The response of unions to the rise of precarious work in Britain

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Abstract

There has been significant growth of precarious work in Britain over the past three decades. This article examines the strategies adopted by unions to counteract this trend. It uses Weil's 'strategic choice framework' to assess the attempts of the Trades Union Congress to encourage affiliates to adopt innovative ways of reaching precarious workers and examines the extent to which these strategies have been implemented. Unfavourable external shifts have placed greater pressure on unions to develop appropriate internal strategies and structures to strengthen their capacity for reaching precarious workers. The Trades Union Congress has encouraged unions to use community unionism strategies to organise precarious workers outside of the workplace and sustainable sourcing strategies to regulate their conditions through procurement mechanisms. These strategies are relatively effective means of reaching precarious workers in the context of legal constraints on unions and changes in the organisation of work and production. The internal governance structures of the British union movement need to be reformed if these strategies are to be adopted more widely.

The incidence of precarious work in Britain has risen significantly since the early 1980s. The proportion of workers below the low-pay threshold, defined by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) as those earning less than two-thirds

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the median hourly wage, has increased by almost double over this period (Lloyd et al., 2008; Pennycook and Whittaker, 2012). There has also been a notable increase in non-standard forms of employment that are associated with an imbalance of power in the employment relationship, such as temporary, fixed-term and zero-hours contracts, agency work and dependent self-employment (Broughton, 2010). These trends have coincided with a large increase in the number of easily replaceable jobs requiring low or common skill sets (Goos and Manning, 2007).

The growth of precarious work has been driven by the individualisation of employment relations, owing to the decline of trade unions and collective bargaining and the high rate of outsourcing and subcontracting (or 'externalisation'). Strategies that unions once used to prevent employment individualisation have been outlawed, in the case of secondary boycotts, or resisted with increased vigour from employers struggling to compete in a more competitive and trade-exposed economy, in the case of multi-employer bargaining (Wright and Brown, 2013a).

This article examines the growth of precarious work, defined here as non-standard forms of employment that are below the low-pay threshold, in the context of the weakening of organised labour. The question of how British unions have responded to this growth is its central focus. A recent comprehensive study identified 'the decline of unions in Britain as a key factor contributing to higher wage inequality and the growth of low-paid work' (Mason et al., 2008a: 34; cf. Gautié and Schmitt, 2010).

Regulatory features of the British labour market are a significant contributor to the increase of precarious work. The system of 'collective laissez faire' that existed for much of the 20th century gave unions a dominant position to regulate markets through collective agreements with employers. The strength of unions allowed them to use their position within this system to maintain decent rates of pay and minimise the use of non-standard employment, particularly during the post-war decades. Because precarious workers were largely seen as posing a threat to the conditions of permanency enjoyed by their members, many unions used their position of strength to marginalise workers in non-standard employment from their membership structures and to resist their engagement by employers (Gumbrell-McCormick, 2011: 300–307).

The capacity of unions to organise workers and use collective bargaining to establish common standards on issues such as precarious work has suffered over the past three decades. While unions have managed to contain the rise of precarious work in the public sector, the continual deterioration of their strength in the private sector has led to the erosion of real wages and working conditions across numerous industries and to the concomitant growth in precarious work. According to a report commissioned by the Trades Union Congress (TUC), of the 64% of precarious workers who are not in a union and do not have a union presence in their workplace, 93% are employed in the private sector (Commission on Vulnerable Employment (COVE), 2008: 69).

The entrenchment of the association between non-union workplaces and precarious workers has led unions to shift away from their previous position of exclusion. The union movement has sought to extend employment rights once enjoyed only by permanent and full-time workers to all workers through collective bargaining and lobbying for legislative change. Many unions have adopted strategies for recruiting precarious workers into membership and accommodating them within representation structures. However,

changes in the way that work and production are organised within the British economy indicate that traditional union strategies focused on workplace organising and bargaining have had a limited impact. Unions have thus been required to develop innovative strategies for representing precarious workers and improving their conditions (Heery, 2009).

