

**Organising the Unorganised:  
'Race', Poor Work and Trade Unions**

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## **Organising the Unorganised: 'Race', Poor Work and Trade Unions**

The combined effects of long-term economic restructuring, recession and new levels of structural unemployment have produced significant changes in patterns of inequality and the dynamics of the class structure in Britain. More specifically, they have contributed to a 'crisis' for trade unions and the labour movement (Hobsbawm 1981; Lane 1982). Groups whose employment circumstances have been most significantly affected by the developments of the 1980s and early 1990s are women and minority ethnic workers. This paper looks at the attempts by two general unions to organise two groups of workers who consist mainly of ethnic minorities and women, and how the context of the 'crisis' impinged on these attempts.

Economic factors alone do not explain the fundamental changes in employment over the 1980s. For example, the particularly high level of unemployment experienced in Britain was not simply 'inevitable', but at least in part reflected the lack of commitment to the maintenance of full employment on the part of Britain's ruling elite (Ashton and Maguire 1991). Similarly the crisis facing trade unions is the product of both economic forces and political ideologies, the latter demonstrated in the political and legal assault by the Conservative government on trade union rights and functions in Britain. Between 1979 and the end of 1993 nine pieces of legislation, including five Employment Acts, had removed all barriers to the 'free and flexible' labour market lauded in new-right Conservative ideology.

The Conservative's comprehensive programme of employment law reform comprised the removal of statutory and administrative supports for collective bargaining, partial deregulation of the contract of employment, creation of statutory rights for members and non-members alike against unions ... successive reduction of union tort immunity for industrial action, ... introduction of procedural rules for the initiation of industrial action, and tort liability of union funds (Smith and Morton 1993: 98).

In 1993 a clause was introduced by the Government into the Trade Union Reform and Employment Rights Bill allowing employers to bribe employees to give up the right to trade union representation, and cut the pay of those who do not (*Guardian* 27 May 1993).

The principal significance of Conservative employment legislation is to deny workers access to resources of collective power (Smith and Morton 1993: 99). In February 1994 a High Court judgement ruled that employers are entitled to know the identity of

all workers who are being balloted on industrial action. This development was described by a union organiser as 'an extraordinary attack on the civil liberties of trade union members', thus rendering them liable to be victimised by employers for considering such action (*Guardian* 25 February 1994).

Secondary industrial action, the single most potent means of success in pursuing a strike, has been outlawed; while uniquely in Britain, majority decisions in unions are not binding on individual members. So demanding are the new rules that some lawyers consider it virtually impossible to organise a strike legally (*Guardian* 18 October 1993).

The changes over the last 15 years have eroded the sectors which have traditionally provided the mainstay of trade union membership, and have increased the proportional significance of sectors that are difficult to unionise. Unions need to target these new groups of workers for replacement membership at a time when government policies have made such recruitment immensely more difficult. Within this picture, minority ethnic<sup>[1]</sup> workers form an extra dimension. They are disproportionately concentrated in these 'poor work' sectors, and they raise a whole extra set of issues with regard to union policies. When these minority ethnic workers are women, a further range of issues are added to the agenda.

### **Women, employment and trade unions**

Recent decades have witnessed the increased participation of women in the labour force, and within this a greater proportion of *married* women (Morris 1991). The proportion of female employees increased from 25 per cent of those in paid employment in 1901 to 43 per cent in 1988 (Brown and Scase 1991: 7). A Department of Employment study in 1994 suggests that by the year 2006 almost 90 per cent of the increase in the labour force will be accounted for by women; in a broader context, women have been entirely responsible for the growth in employment in Europe in the last two decades (*Guardian* April 9 1994). As men in their 40s and 50s are being steadily ejected from the labour force, they are being replaced by women in inferior sectors of employment - the 'poor work' sectors.

Although the union membership rate of women has lagged behind that of men, history shows that this does not reflect an unwillingness to engage in industrial struggle, and women have been disproportionately figuring amongst new recruits to unions. Trade unions, however, have a record of neglecting issues which relate to specifically to their women membership (Phizacklea and Miles 1980: 97), and recent figures suggest that trade unions are now starting to lose women from membership after several years of stability in their female ranks (*Labour Research* May 1994).

This paper looks at two case studies where manual trade unions have attempted to organise groups of vulnerable workers who are mainly minority ethnic women. It concludes that the difficulties experienced by unions in these circumstances are of four related but different types:

1. Difficulties arising from the broader context of economic restructuring, recession, and structural unemployment.
2. Difficulties created for unions by the Conservative government's employment legislation.
3. Difficulties relating to the relationship between trade unions and minority ethnic workers, and more specifically to minority ethnic women workers.
4. Difficulties inherent in the contradictory nature of trade unions in a capitalist society and the conflict within the labour movement over the strategies and values they should adopt.

Before describing the two cases studies, this paper first considers some of the broader issues relating to trade unions, migrants, and minority ethnic workers.

### **Trade union responses to migrant labour**

It has been argued that trade unions face three dilemmas in terms of their response to migrant workers (Penninx and Roosblaad 1994). The first is whether to resist immigration or cooperate with and try to influence state immigration policies; the second is whether to include migrant workers as trade union members once they have arrived, and the third is, once they have been recruited, whether special union policies should be established for migrant and minority ethnic members over and above those policies for white members.

To keep the price of labour from falling trade unions have traditionally tried to do two things: to limit the labour supply and to improve and equalise wages and conditions. In the aftermath of the Second World War European unions were unable to resist successfully the introduction of large numbers of foreign workers into the industrialised countries of Western Europe, mainly because indigenous workers were reluctant to take the low-paid, low status jobs themselves (Vranken 1990: 55). If the first strategy - limiting the labour supply - had not been possible, then the second -

organising these new workers and demanding equal pay and conditions - should have been given some priority. In reality this second strategy was only reluctantly embraced.

Martens (1993:3) writes that within the organised labour movement, workers find it hard to understand why they should first be mobilised against imported foreign labour, and then, when that demand has failed, to have to welcome those same workers with open arms and prevent them being singled out for exploitation, segregation and victimisation. The dilemma is expounded further by Castles: the fact that unions had originally opposed immigration would alienate migrant workers, who would then be less likely to join them. 'Thus there was a potential conflict between trade union policies towards immigration on the one hand, and policies towards migrant workers once they were in the country, on the other' (Castles 1990: 6).

Running through these dilemmas is the variable of racism, which in some instances was mobilised as part of union attempts to restrict the labour supply, and at other times ran counter to the principle of equalising wages and conditions. With regard to the first dilemma, racism could easily be drawn upon in the fight to keep out immigrants, and between and after the two World Wars, there were many quite blatant examples of this (Fryer 1984). However, with the post-war permanent settlement of new migrant-based communities in Britain, racism interfered with the second strategy - the need to get migrant workers organised and defended. In many industries white trade unionists insisted on a quota system restricting black workers to a maximum of (generally) 5 per cent, and there were understandings with management that the principle of 'last in first out' at a time of redundancy would not apply if this was to mean that white workers would lose their jobs before blacks (Fryer 1984: 376). In the 1950s transport workers banned overtime and staged strikes in protest against the employment of black labour, and others sent motions to annual conferences asking for black workers to be excluded from their sectors (Bentley 1976: 135). There was a 'determined effort' by the National Union of Seamen to keep black seamen off British ships after the war (Fryer 1984: 367).

Despite this treatment it remained a fact that in Britain (in contrast with many other European host countries) post-war black migrant workers had an *above average* propensity to join trade unions. For example, the Policy Studies Institute (PSI) survey showed that in 1982, 56 per cent of Asian and West Indian employees were union members, compared with 47 per cent of white employees (Brown 1984: 169). Although some of this difference was due to the over-representation of minority ethnic workers in those industrial sectors where trade union membership rates are higher for

*all* workers, the PSI study reported that their greater inclination to join unions holds true even when allowing for the differences in occupational concentration, reflecting an ideological commitment to the principles of unionism. More than ten years later, another PSI study showed that employees from some ethnic groups still had higher rates of unionisation than white employees: Afro-Caribbean and Indian employees had 44 per cent and 38 per cent respectively, compared to 35 per cent of white employees. On the other hand, Pakistani and African Asian employees had slightly lower rates than whites (33 per cent and 28 per cent) and Bangladeshi employees significantly lower (14 per cent). (Jones 1993: 76).

