Federation of Poles in Great Britain, as well as with local Polish community groups. The president of this federation commented on the motives for working with trade unions and the benefits it brought to it in the following terms:

We, as a Polish community organization, don’t have enough expertise or enough money to defend individuals. . . . But without doubt, our field of activity is to persuade Poles to join unions. . . . Simply, they don’t know how to approach Polish people, they don’t know what to say, they don’t know how to encourage them. Maybe, the best or the worst example of that was one union, which is very active among people working in hotels. And they wanted to organize a meeting for hotel workers. . . . They provided a very good lunch for everybody, they paid for renting the room, they spent lots of money, and there were only three people who turned up for the meeting. . . . We organized a meeting in the same place, a month later, with a much smaller trade union. We didn’t offer anything to people who were coming except help and information, and we had over 200 people who turned up. So there is a difference.

Such meetings were seen to have invariably provided unions with a valuable means of accessing Polish migrant workers in order to explain what they do and the benefits of joining. For example, a joint meeting with Unite–Amicus in Bradford, at which advice was given on a range of issues, including housing and social services, and information provided on how to join unions and the benefits of doing so, was reported to have attracted around 400 people. Similarly, a public meeting organized by the GMB in Southampton, as a result of contacts with the local Polish community, was attended by 120 workers and led not only to the recruitment of new members but to a subsequent decision to set up a new union branch (for which, see below).

A number of examples were also identified of various forms of local involvement with the Catholic Church in campaigns and joint meetings. Perhaps the most developed of these collaborations was that with Unite–Amicus in the Yorkshire and Humberside area. Here, the union had established a close working relationship with the Polish Catholic Centre in Leeds, which, among other things, encompassed the provision of financial support and articles for the Centre’s newspaper, as well as ESOL and other educational classes, and the running every six weeks of joint union-church meetings in different parts of the region, as well as a union presence each Sunday before and after Mass.

### Workplace Organizing and “Beyond the Enterprise” Activity

Unions were, as in the educational initiatives already detailed, reported to be using their engagement with community groups and other organizations to identify employers and workplaces where organizing activity could be undertaken. At the same time, however, only limited numbers of concrete examples were identified where this “beyond the enterprise” activity had contributed directly to organizing activity.

One such example was the already mentioned educational collaboration between Community and a temporary employment agency, which had extended its activities to encompass the internal circulation of union leaflets, the creation of a noticeboard that could be used to promote the union, and the more general encouragement of union membership by the agency when workers registered with it. Another example was a campaign aimed at a flower company within GMB’s Southern region, which had led to the obtaining of representation rights and the eventual hope of recognition being secured.

No examples were therefore found of recognition campaigns being conducted on the basis of the type of comprehensive organizing advocated in the United States’ “new labor movement” literature (Milkman, 2006; Milkman & Voss, 2004; Sherman & Voss, 2000; Voss & Sherman, 2003), beyond the already well reported examples of TELCO’s Living Wage Campaign in East London and the Unite–TGWU-led Justice for Cleaners Campaign (TUC, 2008; Wills, 2002)—it may be noted that the latter has been very much influenced by the U.S. Justice for Janitors campaign (Erickson et al., 2002).

Where unions were recognized in workplaces containing substantial numbers of migrant workers, cases were reported of English language provision being used as a means of encouraging union membership. For example, in relation to a major bus company, reference was made to how Unite–TGWU were using an in-house learning center in this way in respect of the large number of Polish bus drivers that the company had employed. In a similar vein, a UNISON interviewee reported how such language classes were being provided for Eastern European workers employed by a cleaning services company within which the union had recognition. There were, however, signs that difficulties could exist at the workplace level regarding the offering of services to nonmember migrant workers as an inducement for them to become members, because of the use of income derived from existing members for this purpose. This is an issue that the following quotation from a union branch official (activist), in response to a question about whether training was being provided to nonmembers within a particular work site, illustrates well:

No, not necessarily; what we do is we supply initial advice to people. What we say to people is look, you’re not a union member, we’ve got our existing members . . . and I think to a certain extent if you’re a member you’re buying into something. . . . You have to be a bit careful sometimes; you can go into it too far and I could have a member coming up to me saying, well, hang on a minute.