This article uses David Weil's (2005) 'strategic choice framework' for union decision-making to assess the attempts of the TUC, the sole peak union federation in Britain, to encourage affiliates to adopt new ways of reaching precarious workers. It also examines the extent to which unions have implemented these strategies. The central argument of the article is that unfavourable external shifts have negatively impacted the power or 'leverage' of British unions to address the challenge of precarious work. This has placed greater pressure on unions to develop internal strategies and structures to strengthen their capacity for reaching precarious workers. The TUC has accordingly made a 'strategic choice' to encourage affiliates to strengthen leverage. In particular, it has promoted community unionism strategies to organise precarious workers outside of the workplace, and sustainable sourcing strategies to regulate working conditions through procurement mechanisms. The weak internal governance structures of the British union movement explain why these strategies have not been implemented on a wider scale.

The next section outlines the methodological approach adopted. An overview of relationship between precarious work and non-unionised labour then follows. The strategic choice framework is then used to explain the challenges for British unions in representing and improving the conditions of precarious workers. The community organising and sustainable sourcing strategies that unions have used to engage precarious workers are examined and their effectiveness is analysed. The conclusion considers the importance of these strategies and provides suggestions for how they could be adopted more extensively.

Methodological approach

This article draws upon research conducted between October 2010 and October 2011 as part of a project funded jointly by the Economic and Social Research Council's (ESRC) Placement Fellowship Scheme and the TUC. The objective of the project was to identify ways in which unions could extend collective labour market regulations to improve working conditions and employment relations among the non-unionised workforce, especially precarious workers. The project involved a comprehensive analysis of the factors that have contributed to the decline of collective labour market regulations and the strategies that British unions have adopted to arrest this decline. The TUC provided extensive access to union strategy documents and facilitated 42 interviews with union officials for the purposes of background information and data collection.

The focus here is on the part of the ESRC project that analysed union strategies to negotiate agreements pertaining to multiple firms within production systems. These agreements aim to improve labour standards among non-unionised and precarious workers. Case study research of three successful attempts of unions to secure these agreements was conducted for this analysis (see Wright, 2011). The article also draws upon research for a separate project on community unionism undertaken between March and July 2010 funded jointly by the ESRC's Third Sector Research Cluster and the TUC. The

project used five case studies to evaluate the effectiveness of community engagement strategies of British unions in supporting unemployed and precarious workers (see Wright, 2010).

The association between precarious work and non-union workplaces

Although the rate of precarious work in Britain has grown in recent decades, it remains relatively concentrated among certain segments of the workforce. This is reflected in the patterns of workers earning less than the low-pay threshold. A 2012 report for the Resolution Foundation identified a high rate of workers receiving an hourly wage below the low-pay threshold in the hotels and restaurants (69%), wholesale and retail (41%), administration (39%) and arts sectors (37%). At the other end of the spectrum, there is a low rate of workers in low-paid employment in the professional, scientific and technical services (8%), information (7%), financial services (4%) and public administration sectors (2%). A high incidence of low pay is also found among workers in elementary occupations (including cleaners, security guards, catering assistants and leisure workers) and sales and customer service occupations. Low pay is very common among young workers, part-time workers and those with lower levels of qualifications and formally recognised skills. It is more common among women and temporary workers than men and permanent workers (Pennycook and Whittaker, 2012; cf. Mason et al., 2008b).

The near-doubling in the proportion of workers in low-paid jobs since the early 1980s corresponds with the growth of non-standard forms of employment, particularly among smaller firms and private sector firms. Between 1980 and 2004, the number of British workplaces using workers on fixed-term contracts increased from 19% to 30%, those where at least half of the workforce was part-time went from 13% to 28%, those using temporary workers engaged through labour agencies rose from 20% to 27%, and the proportion of the workforce whose main job was self-employed went from 8% to 13% (Broughton, 2010; Brown and Edwards, 2009: 17–18).

Unions are weak in many of the industries and workforce segments characterised by low-pay and non-standard employment (see Table 1), which are both commonly associated with precarious work. However, union leverage is not the sole determinant of precarious work. For example, union membership, union workplace presence and collective bargaining coverage are low in the financial services and information sectors, where low pay and poor conditions are less likely. The highly skilled or high-demand nature of labour in these sectors, which serves to raise the individual bargaining power of workers, helps to account for these outcomes. The high level of union representation in the university sector has not prevented a significant growth in fixed-term contracts. Moreover, women are more likely than men to be low-paid and engaged in non-standard employment, but are also more likely to be represented by a union (Broughton, 2010; Department for Business Innovation and Skills (DBIS), 2013).