### **Equal versus special treatment**

With the inclusion of migrant workers into unions, and the transformation of migrant workers into minority ethnic British workers, the third dilemma began to take precedence over the previous two: that of equal versus special treatment. Should a trade union concern itself only with issues common to white and minority ethnic members or should it in addition operate special policies relating to the specific interests of the latter? If minority ethnic workers suffer disadvantages not experienced by white workers then 'equal treatment' will allow these disadvantages to remain. However, if a union devotes extra resources to issues specifically concerning minority ethnic members, this may cause resentment and resistance on the part of white workers who see minority ethnic members as getting favourable treatment (Penninx and Roosblad 1994).

Until the end of the 1960s the standard trade union position on this was exemplified by the Trades Union Congress (TUC) view that to institute any special policies would be to discriminate against the white membership. As one TUC official put it in 1966: 'There are no differences between an immigrant worker and an English worker. We believe that all workers should have the same rights and don't require any different or special consideration' (Radin 1966: 159). In 1970, Vic Feather, TUC General Secretary, argued 'The trade union movement is concerned with a man or woman as a worker. The colour of a man's skin has no relevance whatever to his work' (Wrench 1987: 165).

However, in the early 1970s the TUC began to adopt special policies against racism. This shift came about for a number of reasons. Firstly, there was the increasing organisation on the issue by black and white trade union activists; secondly, there were a number of industrial disputes in the late 1960s and early 1970s which had highlighted union racism towards striking black members, and thirdly, there was the

growth of extreme right wing groups such as the National Front, who played on the divisions between black and white workers and gave open support to the white trade unionists in some of these disputes (Phizacklea and Miles 1980: 93-4). Thus the TUC, having first dropped its opposition to race relations legislation, now started active campaigns against racism in the labour movement.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s the TUC began to produce educational and training materials on equal opportunities and racism for use in trade union education courses (e.g. TUC 1983a, 1983b). In 1981 the TUC published 'Black Workers: A TUC Charter for Equal Opportunity', encouraging unions to be more active on the issue. Seven years later the TUC re-issued the Charter. The TUC also worked with the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE) in the production of a 'Code of Practice', and has encouraged unions to make use of this code. In recent years in the wider European forum the TUC has lobbied the European Trade Union Confederation to take on board issues of migrants' rights and racial equality, drawing attention to the UK experience of the important role of legislation in combating discrimination.

Increasingly in the UK, individual unions have set up separate committees or structures to deal with race relations and/or equal opportunities issues, and adopted equal opportunity policies and anti-racist statements. Many have created national officers to take responsibility for issues affecting black members, for encouraging the participation of black members and furthering equal opportunities. A recent survey of 21 unions found that ten had a national level committee dealing with race equality issues and nearly two-thirds had taken positive steps such as targeting workplaces, organising conferences for black members and producing recruitment literature in minority ethnic languages (Mason 1994: 307).

### **New problems of recruitment**

Although the Asian and Afro-Caribbean migrants of the 1950s and 1960s were always good 'joiners' of unions, the above-average propensity of black workers to join unions now seems to be declining. This could in part be related to the disillusion experienced by some 'first generation' migrant workers over their treatment by unions over the years, and the fact that the 'second generation' cannot be relied upon to have an automatic ideological sympathy towards unions. Then there is a growing category of black/migrant workers who are under-unionised. These are the workers in the expanding sector of low paid, unregulated, marginal work - sweat-shop workers, part-time workers, cleaners, home-workers. Often they contain the most vulnerable groups, such as older Asian women who speak little English, and newer arrivals such

as refugees, migrants and illegal workers, and these are the most difficult categories of workers to organise. Across Europe, as rules for work permits become tighter, more migrant workers become 'illegal' or unauthorised. Consequently 'they are particularly favoured by employers because of their restricted bargaining power' (*Labour Research*, February 1989).

With no rights of settlement, rarely the right to work, no right to housing or medical care, and under the constant threat of deportation, the new migrants are forced to accept wages and conditions which no indigenous worker, black or white, would accept. They have no pension rights, no social security, the employers do not have to insure them - they are illicit, illegal, replaceable (Sivanandan 1989: 87).

Many within British unions have realised the need to organise such workers. For example, in 1989 the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU) attempted to organise sweat-shop workers - including Kurdish refugees and illegal workers - in North London, with some success in recruiting membership and gaining compensation for unfair dismissal and payment of unpaid wages. As the chair of the local TGWU branch put it, 'This happens to illegal workers - they work for one or two weeks; when they ask for their wages the boss says "No way; if you stay here I am going to call the police"' (*Labour Research*, August 1989).

### **The first case study: TGWU**

To illustrate some of these difficulties in practice, this paper will take a case study relating to the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU). The TGWU has over a million members and was, until 1993 and the merger between NUPE, NALGO and COHSE to form UNISON, the largest trade union affiliated to the TUC. As well as electing the first black general secretary of a trade union, Bill Morris, the TGWU organises more minority ethnic members than any other union, estimated at around 10-12 per cent, or 150,000-180,000 members (cited in Equal Opportunities Review 1992: 22).

The TGWU has initiated at national level a number of special measures specifically related to its minority ethnic members. The issue of black participation in trade unions was initially raised within the TGWU in 1987 when growing concern from the members on this issue led the union's Biennial Delegates Conference (BDC) to decide that 'the union should set up a network of race advisory committees to promote the involvement of black and ethnic minority workers within the union' (Equal Opportunities Review 1992: 22). An Equal Opportunities Working Party comprising representatives from each of the 11 TGWU regions was established to implement the

BDC decisions. This working party was able to provide concrete evidence on the extent of under-representation of black members among the Union's officers, and among the membership of Regional and National Committees (TGWU 1989: 21). The General Executive Council accepted the recommendation of the Working Party to establish a structure of national and regional race advisory committees. These committees would be responsible for advising on initiatives to promote the recruitment, organisation and involvement of minority ethnic members. In addition, a National Equalities Officer was appointed to initially help establish these new committees and oversee their work.

The first case study falls into the service sector. Since 1979 there has been an increasing shift of jobs from manufacturing industry into services. The number of jobs in manufacturing has fallen by about two million since 1979, whereas jobs in services have grown from 12.8 to 14.5 million during the same period. This change has important implications for trade union membership. As trade union organisation has traditionally been stronger in the manufacturing sector rather than the service sector, it is precisely the areas where they are now most required where they have least strength, and where they experience greatest difficulty in retaining or increasing membership. John Edmonds, General Secretary of the GMB, set out the difficulties:

We must accept that within the next decade the trade unions are not going to be in a position to force contract cleaners, for example, to pay reasonable pay and conditions through traditional trade union organisation. We are not going to have effective trade union organisation in every large hotel in the country ... The whole private service area, particularly leisure, isn't very well organised and is likely to remain significantly unorganised for all sorts of structural reasons... If you have an industry where the workforce is highly mobile, where they are not attached to any particular employer for any length of time, then the organisational difficulties are very substantial indeed. It is obviously more difficult to organise there than it is a factory of 500 people who have relatively long service records. (Interview in *Marxism Today* September 1986: 17-18)

### **The organisation of cleaning workers**

The case study concerns a TGWU branch and the local TGWU office responsible for servicing it. This was the Hillingdon (formerly Southall) TGWU office in Region 1 of the TGWU, encompassing Greater London and the South East. The branch selected was a recently established cleaning branch, and made an interesting case for a number of reasons, including:

- (a) a workforce that was located in a traditionally low wage sector.
- (b) a large female South Asian membership.