### “Like for Like” Recruitment

There was general agreement among interviewees that effective organizing among migrant workers requires due account to be taken of relevant language and cultural barriers. One particular challenge noted in this regard was the way in which workers can be suspicious of unions, or unwilling to engage with them, because of the close relationships that had existed under communist rule between unions and government in Poland. Another was the way in which workers’ engagement with, and participation in, the activities of union branches could be problematic because of language limitations, and the difficulties that could arise as a result of the way in which branch meetings are conducted. For example, in relation to such difficulties, one migrant worker activist observed the following:

After the first six months of membership, I almost gave up because I couldn’t really follow what was talked about. It all seemed to be in code to me, using abbreviations, and . . . what is it called . . . acronyms? Well, in the end I persevered, and now I’m glad I did so. Gaining understanding seemed to also gain me acceptance.

A number of examples were identified of joint work with Polish unions to address these language and cultural barriers. At the level of the TUC, for example, collaboration with Solidarity was found to have led to the appointment of a full-time organizer from the latter in the North West region and the involvement of another organizer in a collaborative project involving the Northern TUC, UCATT, and Northumbria University centered on the North East construction industry (Fitzgerald, 2006). Meanwhile, at the level of individual unions, UNISON had cooperated with OPZZ, another Polish union, on overcoming cultural barriers to organizing in Polish communities, and the GMB had concluded an agreement with Solidarity under which the latter undertook to set up a Web site for Polish workers, informing them of their employment rights, the benefits of joining a union, and how they could join the GMB, including the option of joining even before they left Poland (GMB, 2007).

Virtually all of the unions also provided examples of Polish organizers and project workers having been appointed against the backcloth of evidence pointing to the potential value of “like for like” organizing (Holgate, 2005). These examples included the presence of two Polish members of staff in Unite–TGWU’s North West region’s organizing unit, the employment of a Polish liaison worker to support the earlier mentioned Community educational initiative, and the similar use of staff in the GMB’s Southern region.

A number of interviewees further alluded to the importance of encouraging members from migrant groups not only to become members but also to become activists, with one interviewee observing, for example, that “migrant workers are more likely to join a union within which migrants are active” and another commenting, in relation to this, that “It is logical as I see it; we all prefer someone we identify with. English identify with English, Poles with Poles, and so on.”

In several unions, such considerations had led to the adoption of initiatives specifically aimed at increasing the number of migrant union activists. The GMB's Southern region, for example, had developed an activist course for migrant workers aimed at encouraging the union's approach to self-organizing, and another focusing on the challenges that union officers face in both servicing and organizing migrant workers (GMB, 2008). Meanwhile, nationally within UNISON, a Migrant Workers Participation Project had been established with financial support from the government-financed Union Modernisation Fund to develop initiatives in this area and thereby support the union's constitutional objective of ensuring that representation at all levels of the union is proportionately representative of its membership.

Several examples were, in turn, found in which unions had decided to pursue this logic to the point of organizing Polish members into geographically based migrant worker branches that were supported by Polish-speaking staff. Community's South West regional educational initiative had, for example, led to the establishment of such a branch in Yeovil. Similarly, a branch of this type had been set up in the GMB's Southern region in Southampton (Labour Research Department, 2007).

## DISCUSSION

In the recent article by Fitzgerald and Hardy (2010) referred to earlier, attention was drawn to how British unions had sought to recruit and organize among Polish migrant workers using a range of innovative strategies and via the establishment of new local, regional, national, and international collaborations. At the same time, while noting that such alliances and networks had been highly successful in engaging and recruiting A8 migrant workers, Fitzgerald and Hardy expressed concerns about their scale and sustainability; pointed to the way in which the sustainability of the strategies adopted was threatened by resource constraints; highlighted how unions faced potential criticism from indigenous workers that their interests were being neglected, noted that disagreement existed as to whether migrant workers should be treated as a separate group; and reported concerns within unions about whether those recruited would prove to be "cost-effective to service." In many respects, as the following discussion will demonstrate, the findings from the present study, based as they are on data from a larger sample of unions, which did not therefore include some of those included in Fitzgerald and Hardy's study, can be seen to reinforce and therefore add weight to most of these observations. Our findings do, however, also appear to raise greater concerns about both the financial sustainability of many initiatives and of the membership gains made as a result of them. In doing so, our findings further suggest that unions still face major challenges in providing recently recruited migrant workers with an ongoing incentive to remain as union members when they have been recruited above the workplace level.