Nevertheless, union leverage is low across much of the workforce defined by precarious work. This is reflected in low membership density, workplace presence and bargaining coverage in the accommodation and food services sector, the administrative services sector, the arts, entertainment and recreation sector, the wholesale, retail trade and motor

Table 1. Various indicators of union leverage (membership, workplace presence and collective agreement coverage) in Britain (%), 2012.

	Union membership density	Union presence in the workplace	Collective agreement coverage
Industry			
Public administration and defence	52	82	66
Education	52	82	55
Electricity, gas, steam and air-conditioning supply	44	70	53
Human health and social work	41	63	40
Transport and storage	40	59	47
Water supply, sewerage and waste remediation	35	62	45
Manufacturing	19	37	22
Mining and quarrying	19	31	16
Financial and insurance activities	16	38	24
Construction	16	28	18
Arts, entertainment and recreation	15	33	19
Wholesale, retail trade and motor repair	13	28	15
Information and communication	13	26	14
Real estate activities	12	27	15
Administrative and support services	11	23	13
Other services	10	19	13
Professional and administrative services	9	18	9
Accommodation and food services	4	8	4
Sector			
Public	56	86	64
Private	14	29	16
Workplace size			
Workplaces with 50 or more employees	35	61	42
Workplaces with less than 50 employees	17	27	16
Gender			
Female	29	N/A	31
Male	23	N/A	27
Employment status			
Full-time	28	N/A	31
Permanent	27	N/A	30
Part-time	21	N/A	25
Temporary	15	N/A	23
All employees	26	45	29

Source: DBIS (2013).

repair sector and in smaller workplaces. Workers in these parts of the labour market are likely to be low-paid and in non-standard employment. In contrast, union leverage remains high among parts of the workforce where precarious work is less problematic, such as in the education, public administration and defence and public utilities sectors, and also in larger workplaces. Younger workers, workers with lower levels of formal qualification and workers in service and elementary occupations are far less likely than average to be represented by a union, as well as being far more likely to be in low-paid and non-standard employment (DBIS, 2013; Mason et al., 2008b: 45).

The decline of union leverage in Britain

Conceived as a tool for evaluating the decisions of unions in the pursuit of their objectives, Weil's strategic choice framework allows the sources of union leverage for representing workers and regulating labour standards to be analysed. The concept of 'strategic leverage' is used to explain the impact of external factors shaping union leverage. These factors include the legal framework regulating employment relations, the structure and profitability of firms and industries, the ways that work and production are organised, and labour market supply and demand. While these external factors are all largely beyond the control of unions, the concept of 'organisational capacity' helps to explain the impact of the internal factors affecting leverage, which unions have much greater capacity to shape. These include internal structures for governance and resource allocation and the strategies used to translate organisational objectives into practice. A positive shift in external factors affecting a union's leverage will take pressure off its organisational capacity. Conversely, a negative shift in the factors affecting its strategic leverage will place greater pressure on internal union decisions regarding resource allocation, governance structures and organisational strategies. The overall level of union leverage will shape its ability to meet objectives and to fulfil basic functions (Weil, 2005: 329–333).

Among the numerous functions that unions perform, representing workers and regulating labour standards are the two most fundamental. The representation function of unions allows workers greater 'voice' in workplace decision-making and in negotiating the conditions of work with their employer. Through their regulation function, unions seek to establish common standards across workplaces within a given market to ensure that the gains achieved in an organised workplace are not undermined by non-unionised ones (Ewing, 2005).

The capacity of British unions to perform these two functions has been constrained over the past three decades by the decline of union leverage. This has undermined their ability to counteract the rise of precarious work. Union membership and collective bargaining coverage, which are proxies for the capacity of unions to represent workers and to regulate employment conditions, have been in sharp decline. The decline has been particularly dramatic in the private sector, where union membership fell from 52% in 1980 to 14% in 2012 and collective bargaining coverage fell from 57% to 16% (DBIS, 2013).