- (c) a temporary South Asian local officer responsible for the organisation of the cleaners.
- (d) a local office which serviced an area of high ethnic concentration, including the town of Southall, West London.
- (e) the identification by the Race Relations Advisory Committee (RRAC) of Region 1 of the TGWU of the organisation of the cleaners at Heathrow Airport as being a priority task.

Heathrow is the world's busiest airport. In the financial year 1993-4 it handled 48,400,000 passengers, over 42 per cent of total passenger traffic through all UK airports. It is also the UK's premier air cargo handling facility, with cargo in 1991 valued at over £34 billion. Its annual revenue for the year 1993-4 was £630.7 million, whilst its operating profit was £250.4 million. Heathrow handles 90 airlines from 85 countries, and offers direct flights to over 220 destinations (BAA 1992, 1994). Clearly, as one of the largest service complexes in Britain, it plays the role of a key institution in the British economy: dynamic and highly profitable, with the added glamorous image associated with international air travel. However, for many of the 54,000 people who work there, conditions of employment are anything but glamorous. One such group of workers are the contract cleaners.

Since the 1960's Heathrow Airport has been the largest employer of Southall's Asian women, who work in the cleaning and catering divisions (CARF/SR 1981: 18). These minority ethnic workers were recruited into the area originally to work at Woolf's rubber factory. The plight of the predominantly female South Asian cleaning workers at Heathrow Airport had been brought to the attention of the TGWU on many occasions in the past (see CARF/SR 1981). This was in the context of a heated debate within the West London trade union movement in the late 1980s which included allegations of racism on the part of the white hierarchy of local trade unionists. In particular there had been an incident in 1984 with a large cleaning contractor at Heathrow, where the union had been seen to be guilty of complicity in racial discrimination. In July 1984 it became known that Reliance Cleaners, a large contractor operating at Heathrow, had lost their contract, and they issued redundancy notices to all their staff. However, in order to avoid redundancy payments they tried to harass some of the Asian women workers into resigning, gave them false information about their entitlements, and tried to stop them from collecting their wages (*Public Service Action* No.12 December 1984). Although many of the women had been paying subscriptions to the TGWU they received more sympathetic assistance in their grievances from a local community based organisation, Southall

Rights. Indeed, the union's area representative commented to a local reporter that he hadn't made much of an attempt to organise the Heathrow workers because he 'couldn't be bothered to understand Indian names - they were difficult to pronounce'. He commented that 'if I know Indian people they always have two jobs' and observed that 'if you offer nuts you should expect monkeys'. Awaiting the outcome of an Industrial tribunal, (at which the women were eventually awarded compensation), he complained 'Asians are not willing to fight for themselves' (Workers Against Racism 1985: 8).

In 1988, after a report was published by the London Borough of Ealing, the TGWU undertook to review their organisational policies in relation to the cleaning workers. The 'Ealing Report' highlighted

.... job insecurity, physically demanding work, low pay, unsocial hours, shift work, lack of training, and allegations of racism and sexism from employers (London Borough of Ealing 1988).

A conference, convened jointly by the Borough and the TGWU and attended by the then general secretary-elect, Bill Morris, agreed to make the organisation of the cleaners a priority task and implement a plan of action. This was based upon three measures that would, it was hoped, not only contribute to the effective organisation of the cleaners but also lead to a development of workplace cleaning representatives.

At the time of this initiative, twelve interviews were carried out by one of the authors with cleaning workers and TGWU representatives.<sup>[ii]</sup> The experiences of one cleaner, summarised from just part of the interview notes, gives some insight into the cleaners' working conditions:

Mrs A. is an Asian woman who has been employed as a cleaner at Heathrow Airport since 1975. She works a 40 hour week on a shift basis, for which she is paid £84 a week. Despite having to use hazardous chemicals and continually suffering from skin rashes and nausea she has received no health and safety instruction from her employers. No changing room facilities are provided; the company deducts a small weekly amount from her wages to clean her work clothing even though she does this at home. She gets a half-hour paid lunch break but is prohibited from using any of the airport's canteen facilities. When she first began work at Heathrow she was entitled to three weeks paid leave but this was recently reduced to two weeks without any explanation by the employers. There is no grievance procedure in operation in the non-unionised sector of the airport, and she believes that complaining about her conditions will risk dismissal from her job.

The first measure by the TGWU was to establish a branch solely for the cleaners in April 1990. Beforehand, the handful of cleaning workers who had joined the union had been forced to join the baggage handler's branch at the airport. This had not been very successful, as a branch dominated by the problems of baggage handlers was clearly inadequate in servicing the needs of the cleaning workers. As a result, these cleaning workers had remained union members only a short time. The second measure was the appointment of a temporary local TGWU officer with the sole responsibility for organising the cleaners. This Asian officer had extensive knowledge of the cleaning and catering industry at Heathrow Airport having been a steward there for twenty years between 1965 and 1985. The third initiative was the production of recruitment literature in all the appropriate minority ethnic languages. This literature outlined the importance of joining a union and provided information on how the union could help in relation to health and safety issues, workplace grievances and dealing with racial and sexual harassment from employers and workers alike.

In terms of the previous discussion, these measures showed some recognition within the TGWU of the need for 'special measures' as opposed to 'equal treatment' for this sector of ethnic minority workers. Unfortunately the measures outlined to improve the rate of unionisation amongst cleaning workers proved to be relatively unsuccessful. Although the two-year recruitment effort increased membership from six to fifty, this was still only five per cent of the potential membership of 1,000.<sup>[iii]</sup>

**Table 1: Composition of cleaning branch : ethnicity and gender**

	Asian members	White members
Women	35	4
Men	5	6

**Why was this recruitment drive unsuccessful?**

A key factor as to why the local TGWU office was unable to organise a larger number of cleaners was the constraint of the industrial relations climate and restrictive employment legislation, as set out at the beginning of this paper. One major difficulty was the continual refusal of Heathrow Airport Ltd (HAL) to agree to a union recognition agreement. This meant the local officer was unable to organise the cleaners at their place of work - the most likely place where the cleaners would join a union. The main method of recruitment had to be one of home visits to those cleaning workers known to be working at the airport. This was a very time-consuming task which often had to be undertaken outside normal working hours, and the resulting

rewards in membership were small in relation to the effort. The difficulties were exacerbated by shift-working which meant that the officer would often have to make several visits to the homes of these cleaning workers before making contact with them. In addition, because the local officer was unable to organise the cleaning workers at their place of work, the recruitment literature which had been translated into the appropriate minority ethnic languages could not be distributed to them there. An attempt to distribute literature in places of worship also proved to be unsuccessful because few cleaners had time to attend such places, due to the long and unsocial hours they worked and the need for many of them to undertake more than one job as a result of the poor wages paid by the cleaning companies. (None of the six cleaning workers interviewed in the study had ever seen the recruitment literature produced by the TGWU).

Since 1979, the pay and conditions facing many low-paid workers have worsened as a result of the abolition of Schedule 11 of the 1974 Employment Protection Act (previously known as the 'Fair Wages Act') which had been in existence in various forms for almost 100 years. Although the wages of the cleaners have always been relatively poor, this change has left them particularly vulnerable to unscrupulous employers wishing to further erode their terms and conditions of employment. It has given some employers in the cleaning sector at the airport the encouragement to force through further pay reductions by employing 'undocumented' or 'unauthorised' minority ethnic labour. These are often workers who entered Britain on a tourist visa, found work and have overstayed, which often forces them into part-time, casual, or short-term jobs on a cash in hand basis. Many of these left their own country for political reasons. Some of the cleaning employers used the threat of informing to the authorities as a way to pacify all the cleaners working at the airport. Wage reductions are imposed in the knowledge that 'undocumented' workers will not seek redress from the union because of their precarious legal position. This has left the cleaners vulnerable to what one local officer referred to as 'an obscene level of exploitation.'