The findings reported above demonstrate, for example, that some of Britain's largest unions have been engaged in a variety of initiatives aimed at supporting the recruitment and organization of Polish migrant workers, confirming evidence reported elsewhere as to what unions have been doing in this regard (Heyes, 2009; Martinez Lucio & Perrett, 2009). Taken together, the findings reported above further show that the initiatives being pursued could be seen to broadly address the main challenges and barriers that were identified earlier as potentially confronting the recruiting and organizing of such workers.

The lack of availability of unions to migrant workers at the workplace level had been addressed by attempts to access them, often via community organizations, at the "beyond the enterprise" level and to utilize this access to identify their most pressing needs and concerns and possible opportunities for successful workplace organizing. Unions were also found to have sought to demonstrate their value to workers at this level through the provision of educational opportunities, notably, but not exclusively, in the form of ESOL classes, and other forms of both employment- and non-employment-based advice and support.

Efforts had further been made to use the contact established with Polish migrants to explain the nature of British trade unions and the benefits that membership of them can bring, and thereby to challenge any barriers to joining that stemmed from a lack of knowledge of unions or adverse prior perceptions of unions arising from their current and previous role in Poland. This was a process that had at times been facilitated by the use of "like for like" recruitment encompassing Polish (-speaking) staff and project workers, and the collaborative involvement of "trusted" community-based organizations. In a few cases, it has also been extended to encompass the establishment of migrant workers' branches that were intended to both support "self-organisation" and overcome language and cultural barriers confronting the engagement of migrant workers with "normal" branches.

Based on their experiences, interviewees, while acknowledging the challenges involved, generally felt that Polish migrant workers, particularly younger ones, were decidedly organizable, although this was a view that, with the notable exception of the GMB's migrant workers' branch in Southampton, was found to be generally difficult to validate by reference to hard recruitment data.

The positive observations regarding what British unions have been doing to recruit and organize among Polish migrant workers, however, need to be balanced against a number of problematic features of this activity, features that serve to raise important questions regarding the sustainability of many of the identified initiatives and the membership gains obtained as a result of them.

Much of the activity identified, notably in the educational area, essentially encompassed the servicing of important, but essentially immediate, individual needs at a "beyond the enterprise" level. As a result, the question inevitably arises as to whether membership will remain an attractive option once these needs have been met, particularly given the doubts that have been expressed more

generally as to whether educational initiatives, even when undertaken at the workplace level, provide an effective source of “union renewal” (McIlroy, 2008).

These concerns, in turn, receive further reinforcement from the premises of mobilization theory (Badigannavar & Kelly, 2005) and evidence that suggests that people often decide to join unions, and remain members of them, as a protective investment in case they “have a problem at work” (Waddington & Whitson, 1997). Thus, in the light of the generally limited evidence obtained of successful workplace organizing having stemmed from such servicing activity, doubt necessarily arises about the extent to which membership continuity can be achieved in the absence of workplace representative arrangements capable of providing protection against workplace problems and more generally engendering collective solidarity.

The resourcing and more general “governance” of the recruitment and organizing initiatives identified also serves to raise other important questions about their sustainability.

A common feature of many of them was their reliance on external, often short-term, funding from such sources as local authorities, local Learning and Skills Councils, regional development agencies, the Union Learning Fund, the Union Modernisation Fund, and the ESOL program. Another feature, in the case of initiatives undertaken by individual unions, was the local nature of their “authorship.”

Reliance on external funding raises obvious concerns about the ongoing sustainability of many of the identified initiatives, concerns that were given added weight in the findings presented above by the way in which changes to the funding of the ESOL program had already acted to threaten the future of some of the language training provided. The same is true of the devolved origins of much of the activity concerned, since not only was the extent to which it was the subject of wider and likely longer-term support at higher union levels generally unclear, but there were also indications that this support was at times problematic.

Overall, then, the picture to emerge from the findings obtained suggests that while a good deal of impressive work has been done across the country by unions to recruit and organize Polish workers, the financial sustainability of much of it would seem open to question; the scale of the membership gains obtained is, for the most part, far from clear; and doubts must exist as to whether these gains are themselves sustainable. Such reservations, it has to be acknowledged, may prove to be misplaced. Insofar as this is not the case, however, there remains the question of how unions should respond to them.

Clearly, one response would be for unions to focus their own internal resources in terms of staffing and expenditure more on initiatives to organize among migrant workers, so that the initiatives undertaken are less reliant on vulnerable sources of external funding. This in itself, however, would leave unresolved the wider and more fundamental issue of how membership gains achieved through initiatives of the type detailed in this article can be effectively sustained.