The representation and regulation functions of unions have come under major challenge from internal and external factors that have undermined their leverage. Changes in the regulatory framework and in the organisation of work and production are the most

significant external factors that have adversely affected union leverage in this respect. The Thatcher and Major Conservative governments implemented reforms that weakened union leverage through restrictions on workplace and industrial activity. These reforms consolidated a 'single-employer' regulatory model that constrained the ability of unions to extend gains made at one workplace to other workplaces in the same industry which weakened their regulation function. The Blair and Brown Labour governments acknowledged that the reforms of their Conservative predecessors led to a growth in precarious workers. New workplace rights for unions and a national minimum wage were introduced to prevent wage inequality from growing further, but these reforms did not lead to a notable decline in the incidence of low-paid or non-standard employment (Broughton, 2010; Brown and Edwards, 2009: 17–18; Mason et al., 2008a: 16).

Changes in the organisation of work and production are other significant external changes that have undermined the capacity of unions to address precarious work. The exposure of British firms to greater competition has eroded traditional employment relationships based on full-time and permanent work. Various forms of non-standard employment, often involving intermediaries such as employment agencies situated between the worker and their 'effective' (rather than legal) employer, have grown as a consequence. The trend towards inter-organisational contracting and the externalisation of employment arrangements has resulted in production systems becoming increasingly disaggregated. Numerous studies have identified a range of negative outcomes for workers and unions resulting from externalisation (James et al., 2007: 167–168; Marchington et al., 2005: 241–244; Walsh and Deery, 2006: 560–561).

The negative impact on union leverage resulting from these external shifts has placed more importance on the internal factors relating to organisational capacity. The Blair government's reforms gave unions the right to be recognised by employers in enterprises where they had support from a majority of employees. But the continued operation of the single-employer regulatory model blunted the impact of this provision, with the incidence of statutory recognition applications very low in recent years. The maintenance of legal restrictions on industrial and secondary action has severely limited the ability of unions to gain recognition at new enterprises and to organise across organisational boundaries (Smith, 2009: 344–345). Unions have thus struggled to contain the adverse impacts of externalisation and segmented production on precarious work.

Union strategies to regain leverage among precarious workers

The adoption by many British unions of partnership and organising strategies in the late 1990s did little to improve their leverage, either overall or among precarious workers. Partnership involved unions' establishing agreements with employers around the principles of mutual gains through cooperation and joint commitment to the success of the enterprise. These agreements were adopted mainly in enterprises where unions already had a presence, rather than in non-unionised enterprises where precarious workers are most likely to be found. Organising aimed to empower workers by instilling a culture of workplace activism and giving them skills to maintain organisational strength with minimal reliance on union officials. This was advanced as a more

suitable strategy than partnership for gaining a foothold in non-union enterprises where managerial hostility could be expected. Although organising has been embraced widely, much activity has focused on existing areas of strength. As with partnership strategies, unions have struggled to organise in small firms and in the industries and workforce segments where precarious work is concentrated (Daniels, 2009: 266; Simms, 2010).

A core weakness of these strategies is that they accept the logic of the single-employer regulatory model by aiming to organise workers or establish partnership agreements on a workplace-by-workplace basis. While these strategies have allowed unions to improve membership density and gain recognition in certain firms and industries, any gains have been fragile given the continuing growth of non-unionised enterprises. In the absence of regulatory reforms enabling unions to extend gains within a given market more easily, firms have an incentive to compete over labour costs and therefore to resist attempts at unionisation (Nowak, 2009: 150–151). The continued dwindling of membership and bargaining coverage indicates that these strategies have not, for the most part, succeeded in strengthening union leverage among precarious workers.

In recent years, the TUC has sought to address as a matter of priority the challenge facing a weakened union movement in representing and improving the conditions of precarious workers. Most notably, the TUC established the Commission on Vulnerable Employment (COVE) in 2007 to document the growing incidence of precarious (or what it termed 'vulnerable') work and to propose solutions for how unions and policymakers could address this challenge more effectively. According to the COVE final report (2008),

> There is growing recognition in the union movement that until now unions have largely failed to reach those in vulnerable employment, and that if they are to offer protection to vulnerable workers new strategies for organising among these groups are necessary. (p. 69)

The report made several recommendations for unions to adopt. Of particular note are the strategies suggested for strengthening the capacity of unions to represent workers and regulate standards in the context of fragmenting employment relationships and production systems.