Finally, the traditional trade union strategy of defending jobs by undertaking industrial action and seeking support from fellow workers has been largely emasculated by recent government legislation. According to one local TGWU officer, not only were the stronger sections of workers at Heathrow Airport unwilling to defend the cleaning workers, they themselves were under threat of redundancies by the employers. The effect was that most employees, including those that were union members were working in a climate of fear at Heathrow Airport. For example, in September 1993 more than 100 porters at Heathrow Airport were sacked after going on strike in an

attempt to persuade their employers to recognise the Transport and General Workers Union (*Morning Star* 7 September 1993).

### **Union mistakes**

This case study shows how the broader economic climate coupled with the political assault on union rights has had a direct effect on union recruitment attempts. This is not to say, however, that all the problems faced in this case were due to external forces. There were some problems that the local TGWU office was fully instrumental in creating for itself in this campaign. It may be going too far to say that by avoiding such mistakes, the local TGWU office would have recruited a far greater number of cleaning members, but at least the union would have managed to retain the full confidence and support of the existing cleaning members of the branch.

The first mistake related to the local TGWU officer's failure to call a single branch meeting of the cleaning membership in the two years that the branch was established. This officer argued that it had been difficult to arrange a time that was acceptable for those cleaners who worked unsocial shifts. As a result, even those 50 cleaning workers that had joined the union remained atomised, lacking an effective and fully working forum which would enable them to come together to collectively articulate their grievances. A second avoidable problem occurred when the local TGWU office (and also Region 1) terminated the contract of the local officer. Although another local officer assumed responsibility for the cleaning workers at Heathrow Airport, this task had to be undertaken in conjunction with his responsibility for the catering workers based there. This meant that even less time would be devoted to the servicing of cleaners and addressing their concerns. This new officer acknowledged that the cleaning branch had lost a number of members as a result of the disillusionment of the cleaners with the local TGWU office, and the perception that they would not receive the same quality of service as they had from the temporary local officer. Whatever the reason for this action, it seems to fall under the heading of our third dilemma - the unwillingness of the union to consolidate 'special measures' into a more permanent structure. It could be argued that the cleaners had special needs, yet the eventual outcome was to incorporate their organisation into the normal existing structures.

The very characteristics which made the cleaners easy to exploit - the fact that most were minority ethnic women with poor or non-existent English language skills - also made them hard to recruit and organise, and yet many local union officials were unconvinced that special measures were necessary to allow for this. Many of the cleaners had previously favoured organising themselves outside rather than through

the union because of the image of the union as an unsympathetic white organisation. The local TGWU office, in the heart of a large Asian population, had an all-white staff, with little knowledge of the local community. Some cleaners felt that local union officers had been racist in their attitudes, and that white stewards were likely to be unsympathetic to taking action against racist behaviour. Furthermore, there was still the local legacy of experiences such as the Reliance Cleaners dispute to overcome (See above p.9). Officials in the local TGWU office had no experience in servicing black members. As a black union officer explained, '... you're in Southall dealing with Asians and yet you have nobody on the counter who is Asian ... This is a problem nobody realises - Asians don't feel confident in turning up to an all-white office'. There was a particular need for an Asian equal opportunities officer at the local TGWU office as many of the older Asian women had difficulties with English.

### **Innovative approaches**

Although it was quite clear that traditional methods of organisation had proved to be unsuccessful in relation to the cleaning workers, there continued to be a marked reluctance on the part of some local TGWU officers to consider alternative and more innovative approaches to the problem. In particular, there seemed to be a great reluctance to involve local minority ethnic community groups such as the Indian Workers Association (IWA) and the Southall Trade Union and Employment Advisory Service (STUEAS) in their attempts to organise the cleaning workers. This was because some local TGWU officers viewed such groups as direct competitors to their role. One local TGWU officer argued the IWA were actually making the recruitment of cleaners more difficult for the union by 'using the problems faced by the cleaners to usurp the functions of the local TGWU office.' This officer refused to acknowledge that some cleaning workers had sought help from such groups because the local TGWU office was regarded as a 'white institution' which was removed from the problems facing the cleaners: 'There's a lot more to the problems facing the cleaners than the Southall (now Hillingdon) TGWU office being racist.'

However, after the failure of the cleaners recruitment campaign the new local TGWU officer with responsibility for the organisation of the cleaners articulated a different view. He believed that co-operation with local community groups would help the local TGWU office in organising the cleaners. There was an acknowledgement that the local office had made mistakes in the past by attempting to organise cleaning workers in isolation from representatives of local community groups such as the Indian Workers Association who were employed in other areas of the airport. An Afro-Caribbean shop steward in the car industry who was a member of Region 1's RRAC

also felt that it was important to work with local community groups to bridge the gap between the local office and the cleaning workers, and recruit them to the union. He suggested that if a particular area of work such as the cleaning sector was unorganised 'it should be down to the officer responsible to take the initiative to get amongst the community and sell the union in terms of what can be done'.

Some progress towards achieving a level of co-operation with local community groups has begun to happen. The local TGWU office in conjunction with the IWA has begun to devise ways of recruiting cleaning workers at their place of work by getting IWA and union members who work in other areas of the airport to inform and pass on recruitment-related information to the cleaning workers. However, at the time of writing this paper it is too early to assess whether this has resulted in any tangible change in the organisation of the cleaning workers.

### **Broader implications**

This particular case study indicates a number of broader points relevant to the relationship between minority ethnic workers and trade unions. At a time of declining union membership and growth in marginalised forms of work, trade unions will increasingly need to set up initiatives to recruit minority ethnic workers within these jobs. The above case study shows that for many such workers, barriers of isolation, language, low pay and anti-social hours make this task difficult. To help to overcome these barriers unions need to take account of the special needs of minority ethnic workers. Extra time and resources will need to be made available; specific initiatives are needed which make full use of community networks and organisations, as well as using local ethnic minority newspapers and radio stations. Union recruitment literature and other material will need to be translated into community languages. Union officers from ethnic minority communities are necessary at a local level, with the appropriate insight into language and culture. Unions need to demonstrate to the minority ethnic communities that they will not only tackle traditional union matters on behalf of their minority ethnic members, but will also fight against racism on their behalf, and involve themselves in broader community issues, such as immigration injustice and racial harassment on the streets.

The issue of the relationship of trade unions to external community-based minority ethnic groups is a controversial one, which pricks a number of sensitive points in British trade union history. As stated earlier, post-war black migrant workers experienced white trade union racist exclusion in the 1950s and 1960s. For example, in the 1965 dispute at Courtaulds' Red Scar Mill, Preston, white workers and the union had collaborated with management in the attempt to force Asian workers to

work more machines for proportionately less pay, and later that year a strike by Asian workers at the Woolf Rubber Company was lost through lack of official union backing (Sivanandan 1982). Partly as a result of such experiences, minority ethnic workers tended to organise themselves outside the factory walls, making such organisations more 'community based' than 'work-based', and in subsequent industrial disputes they would draw upon such groups. In the late 1960s and early 1970s there occurred a number of strikes characterised by a strong support of Asian workers by local community associations and an equally noticeable lack of support by a local trade union. In particular, three notorious disputes were those at the Coneygre Foundry in Tipton in 1967-8, Mansfield Hosiery in Loughborough in 1972, and Imperial Typewriters in Leicester in 1974. All three were precipitated by management and union collusion in discriminatory practices, such as paying Asian workers lower wages, barring them from promotion, or selectively making them redundant. In each case the strikers benefited substantially through the support of local community organisations and political groups, and Asian workers from other factories (Wrench 1987: 166-7).