Existing evidence on joining unions, as highlighted earlier, points to the importance of workers' perceptions of the role that joining a union can play in protecting and enhancing their interests. In doing so, it indicates that member retention is intimately connected to the existence of an ongoing nexus between union membership and member interests. Given the doubts raised about the sustainability of recent membership among Polish migrants, one option to improve this nexus so that it extends beyond the addressing of needs, such as housing advice and English language support, associated with being a "recent migrant" would be to incorporate a wider range of "individual benefits" (Bassett & Cave, 1993). Even if this is financially and organizationally viable, however, the evidence does not lend much support to the likely value of such an approach (Kelly & Waddington, 1995; Williams, 1997).

If this pessimistic conclusion is correct, then the challenge for unions would seem to be finding a way to create a much more strategic linkage between "beyond the enterprise" organizing activity and the representation of workers' interests at the workplace level—so that initiatives at the first of these levels move beyond a focus on "recruitment" to form an integral part of a strategy aimed at the representation of the substantive employment-related interests of workers. In this regard, the wider adoption of many of the prescriptions of the U.S. "new labor movement" literature reviewed earlier would clearly seem potentially relevant. This is, moreover, perhaps particularly so with regard to the advocacy in this literature of organizing migrants on an "occupational" rather than "generic" level, as with the Justice for Janitors campaign. For such a focus clearly opens up a greater potential to link recruitment outside the workplace to a concerted approach to achieving representation within the workplace.

A strategic reorientation of this type would, however, still leave unions in Britain confronting major barriers with regard to the achievement of workplace representation (and recognition), notably employer opposition to union organizing and recognition. A further line of needed response would therefore seem to be the exertion of pressure for legal reforms supportive of its achievement.

In the space available, it is not possible to provide a detailed consideration of the precise reforms that could and should be pursued in this area, given that they potentially encompass improvements to the present statutory framework for union recognition (Ewing, Moore, & Wood, 2003), the creation of stronger antidiscrimination protection for union members, and the introduction of legal requirements on the establishment in nonunion workplaces of elective consultative bodies that could potentially support collectivization and the building of union membership. Two, somewhat related, avenues of reform do, however, merit specific mention, given their very direct relevance to the above argument relating to the creation of stronger linkages between "beyond the enterprise" recruitment and workplace representation.

The first of these avenues concerns the exertion of pressure, in conjunction with migrant workers and community groups, to establish forms of supply chain

regulation that incorporate labor standards (including rights to union representation and recognition) in sectors where migrant workers are concentrated and to impose a duty on major supply chain actors to monitor compliance with them (James et al., 2007; Weil & Mallo, 2007). The second avenue is the introduction of union rights to “follow recruited members” into their employing organization, thereby providing unions with a means of both pursuing the interests of migrant members who have been recruited from outside the workplace level and building collective solidarity and pressure for employer recognition: an approach that, in the Australian context, has been observed to have provided unions “with unique recruitment opportunities at the shopfloor level” (Pyman, 2004: 2).

## CONCLUSION

Against the backcloth of a large inflow of Polish migrant workers since 2004, this article has examined the nature, and experiences, of union initiatives to recruit and organize such workers, and explored how far they appear to provide a basis for a substantial, and sustainable, expansion of membership and organization among them. In doing so, it has revealed that a range of initiatives have been undertaken in pursuit of this objective and that they do broadly address the main barriers that, the existing literature suggests, confront its achievement.

At the same time, while those interviewed generally felt, on the basis of their experiences, that Polish migrants were decidedly organizable, concrete evidence of union achievement in this regard was found to be relatively limited. In addition, a number of grounds for casting doubt on the sustainability of many of the initiatives, as well as the membership gained as a result of them, were identified, perhaps most notably a lack of a strong connection with effective workplace organizing and an overreliance on external, often short-term, funding. This doubt was, in turn, identified as potentially requiring unions to reappraise their current approaches to the recruitment and organization of such migrant workers. In particular, it has been suggested that unions’ approaches need to encompass a stronger “occupational” focus that is facilitative of the creation of stronger linkages between recruitment beyond the workplace and the provision of workplace representation. It has been further suggested that this reorientation needs to be supported by the pursuit of supportive legal reforms, most notably reforms that provide unions with increased rights of access to workplaces in which they are not recognized but have members.

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