With respect to representation strategies, the COVE report encouraged unions to devote more resources to organising precarious workers. It suggested that the proliferation of labour agencies and subcontractors requires unions to organise across organisational boundaries and among different employers operating in the same workplace. Unions were urged to reform their membership and participation structures to be more inclusive of groups that have traditionally been difficult to organise, such as migrants and workers from ethnic minority backgrounds. Because the high incidence of non-standard employment among these workers makes it hard to reach them through workplace-based strategies, the report called on unions to develop alliances with local community and faith groups. The COVE report also encouraged unions to use workplace learning as a mechanism to engage and organise precarious workers. In order to strength the capacity of unions to regulate employment standards within disaggregated production systems, the report suggested that unions work with government agencies to improve the enforcement of legal regulations down the supply chain. It encouraged the use of strategies to

pressure firms and public bodies to reform procurement practices to improve employment standards among contract firms (COVE, 2008).

Following the publication of the COVE report, the TUC's Organising and Services Department and Unionlearn (its learning and skills division) encouraged affiliates to use these strategies in their organising and bargaining campaigns. The Organising Academy and TUC Education promoted the strategies to union officials and representatives. The next section examines the extent to which unions have adopted these measures to reach precarious workers and to improve their conditions.

Improving the union representation function through community organising

Community unionism has become increasingly common in recent years, especially in countries most associated with the organising model, such as the United States and Australia (Fine, 2005; Tattersall, 2010). This strategy is based on the assumption that intermittent work patterns pose a challenge for unions seeking to use traditional workplace-based strategie to organise workers in non-standard employment. The difficulties of reaching precarious workers concentrated in small firms require unions to organise them through their communities outside of the workplace, for example, by developing alliances with local community organisations, sports clubs and ethnic community groups (Holgate, 2005: 476–477; Martinez Lucio and Perrett, 2009; Wills, 2002: 32–35).

British unions are generally considered to have weak records of community engagement (Martinez Lucio and Stuart, 2009: 34; Stirling, 2005: 56–57; Wills, 2002: 2). In recent years, senior TUC officials have advocated community unionism as a 'valuable tool' to be used alongside workplace organising for 'reaching out to groups of workers which have failed to engage with our traditional structures' (O'Grady and Nowak, 2004: 160).The growth of non-standard employment has prompted greater interest among British unions in using organising strategies based on community engagement. These factors have influenced the recent decisions of several unions to establish or consolidate community engagement initiatives.

In one such example, the GMB (a general union)[1] used alliances with local churches and community organisations to organise migrant workers and to establish a Polish workers branch in its Southern Region. In addition, the TUC launched the Vulnerable Workers Project, a 2-year pilot project in East London supported by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills. Unions involved in the project developed partnerships with voluntary and community sector organisations in recognition that these groups would assist attempts to make contact with precarious workers. Unions adapted their strategies and structures to work with these organisations more effectively to this end. Local union branches established advice surgeries alongside weekend training courses as well as a Vulnerable Workers Group to extend their reach into the workers' communities.

Various unions have used the 'learning agenda' as part of their community-based strategies for organising precarious workers. The Blair government's establishment of the Union Learning Fund and a statutory role for union learning representatives (ULRs) in 2002 led unions to become much more active in the delivery of work-related skills and

learning. The initiative has been cited as an avenue for union revitalisation because it gives unions an opportunity to position themselves around themes such as skills development, dignity and inclusion, which are likely to appeal to precarious workers often marginalised from such opportunities (Martinez Lucio and Stuart, 2009: 34; Munro and Rainbird, 2004: 431). The 22,000 ULRs who have been created are more representative of the broader workforce than union workplace representatives, since they are much more likely to be younger, female and from an ethnic minority background (Darlington, 2010). According to Fitzgerald and O'Brien (2005), this diverse and broadly reflective demographic profile has allowed unions to use ULRs to connect with precarious workers more effectively (pp. 23–24).

Union learning is most likely to take place in the workplace, especially in workplaces where unions are recognised (Stuart et al., 2010). This has inhibited the ability of unions to use learning initiatives to reach precarious workers. Critics have argued the programme is not targeted sufficiently towards those less likely to have access to workplace learning centres or to receive training from their employer. Workers in non-standard employment without union representation are highly likely to fit this profile (Wallis et al., 2005: 294).