One example of an external group which was associated with some of these disputes is the Indian Workers Association (IWA). The question of the relationship between the IWA and the union figures in both the case studies of this paper, although there are significant ideological differences between the IWA in Southall and the IWA(GB) rooted in the West Midlands. The IWA in Southall, although involved in the Woolf's strike in 1965, is nevertheless much more 'moderate' and less trade union oriented than the IWA(GB) (Josephides 1991: 20). The Indian Workers Association (Great Britain) traces its origins back to organisations of Indians in Britain in the 1930s. These organisations were largely concerned with the independence of India, and after the political independence of India and Pakistan in 1947 went into decline. However, they became active again in the 1950s, one stimulus being the need to provide assistance to the newly arriving Indian migrants to Britain. It expects its members to belong to unions, and assists them in making representation at branch, district or TUC level on issues of importance to its members. The IWA(GB) has always had a distinctive political philosophy - it locates its work of fighting racism and discrimination within its overall mission of creating a strong and united working class movement. It has had some success in its activities, initially in forcing specific unions to accept Indian members, and then in numerous campaigns on behalf of individual victims of racism and discrimination in the workplace. Members see themselves not as constituting an alternative to trade union organisation, but as strong trade unionists

themselves, who welcome alliances with other multi-racial progressive groups (Josephides 1990).

### **The second case study: GMB**

The issue of a trade union's relationship with external community-based groups, and the IWA in particular, is central to the second case study. This concerns the attempts of the GMB union to organise a group of mainly South Asian women sweat-shop workers employed at Burnsall Ltd, a small metal finishing company in Smethwick, the West Midlands, in 1992-1993.

The union described the situation at Burnsall<sup>[iv]</sup>: 'Here, exceptionally low-paid workers were sweated and subjected to the whim of a capricious and autocratic management. Along with total mobility of labour, docking of wages and imposed overtime, we have the maximum extraction of value from workers in a highly competitive industry'. The women complained that they got less money than the men for similar work. But the main catalyst for the strike was the health and safety issue. Workers complained of skin rashes and dizziness from the tanks of heated chemicals. The management ignored the request of a pregnant woman who lifted metal pieces out of a degreasing tank to be move to lighter tasks. In May 1992, when three months pregnant, she was rushed to hospital and suffered a miscarriage. The doctor who attended her said that the cause of her miscarriage was consistent with the lifting work she had been doing.

One of the women workers was docked an entire week's wages for missing one day at work. Another reported 'We ate surrounded by filth - they treated us like animals'. In the three months before the strike, the union made many approaches to secure recognition, informing the management that 95 per cent of their workforce were now union members. On 1 May 1992 a white worker was dismissed for refusing to work overtime. On 11 June a secret ballot took place of the 26 of the 29 workers who had joined the union. No votes were cast against the strike. On 15 June the strike began. The objective was union recognition, to combat low and unequal pay, imposed overtime and a hazardous environment.

There were 26 strikers, mostly Punjabi women who spoke little English. In the 54 weeks of the strike there was a daily picket, with a least one full-time union officer spending at least some time on the picket line each day. The strike was intermittently featured in newspaper articles and television news and documentary programmes, and attracted considerable public support. A London support group was formed, and later

a local Birmingham support group too. Marches of solidarity were held, and concerts and social events organised to raise money for the strike fund.

Despite the general public sympathy, the strike failed. Legal restrictions on picketing and secondary action limited the impact of the strike on the company, who found it relatively easy to recruit scab replacement labour. Local Job Centres told women on the unemployment register to report to Burnsalls, otherwise their benefit would be stopped. The majority of Burnsall's customers were non-union, which made it impossible to organise boycotting of products treated by Burnsall. There were a few unionised companies which took their products, such as Jaguar. After pressure from a Jaguar shop steward and a sympathetic article in the *Guardian*, a manager at Jaguar instructed its suppliers to terminate their relationship with Burnsall. However, the success at Jaguar could not be repeated at Rover, Land Rover and other unionised companies which did business with Burnsall.

In May 1993 a scab who had been hired at Burnsall only that day attacked with a knife a young male striker on the picket, who later underwent emergency surgery for partially severed fingers. The union featured this vicious assault in a four-page leaflet calling for solidarity, distributed at all the unionised factories that do business with Burnsall. After 26 days without a single response to the leaflet, the union officials came to the conclusion that the strike was over. They argued that if other trade unionists were not going to take solidarity action for a fellow trade unionist mutilated on an official picket line, then they were unlikely to take action whatever further appeals were made. Other trade unions argued that they were unable to provide more substantial and effective support unless they were *officially* asked by the GMB; however, such action on the GMB's part would be seen to be unlawful. The GMB union officials had no further initiatives to propose, saw no prospect of victory, and recommended calling off the picketing. After a three hour meeting with the strikers the strike was called off. It had lasted for just over one year.

### **The ending of the strike**

The strike ended in a great deal of acrimony between the union, the external support groups, and the strikers. The union had committed itself to an official dispute, within the law, including compliance with the law on balloting, picketing and secondary action. This policy was criticised by the support groups who favoured a wider blacking of Burnsall work, and mass picketing. This was rejected by the union for legal and practical reasons - if the GMB broke the law it would leave itself open to raids on its finances. One full time official argued that for a mass picket to be

successful it must block all vehicles and all scab labour entering and leaving the factory, which would entail blocking off a road well-used by local commercial traffic. 'Thus, for the union to defy the law would be no more than an invitation to countless inconvenienced companies to plunder, via the courts, the union's resources'. On top of this, he pointed to all the recent times that mass picketing had ended in defeat in recent years.

A leaflet issued by the London Support Group during the strike argued that it was precisely because of the new restrictive legislation that broader action was necessary:

Historically, strikes by black workers have only been successful through the support of the community and mobilisation by black and anti-racist organisations. In the 90s, with the ban on secondary picketing and other anti-union legislation making it harder than ever to mobilise through traditional trade union structures, community action is vital.

However, in this case, community mobilisation was problematic for the GMB. In January 1993, half-way through the strike, a support group external to the union was set up in Birmingham, and almost immediately relations between the union and the Birmingham support group broke down. The crisis seems to have been precipitated by the call by the General Secretary of the IWA(GB) at a meeting of the support group for mass picketing and secondary action, on the grounds that the strike could not be won by lawful means. A leading activist in the support group was reported to have told a union officer that 'the union now had to step aside. It had had over six months to win the strike and had failed. It was now time for the support group to take over and see what it could do'.

The GMB felt that if this action was taken on behalf of the union in an official dispute it could place the union and its funds in extreme jeopardy. The Courts and Burnsall could legally raid the unions finances. The GMB tried to get the support group to limit its role, which the support group was unwilling to do. Therefore the union issued a statement (28 Jan 1993) stating 'the Union will not accept the involvement, in any aspect of the Burnsall dispute, by members of the Birmingham support group', threatening that further interference would result in the Union 'bringing to the attention of the wider Trade Union and Labour movement the activities of this group'. There then followed a period of exchange of letters, with the support group insisting that it had a legitimate role to play, and that its activities had been agreed with by the union, and the union accusing the support group of re-writing history and concealing the true nature of its activities. By the time the strike was called off one of the union officers describe the support group intervention as 'a campaign to undermine the GMB

leadership of the strike' and an 'additional burden which the union leadership has had to shoulder'. The London support group issued a statement accusing the GMB of intimidating and threatening the strikers to force them to end the strike. In reply, one of the black strikers issued a statement accusing the support group of intimidating the strikers into breaking the law.

Another problem which made difficult the relationship between the union and the strikers was the fact that many of the strikers had limited or no English language skills, and the union could not provide a full-time officer who could speak the language of the Asian strikers. The union officers therefore relied heavily upon an Asian community activist to translate for them. However, because this activist was an active member of the IWA and the support group, the full-time officers felt, rightly or wrongly, that he was misleading the strikers as to the union's position. The IWA strongly denied this allegation; either way, the union officers conceded that the union had been seriously weakened by not having a sympathetic Punjabi speaker to speak on their behalf.