In addressing the limitations of workplace-based learning, a number of unions have used community learning centres to widen access among precarious workers. By using the Union Learning Fund to deliver free training in English for speakers of other languages (ESOL), GMB and the Union of Construction, Allied Trades and Technicians (UCATT) have worked with community learning centres and migrant community organisations to reach precarious workers. In GMB's case, this proved to be an effective recruitment strategy, as the vast majority of the 600 migrant workers enrolled in GMB-provided ESOL courses became union members. This finding leads Heyes (2009) to conclude that community-based learning assists precarious workers in gaining initially positive impressions of unions that can be later consolidated through the provision of additional support and services. Community learning initiatives thus help to embed unions within workers' broader communities (Heyes, 2009).

Community-based learning has become a more common strategy among unions seeking to organise precarious workers. The Migrant Workers Participation Project helped the public sector union UNISON to cultivate links with advocacy and community groups in the Filipino and Polish communities. This allowed UNISON to organise and deliver support and education to migrant workers (Moore and Watson, 2009). Through its Migrant Workers Education Project, Unite (another general union) developed links with migrant community organisations to deliver skills development programmes and ESOL training to precarious workers in the cleaning and domestic service sectors. By utilising the community networks of existing activists to promote the project, Unite was able to deliver union-based learning to more than 1000 non-unionised workers. Unions have also worked with local government, development authorities and sports clubs to deliver learning to workers through local community learning centres. For instance, the creation of the Community and Trade Union Learning Centre by unions and the Olympic Development Authority in 2010 provided learning opportunities to over 500 workers at the Olympic site in East London and community members in the surrounding boroughs.

The 'living wage' campaign for better pay and working conditions for contract cleaners in various British cities (notably London) represents the most comprehensive example of community unionism in Britain. Citizens UK (an alliance of community and faith groups) has been the main protagonist in the living wage campaign, which has also involved unions such as UNISON, Unite, the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers and the Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS). The campaign has entailed protest action against banks, universities, hospitals, museums, hotels and government authorities. Its aim is to pressure these entities to oblige their cleaning contractors to improve pay and conditions for low-paid cleaning workers.

Cleaners have been organised through their communities outside of the workplace, such as the churches and faith groups that they belong to, and then mobilised by unions at their place of work as part of protest actions. Some notable wins have been achieved through this process, and 100 firms across Britain have agreed to pay the living wage, including KPMG, Barclays, the City of London and various local authorities. Although unions have been active in many specific living wage campaigns, successful cases where workers have won the living wage without union participation leads Wills (2009) to argue that union involvement, although beneficial, is not necessarily a critical ingredient for success (pp. 448–457).

The prominence of civil society organisations like Citizens UK in the living wage campaign has prompted scepticism among some unions towards community engagement initiatives. These unions perceive community and civil society organisations to be encroaching upon their territory. Tensions between unions and these organisations have manifested around differences in their objectives and philosophies, campaigning approaches and internal structures (Holgate, 2009: 58–71).

Hostility from unions to the prospect of working with civil society organisations is short-sighted and potentially self-defeating. The role of these organisations complements rather than rivals the role of unions. There are practical limits to the capacity of community groups to influence employer practice because, unlike unions, they do not have a direct presence in the workplace. Furthermore, these groups are primarily campaign organisations that seek to raise awareness about worker vulnerability and achieve one-off victories, rather than provide continuous bargaining and workplace representation (Williams et al., 2011: 79–82). Nevertheless, unions need to use the strong community ties of such organisations to organise the growing number of workers in precarious employment. The effectiveness of organisations like Citizens UK means that unions have to continue working closely with them if they are to reach these workers, which have proved notoriously difficult to organise through conventional workplace-based strategies.

The practical challenge of working with civil society organisations is one barrier that unions may encounter in developing community organising strategies. The resource-intensive nature of these strategies is another barrier. Although community engagement can help improve the legitimacy of unions in the broader community and yield longer term benefits, the resources devoted to these campaigns may not necessarily translate into short-term membership gains. This may make union leaderships reluctant to use community unionism at the expense of more conventional workplace campaigns. This challenge is also relevant in considering the development of sustainable sourcing strategies.

Improving the union regulation function through sustainable sourcing

If community unionism represents an attempt by unions to improve their representation function in the context of fragmenting employment relationships, 'sustainable sourcing' strategies represent an attempt to strengthen their regulation function in the context of fragmenting production systems. When business functions are externalised, the actions of a firm can significantly influence the working conditions and labour management practices of its suppliers and subcontractors. Suppliers that face a power imbalance when negotiating commercial contracts may pass pressures imposed by clients onto their employees, especially those in non-standard employment. This makes it difficult for unions to organise these workers and to establish resilient standards (Wright and Brown, 2013a).