### **The post-mortem**

The ending of the strike generated much debate on what went wrong, and on the degree of blame to be attached to various parties in the struggle. The strike illustrates the fact that the issue of 'community support' for trade unions in disputes involving minority ethnic workers is more problematic than many have realised, not least because of the often very different ideologies and aims of many of these groups and unions. After the strike was called off the IWA (GB) stated:

The calling off of the strike has vindicated the IWA (GB)'s view that it was never possible for this action to succeed within the law. The GMB line of conducting the action within the law has resulted in a failure to win either trade union recognition or to secure the reinstatement of their dismissed members. .... The IWA calls upon all its members to campaign, inside and outside trade unions, to change the policy of those unions who are committed to conducting industrial disputes strictly within the law, even though the law is unjust and biased. (Press Release by IWA (GB) on the calling off of the Burnsall strike)

For the IWA, the lesson of the strike was that unions must sometimes be prepared to campaign *outside* the law, in order to build a mass movement and secure fundamental rights. A similar statement by the London support group urged that in the context of anti-union legislation, strikes such as Burnsall's can only be successful through mobilising wider community support and developing new strategies. They accused the

GMB officials of being 'less interested in winning the strike than in keeping it within their control', which led ultimately to the 'bitter betrayal' of the strikers.

One local white activist tried to put the union's actions in a more sympathetic context:

Most of us on the left are all too familiar with cases of union bureaucrats selling out winnable struggles and treating the rank and file membership with contempt. We are also well aware of the British trade union movement's shameful record of indifference, neglect, and downright racism towards black workers. The knee-jerk reaction is to believe the worst when the GMB is accused of betraying the mainly Asian (and majority female) strikers at Burnsall. ... The uncomfortable fact is, however, that in this instance the GMB conducted an honest, determined and surprisingly principled struggle. If the left's usual accusations of 'selling out' and 'betrayal' against bureaucrats are to carry any credibility, we have to give credit where its due and avoid spreading lies and slander. (Denham 1993)

The GMB's actions in this case should not be seen as of the same order as those of the blinkered and racist union officials who abandoned and undermined black struggle at Imperial Typewriters and other earlier industrial struggles. Indeed, many of the sorts of initiatives which we have argued were lacking in the first case study in this paper were in fact adopted by the union in this one. The strike began with a genuine and determined commitment by the union to the Burnsall strikers. As Denham argues, although it was a 'legal' strike, the union 'sailed close to the wind' in its attempts to obtain blacking of Burnsall. Although in theory the union could have refused strike pay because of the short time of the strikers' membership, the union paid the strike pay immediately. (Normally, 53 weeks' membership was the qualifying period for any Union benefit.)

The union devoted a lot of effort to raising the public profile of the strike, in the first six months of the strike issuing twelve press releases. Indeed, media pressure forced a previously unsympathetic Health and Safety Executive to write a critical report of the factory, imposing a four-part improvement notice, and demanding other alterations to current company practice. The union saw this as having an important effect on the morale of the strikers and the continuation of the strike. The strikers had been suffering real financial hardship, and were unable to get DHSS benefit as the Social Security Act forbids benefit to those involved in an industrial dispute. However, because of the now very public health and safety issue it was ruled that the workers' refusal to return to work was justified, so that the workers were able to receive unemployment benefit and income support. Thus, whilst the Support Groups felt the

union had sold the strikers short, the union felt it done all it was able to do, including initiating some rather innovatory tactics.

## **Discussion**

One of the problems of this dispute was that key players were often operating according to different and incompatible assumptions. Sometimes, at various stages in the strike, the allegiance of different individuals to these different positions was blurred, concealed or confused. To clarify these different sets of assumptions, we will first postulate three different historical positions held by union members regarding the preferred relationship between trade unions and migrant or minority ethnic workers. This will be followed by three different positions held by external black groups on their relationship with trade union struggle.

<b>Union members and Minority Ethnic Workers</b>		<b>Groups External to the Union</b>	
1	Racist Exclusion	1	Black Separatist
2	Incorporation	2	Incorporation
3	Partial Autonomy	3	Race and Class

### **Union members and minority ethnic workers**

1. The first position is that of *racist exclusion*, as characterised by many trade unionists in the pre-war and early post-war periods, and by some members and officials in the disputes of the 1960's and early 1970s. The preference is firstly to keep migrant workers out of the labour market; later, to keep them out of the union, and when in the union, to keep them excluded from the union benefits to which they were entitled.

2. The second position is one of *incorporation*, where union membership is extended to minority ethnic workers, but where the basis of inclusion goes no further than that consistent with a traditional trade union class analysis. Membership unity is seen as central; thus any special measures which distinguish between types of workers are to be discouraged. The natural preference is to be 'colour blind'. The 'hard' position within this was to extend no special measures at all to migrant workers, as was the position of many unions in the 1960s. A later, more flexible, position is to encourage the adoption of some measures which take account of the different circumstances of minority ethnic members, such as producing literature in different languages. The incorporation model forms the premise upon which most of the 'race' structures of individual unions are currently based.

3. The third position is one of *partial autonomy*, held by many black trade unionists and some white activists, who argue that union rules, structures and policies should change to allow for the experiences of exclusion and racism of the minority black membership, as these disadvantages are suffered over and above those suffered by the white membership. Furthermore, the fact that black members are generally in a minority within unions means that normal union structures operate to exclude their voice from being heard by the majority (Lee 1987). Thus many minority ethnic workers feel that the way to get their voices heard is by self organisation within unions, in their own separate structures. (This paper has not time to address the current 'self organisation' debate - for an overview of this see Virdee and Grint 1994).

The tactic of self organisation tends to be regarded with suspicion by the white union hierarchy, who generally prefer what could be called the 'passive assimilation' strategy associated with the previous 'incorporation' position. The assumptions within this model are described by Virdee and Grint:

... eventually, minorities will rise through the ranks of the union movement and provide role models for others to follow; in the meantime the unions themselves will become progressively more liberal, thereby setting up a virtuous circle to bind minorities properly into the labour movement, where their similar experience and interests as *workers* will transcend what differentiates them along ethnic lines. Whatever problems minorities suffer from can best be resolved through a strategy that asserts from the beginning that all are equal (Virdee and Grint 1994: 208).

A common argument used by those within the union who oppose self organisation is one which draws upon a simplistic Marxist approach, namely that class-based interests as employees and workers take precedence over any other sectional interest such as race or ethnicity. (Virdee and Grint find this ironic as the British trade union movement has traditionally been hostile to Marxist approaches.) Only rarely has a union itself actively facilitated the development of self organised groups, the best known example being the white collar union NALGO, the National and Local Government Officers Association, before the UNISON merger.

The self organisation debate is currently generating a lot of heat in some unions. However, it could be argued that in itself self organisation doesn't necessarily raise fundamental contradictions within the unions, and may merely operate to serve the interests of a new and relatively middle class black trade union bureaucracy. If self organisation were to allow the large-scale involvement of minority ethnic workers in

union structures, then many of the demands that minority ethnic workers make to address the issue of racism would push the trade unions beyond what they regard as 'normal' economistic defensive position of protecting the sectional interest of their members, and move them towards a more overtly political position. However, at the moment it seems that such mass involvement in the 'race' structures has rarely occurred (Virdee, forthcoming), and therefore it seems that some of the more fundamental tensions and contradictions within the union position are more likely to be exposed in relation to *external* groups at moments of struggle rather than *internally* through the tensions of self organisation.

### **Groups external to the union**

There are at least three identifiably different positions which in theory could be held by external black groups on their relationship with trade union struggle:

1. The *black separatist* position is the other side of the coin of the racist/exclusionist position historically held by some white trade unionists. This is the view that after years of evidence of white trade union racism to black members and workers, black people can only be properly represented by their own organisations, perhaps even including their own black trade unions. Any organisation where black workers are led by white leaders is bound to neglect black interests in favour of the white majority.

2. The second position is similar to the straightforward trade union class position put forward in the white unionists *incorporation* model. This view is that black groups can help black members integrate into unions, and give some assistance to the unions in limited special measures, such as providing community links in recruitment campaigns, assisting with the translation and distribution of union material, etc. Black workers are not seen in any sense having a special role as a 'vanguard' movement within unions - this would be a sort of inverted racism, carrying a danger of distancing black workers from their white class allies. At least one faction of the Indian Workers Association could be seen to subscribe to this traditional class solidarity view (Josephides 1991: 22).