The profound implications of externalisation and supply chain pressures for the organisation of work and production call for unions to develop strategies that are 'attentive to how organisations are embedded within [these] wider institutional structures' (Grimshaw et al., 2005: 261). Convincing large firms to use only contractors and suppliers that comply with basic labour standards as a contractual requirement is the main aim of these strategies. To this end, sustainable sourcing strategies by unions aim to counteract the negative impacts resulting from pressure imposed by firms onto their suppliers through the terms of the commercial contract (Weil, 2009).

Sustainable sourcing strategies have been used more widely among British unions in recent years. Unions have increasingly used the procurement procedures of large private firms and public entities to organise, extend collective bargaining and improve conditions for workers in non-standard employment engaged by suppliers and subcontractors. This is a central objective of the living wage campaign. Rather than establishing agreements with the cleaning contractors that are the legal employers of cleaners, the living wage campaign aims to secure agreements with the large firms that effectively determine the workers' conditions through the commercial pressures they impose on the cleaning contractors (Wills, 2009).

Several unions have adopted similar approaches by utilising their position in large unionised entities to raise the standards of suppliers and subcontractors. For instance, PCS and the Communication Workers' Union have succeeded in using their organising strength to pressure government departments and public entities to secure recognition agreements with non-union employment agencies, and thereby improve the pay and conditions of agency workers. UNISON has also utilised pressure from members working in local governments, state schools and hospitals as part of its strategy for gaining recognition and improving conditions among workers employed by catering and cleaning contractors.

UCATT has adopted a similar strategy in the civil construction industry, where insecure working arrangements have become widespread with the segmenting of contracting chains in recent decades. Pressure from UCATT has led a number of firms to adopt 'framework agreements' that all contractors must comply with. These agreements have helped improve employment relations among lower-tier and self-employed contractors, where precarious work is most likely to exist. In a similar

case, the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers has worked with the retailer Tesco, with whom it has a longstanding bargaining relationship, to establish a recognition agreement covering agency workers at the retailer's distribution centres. This led to a rationalisation of Tesco's use of employment agencies. The Broadcasting, Entertainment, Cinematograph and Theatre Union has also used its organisational strength at the British Broadcasting Corporation to organise and establish recognition agreements for technical specialists engaged as freelancers by internal production units and private production firms.

Unions have also used their political links to pressure government bodies to incorporate fair employment principles into their procurements policies. When Labour was in government, public sector unions negotiated the National Health Service (NHS) Soft Facilities Management Contractors Staff Joint Statement with the Department of Health and several employer associations. The statement compels NHS contractors to provide their employees with the pay and conditions equivalent to NHS employees. Unions also convinced the Scottish government to adopt procurement laws specifying that all private contractors of public services are expected to provide their employees with the same wages and conditions as public sector employees and comply with best practice workplace safety and equal opportunity standards. Several local authorities have enacted similar procurement policies to maintain decent labour standards among private contractors.

In one of the most prominent examples of sustainable sourcing, Unite targeted commercially powerful firms in the supply chain as part of its attempts for raising employment standards in the meat processing industry. Its strategy focused on supermarket retailers, whose commercial demands for cost reduction resulted in their meat suppliers engaging labour agencies to employ temporary workers below market rates. Although Unite had established collective agreements with a majority of firms in the meat industry, it was unable to prevent widespread use of low-cost labour management practices. This failure led Unite to develop a strategy for improving standards focused on the supermarket retailers.

The union sought to persuade the retailers to compel suppliers to reduce their reliance on low-paid temporary agency labour. After attempts at industry-based dialogue failed, Unite pressured the retailers by mobilising shareholders and consumers in support of the campaign. This culminated in the supermarket retailer Asda obliging its 29 suppliers to engage agency workers on the same terms and conditions as directly employed workers. The campaign resulted in Unite almost doubling its membership in the meat industry (to 26,000 workers out of a total workforce of 45,000) and improving conditions and achieving permanent status for over 1300 agency workers.