3. The third position is a more radical *race and class* perspective, stressing the potential of external groups for galvanising of unions into more radical and political action. By this view, British unions are reformist and non-political organisations concerned only with the immediate remuneration of their members. Black workers can offer the labour movement the opportunity to break the reformist distinction between the political and the economic (Joshi and Carter 1984). Sivanandan writes:

Trade unions, once an instrument of class struggle, have in the course of achieving legitimacy, come to act as a buffer between the classes - absorbing the impact of working class radicalism on behalf of capital in exchange for wage concessions on behalf of labour. ... Black workers ... have been forced by the racist ethos of British society (worker and capitalist alike) to address themselves more directly to the political dimensions of their economic exploitation. They have ... been compelled to recognise that a purely quantitative approach to the improvement of their conditions can by itself have no bearing on the quality of their lives. Their economic struggle is at once a political struggle. And that puts them in the vanguard of working class struggle. (Sivanandan, Editorial *Race Today*, August 1973)

This position is similar to that of the West Midlands based IWA(GB) involved in the Burnsall dispute. The IWA(GB) believes that because many white workers have been corrupted into racism, whilst black workers have at the same time become more politicised, both through their experiences of exploitation as well as by their earlier struggles against imperialism, then black workers will often find themselves taking the initiative in workplace struggle.

In the same way that a class analysis is used by white trade unionists when arguing against self organisation for black workers, so a class analysis can be drawn upon to defuse the radical black intervention in struggle. In the Burnsall dispute, one of the white union leaders clearly identified the London Support Group as 'Black Separatists' and drew on a class argument to oppose them.

Unfortunately, what the London Support Group cannot accept is that it is the strikers' membership of a British Trade Union that gives them coherence. It is their organisation *along class lines* that makes them so potentially powerful and a pole of attraction for others and it is the championing of their cause and the vigorous leadership given by the GMB that has brought their struggle to national prominence. The London Support Group view the Burnsall strike instead as a struggle of black workers and their community against the forces of state repression and its leadership by a white trade union and its officers as an unfortunate minor inconvenience best ignored as much as possible.' (GMB letter 23 March 1993)

Whilst the union officials used class arguments to criticise the support groups, black members of the support groups used race arguments to criticise the union officials. The union was seen to have 'sold out' its black members; accusations of white union leaders unsympathetic to black struggle, with implications of racism, came to the surface, rooted in memories of the experience of black trade unionists in the 1950s, 1960s and early 1970s. Both these arguments were overstated. The external support

groups were not predominantly peopled by 'black separatists'; the union officials concerned with the Burnsall dispute were not 'racist exclusionists' such those revealed in the disputes of 20 or 30 years ago. Indeed, one of the officials consciously saw the dispute as an attempt to put to rest the old image of unions seen only as working for the benefit of 'white, male, skilled workers over the age of 35':

The union's record was a pretty unimpressive one. We consciously saw ourselves as doing something to rectify that imbalance of commitment from the union to the workers, given the commitment that ethnic minority workers in terms of their union membership had given to unions over many years (quoted in Büyüm 1993: 23).

The GMB trade unionists involved in the Burnsall dispute attempted to win recognition and improve the working conditions for their newly-recruited members through action which remained within the law, and insisted on retaining control of the dispute to make sure that actions of their members did not transgress the law and jeopardise union funds. Inevitably this was seen by some as incorporation by white union bureaucracy to contain black struggle. Memories of this went back to Grunwick, where the mobilisation of official union support for the strikers was seen as a tactic of incorporation:

Grunwick marked the end of an era of vibrant and creative black struggles which had threatened to bring a political dimension to industrial struggle. It was an end brought about by the invasion of official trade unionism, which had moved from a policy of opposition or apathy to a strategy of control through co-optation' (Gordon 1985).

Nevertheless, those who were critical of the unions actions are still not to be labelled 'black separatist', a position to which groups such as the IWA (GB) are strongly opposed.

We feel unity (between black and white) will develop in struggle. This does not in any sense deny the need for black workers to have their own caucuses in every factory and place of work. We do not advocate separate black unions; that would be to play the capitalists game of dividing the working class (Report of the General Secretary, IWA (GB) J.Joshi, 1970: 21-22, quoted in Josephides 1990: 119).

The perspective of 'black separatism' is rarely found amongst black union members. In general, the term is over-used by white trade unionists, and is often attributed to black activists when they begin to move beyond the normal limits of traditional trade union activity. A recent study of four trade unions found no evidence of this perspective being articulated by either rank and file black workers nor their

representatives within the 'race' structures of the union (Virdee, forthcoming). The perspective is more likely to be held by activists *external* to trade unions. Activists in the London support group held varying positions on 'separatism': whilst some made pronouncements during the strike which were quite sympathetic to separate black organisation, others threatened to withdraw if the group became 'separatist'. However, for some individuals the failure of the Burnsall strike itself seemed to stimulate a 'separatist' perspective. After the strike, one of the members of the London support group became even more convinced of the importance of black support organisations, and was clearly giving serious thought to the issue of separate black union organisation:

I think the other thing that comes out is that black workers need their own structures as well. The need for ... even a black trade union, if need be ... Structures need to be created where black workers can fight through. Its becoming so difficult to work and struggle within the mainstream unions. They have managed, during the Burnsall strike, to do quite a lot of damage. Despite everything it was getting a lot of propaganda, getting a lot of publicity, getting a lot of mainstream support at one level. But at the end of the day it didn't win. ... It didn't manage to get the mass support that was needed on that picket line every other day. There was no mass pickets. So we as black people do need to construct a strategy in order to have counter structures. Maybe we haven't been doing the right structures. And I think that there are ideas floating around about black trade unions, or black workers organisations. But more black support groups. And I think that's the biggest contribution the strikers have made (quoted in Büyüm 1993: 52).

### **Problems of 'community support'**

In the earlier-mentioned strikes of the 1960s and 1970s, community action played a significant role in support of the strikers. This led to a rather over-romanticised view among the left as to the power in struggle of a union allied to broader black community organisations. In the earlier case study of the Heathrow cleaners in this paper we too have argued that the failure of the TGWU to work with community organisations weakened their hand. However, in the Burnsall case, community support is shown to be a more problematic issue. More specifically, there is a clear distinction to be made between those forms of community support which are lawful and those which are not.

In the early stages of the Burnsall dispute, the union did engage the broader local community in the action, and, with the support of local groups and key religious and commercial figures, succeeded for over two months in preventing the company

securing an alternative workforce. In this, the union had the support of the IWA(GB), which used its local influence to try to shame the scabs in their local communities:

We've put their names up in local temples and distributed leaflets, naming them and the Indian villages they come from. Some might say its direct humiliation. But we're saying, by crossing the picket line for a few bob, you are a disgrace to your community (IWA spokesman, *Guardian* 7 October 1992).

Nevertheless, in this case the community support did not produce the desired outcome. Despite the local popular support for the strikers the company was able to secure a replacement workforce, including many from the local Punjabi community. Some have argued that this reflects the fact that in recent years the IWA has lost some of its mobilising force in the Asian community, as the activities on which they mobilised in the 1960s and 1970s have less relevance for a new generation within minority ethnic communities. A further critique comes from those who see part of the problem to be the fact that the IWA is less attuned to *women's* struggles. In her study of Punjabi women workers in Birmingham, Guru (1987) was critical of the attitudes of some of the IWA men she interviewed, those who were in their late thirties and over, and who had spent much of their lives in rural areas of India: she felt they had 'patronising and paternalistic' attitudes to the participation of women in organised politics. By this argument, the influence of this particular community-based organisation was less than it might have been in relation to the groups of strikers and scab workers who were both predominantly female.