Although sustainable sourcing strategies to improve working conditions across organisational boundaries have become more common, their uptake remains reasonably limited. Nevertheless, sustainable sourcing offers a relatively resource-efficient means of using the commercial influence of large entities, which are more likely to be unionised and adverse to bad publicity, for improving standards among their non-unionised suppliers and contractors. It is likely that British unions will follow the example of unions in other countries in using these strategies more widely for improving their regulation function among precarious workers (Wright and Brown, 2013b).

Conclusion

The declining leverage of British trade unions over the past 30 years has contributed to a growth in precarious work. Using the terminology of Weil's strategic choice framework, unfavourable shifts in external factors shaping British unions' strategic leverage have placed more importance on internal factors relating to organisational capacity. For unions to have strong organisational capacity, they need effective governance structures to ensure that resource allocation is properly connected to strategic decision-making. Ineffective governance structures within a union movement can 'substantially reduce its organisational capacity going forward', according to Weil (2005: 341). The weak command of the TUC over its affiliates is the main barrier preventing British unions from adopting the innovative strategies necessary to improve their coverage among precarious workers.

The TUC has encouraged its affiliates to adopt strategies that go beyond the enterprise, such as organising precarious workers through their non-work communities and pressuring large firms to improve the working conditions of their suppliers and subcontractors. There are good examples of where unions have adopted community unionism and sustainable sourcing strategies to extend representation and improve the conditions of precarious workers. However, the persistent low levels of union leverage among labour market segments characterised by precarious work suggest that these strategies have not been adopted widely enough. The resources of British unions remain invested primarily in servicing members and consolidating their position in existing areas of strength.

The TUC's status as 'a voluntary and weakly organised federation of disparate sectional and producer interests' with limited control over its affiliates (Taylor, 2000: 13) is a barrier to these strategies being implemented more widely. The decentralised and uncoordinated governance structures of the British union movement indicate that unions cannot be compelled to reallocate resources from their shrinking membership base to improve the position of precarious workers. These structures require reform to improve the TUC's capacity to direct union strategies. Their deficient nature has traditionally allowed British unions to pursue their sectional interests, instead of acting in a unified and coordinated manner to represent the collective interests of labour movement. Without more extensive adoption of community unionism and sustainable sourcing strategies, the incidence of precarious work in the British labour market will continue to grow. Although unions have made some progress, they need to embrace these strategies more readily if they are to regain leverage to address the endemic problems of precarious work.

Community unionism and sustainable sourcing will not be appropriate for all circumstances. Workplace organising and collective bargaining continue to be important for unions' attempts to represent workers and regulate wages and conditions. But in the context of growing fragmentation of employment relationships and production systems, and continued restrictions imposed by Britain's single-employer regulatory model, the ineffectiveness of traditional union strategies for reaching precarious workers is increasingly apparent.

Strategies for organising and improving the conditions of precarious workers are time and resource intensive. The benefits may not accrue immediately. Significant resources may be required to develop strategies likely to yield successful outcomes among the

concentration of precarious workers in non-union industries, especially those without strong collectivist traditions and those with employers that are hostile to unions (COVE, 2008: 73). Moreover, organising these workers may be viewed as legitimising forms of employment at odds with the traditional union preference for stable and secure work. Devoting resources to workers in non-standard employment also invariably means fewer resources for permanent workers and existing members, which unions are obliged to service. These challenges make it understandable for why British unions have not comprehensively devoted resources to new strategies for reaching precarious workers. However, their continued failure to do so is likely to be self-defeating.

Leaving workers in precarious employment unorganised will lead to further growth in these types of work. While allocating resources solely to members might allow a union to consolidate support among its membership base, this invariably inhibits its capacity to expand. The emergence of new non-union firms ultimately places pressure on unionised firms to reduce labour costs to remain competitive. Unions perceived as focusing too heavily on defending members' interests, instead of extending gains to those without union representation, undermine their legitimacy among non-members and the broader community. Civil society organisations like Citizens UK are limited in their ability to represent the interests of workers to their employers in a continuous manner. But their central role in instigating the most effective and publicised campaign for improving the conditions of precarious workers in recent years shows that unions do not have a monopoly in defending workers' interests. British unions cannot afford to be complacent about their position.

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Note

1. The acronym derives from General, Municipal, Boilermakers and Allied Trade Union, created in 1982 as a result of amalgamations.

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