This organisation of community support in union recruitment drives, or in attempts to prevent the recruitment of scab labour, does not in theory create problems for the union concerned. However, when community support becomes mass picketing and potentially unlawful secondary action, it becomes an issue of a different order, and may pose a direct threat to trade union assets. Although the other previously-mentioned cases where industrial struggle involved community support were often quite innovative and radical by the standards of normal official and unofficial disputes at that time, they were nevertheless lawful by the laws of the day. These struggles, which seemed to confirm the left's best ideals about unity and solidarity between workers and the extension of economic struggle into new and exciting political areas, were therefore not as 'radical' as mythology would have it. One major difference in the context of similar struggles today is the undermining of workers' collective power through structural unemployment and the increasingly repressive employment legislation. In particular the legislation has made once-normal collective action much more likely to be defined as unlawful activity.

## **Conclusion**

One of the case studies described in this paper is located in the service sector, the other in manufacturing. They both represent typical workplaces for minority ethnic groups; at the same time they are in their different ways both quite characteristic of the contemporary service and manufacturing sectors. Heathrow typifies the profitable, dynamic and expanding part of the service sector whose glamorous superstructure rests upon the labour of thousands of sub-contracted poorly paid and highly exploited workers. Although Burnsalls appears to be an old-fashioned traditional sweatshop it represents an important component of the 'new workplace'. Through the growth of sub-contracting from core, assembly and manufacturing customers, factories such as Burnsalls are an increasingly central element in the new two-tier manufacturing world, in this case supplying major car assemblers such as Jaguar and Rover. The introduction in manufacturing of Japanese-style management practices, JIT (Just In Time), contracting out, and so on, has increased the numbers of small to medium sized employers who are under intense pressure from their customers, the major assemblers, and who become even more opposed to trade unions than they would normally be. In the service sector, competitive tendering and contracting out has the same effect. The over-representation of women, minority ethnic workers and migrants in these sectors provides extra opportunities for employers to divide, segment and individualise their workforce. Increasingly, this is the context in which trade unions must operate.

Many labour movement activists now argue that the trade union movement has no hope of bringing unionisation to these workers unless it works in cooperation with communities and links unionisation to broader issues such as workplace discrimination, sexual and racial harassment at the workplace, health and safety, cultural linguistic and religious rights, harassment by the police and immigration authorities, and so on.

If the trade union movement wants to tackle the creation of low-paid, racially defined ghettos in employment, it has to shift its priorities. It must encourage community initiatives rather than fearing where they might lead. It must offer resources and be willing to stick with the local and community groups when the inevitable industrial disputes arise. This means working jointly to build solidarity and, most importantly, confront anti-union legislation (CARF March/April 1994: 5)

We argued in the first case study that if the union had worked with the local community groups it would have had more success in its recruitment drive. However,

this success would then have led naturally to the problems of the second case study. Here, officials who were sympathetic to the idea of broader community links as well as to some of the principles of 'self organisation' still drew the line at unlawful action to challenge anti-union laws, even though it could be argued that such laws are having a more oppressive effect on these new groups of workers than workers in the relatively strong, already unionised, sectors.

The problem for unions here is that the highly visible failure of campaigns such as Burnsalls could lead to a more general disillusion with unions on the part of minority ethnic workers and make further union recruitment more difficult. As one of the GMB officials recognised: 'there is no doubt that we are going to find it more difficult to recruit Asian workers in the future, because of what happened in the Burnsall strike' (quoted in Büyüm 1993: 37).

One of the key differences between a radical and a reformist position is the readiness in the former to take action outside the law, when that law is seen as unjust and representing the narrow interests of the ruling elite. However, unions by their very nature are not easily radical organisations in this sense. Much has been argued as to the radical or conservative potential of unions in social transformation (e.g. Hyman 1971; Kelly 1988). Many have argued since the times of Lenin and Gramsci that trade unions are basically defensive organisations operating within the confines laid down by capitalist society, are essentially competitive, and are unlikely to be the instrument of a radical transformation of society (see Harman 1983). Although unions in Britain have shown their effectiveness in factory level issues 'they studiously avoid any coherent theory of their role in changing the economic base of society. The question is a political one, and the unions separate the industrial struggle from the political struggle. Politics is seen as something outside of the industrial process' (Rice 1977: 164). Thus in Britain 'union membership has never meant that members should have any fundamental commitment to a new society' (Rice 1977: 164).

Some commentators argue that the current period of crisis of the labour movement cannot be separated from the historical question of the division between 'politics' and 'economics'. The critiques of trade unions by Hobsbawm (1981) and Lane (1982) have been summarised as follows:

the crisis affecting trade unions is the result of the interweaving of long-term structural change with economic crisis and high and sustained levels of unemployment. Together these have exposed union practices that rested upon

'economism' as inadequate and ill-suited to retaining membership, morale and influence in a recessionary period (Eldridge et al 1991: 81).

These commentators are critical of the failure of the movement to demonstrate an alternative vision upon which unionism can be based: 'one that extends beyond the plant and the pay packet and into issues regarding the social purposes of work and a wider quest for a society founded on equity' (Eldridge et al 1991: 81). Eldridge, Cressey and MacInnes write that even in periods of relative strength for unions, there has been constant conflict over the strategies, values and fundamental orientations that unions should adopt; 'this ambiguity is historically embedded and becomes particularly acute in periods of recession' (Eldridge et al 1991: 79). The context of recession heightened the ambiguities, conflicts and tensions of the Burnsall dispute. It might be argued that in the future such tensions are going to be sharpened by the conjugation of a number of factors:

In both the service and manufacturing sectors pressures have increased the proportional significance of marginalised, low-paid and heavily exploited workers, so that these 'poor work' sectors now form an important component of the 'new workplace'.

Unions need to recruit and organise workers within these sectors to replace their falling membership and arrest the effect this sector has on dragging down wages elsewhere.

For a number of reasons, women and minority ethnic workers are disproportionately represented within these 'poor work' sectors.

The problems of organising this sector mean that broader forms of action are likely to be necessary to achieve success. At the same time the increasingly restrictive legislation means that such action is far more vulnerable to being defined as unlawful.

Black workers and their communities, due to the politicising nature of their life and work experiences, are far more ready to embrace a political and radical dimension to economic struggles and struggles of union recognition.

The combination of all these factors means that when unions embark upon similar campaigns they are more likely to find themselves addressing political questions broader than 'economism' and outside the remit of conventional trade union action. By this analysis the tensions which arose during the Burnsall dispute are understandable, and almost predictable. They cannot be reduced simply to individual personalities who are 'racist' 'separatist', or 'bureaucratic'. Given the combination of

factors described above it is clear that in some other form and setting these issues will arise to face the labour movement again.

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## End notes

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1. In this paper the term 'minority ethnic' is used to refer to people of Afro-Caribbean and Asian descent, and other 'visible' minorities. As many of the writers and activists referred to in this paper also use the term 'black' to mean the same thing, we also employ this term in the paper.
2. Twelve interviews were undertaken with cleaning workers and TGWU representatives. This comprised six interviews with cleaning workers, three interviews with local TGWU district officers and three interviews with regional TGWU officers. Four out of the six cleaning workers were Asian women; one was an Asian man and the other was a white man. Of the three interviews with local TGWU officers, one was an Asian man and two were white men. Of the three regional TGWU officers, one was a white man, one a white woman and the other an African-Caribbean man. The interviews were undertaken in 1991 and early 1992. (The interviews with the cleaning workers took place in their homes due to the employer's refusal to allow the TGWU to make contact with them on airport premises.) A full account of this research can be found in Virdee (forthcoming).
3. Of these 800 (80%) were Asian, of whom the overwhelming majority were women. Of the remaining 200 cleaners, 150 (15%) were white, and 50 (5%) were African or African-Caribbean.
4. Much of the material referred to over the next few pages comes from unpublished documents generated by the GMB, the Support Groups, and activists during the course of the dispute.