

Workplace representatives in service sector organising campaigns: roles and tensions

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Introduction

This paper considers the roles of workplace activists in the process of union organising, and in union renewal activity more widely. There is a long history of studies that examine the role of workplace activists and representatives in unions, both in the UK (Batstone et al 1977, Hyman 1979, Boraston et al 1975, Terry 1986, Charlwood and Terry 2007) and beyond (Geary and Roche 2003, Peetz et al 2002, Cooper 2001, amongst many others). Similarly, there is a wider literature that debates and reflects on processes of union renewal of various forms (Taylor and Mathers 2002, Fiorito 2004, Lévesque and Murray 2002, 2006, Hyman 2004). In the UK, the mid-1990s saw a “turn to organising” as the preferred narrative of unions seeking to renew themselves (Martinez Lucio and Stuart 2008). This fitted with a broader political change and the election of the New Labour government in 1997. The change of government after a period of 18 years (1979-1997) of right-wing Conservative Party rule brought with it a significant shift of political and policy context (see Smith and Morton 2002 for further discussion). The most relevant change for the purpose of this analysis was the introduction of statutory trade union recognition legislation in 1999, subsequently amended in 2004. The combination of the more politically and legislatively supportive context of trade unionism underpinned a significant investment in organising activity and a notable shift of emphasis towards promoting organising policies (Heery et al 2003).

The particular area of interest in this paper is in organising campaigns that target previously un-unionised workforces; sometimes called ‘greenfield’ organising. This focus is adopted primarily because it is during the process of unionisation that new activists learn to “be union” (Markowitz 2000). In other words, the patterns of behaviour and interaction adopted during a greenfield organising campaign are likely to establish expectations and patterns of interactions in future. The analysis here is located within long-running debates about the relative desirability, importance and effectiveness of central union structures as compared to strong and independent local structures in securing organising objectives. The sector services have been identified as a centrally important focus of study because labour market restructuring over the past 20 years has meant that this is a key area of employment growth and one where unions have relatively little history of strong organisation.

Previous studies have largely focused on the activities of the TUC (Heery et al 2000, Simms and Holgate 2010a) or the broad policies of individual unions (Simms and Holgate 2010b, Carter 2000). With some notable exceptions (individual case studies in Gall (ed.) 2003, for example), comparatively few UK studies have examined how organising activity is undertaken at workplace level. Even fewer have focused specifically on the role of workplace representatives. This is important because the roles adopted by key union actors can shape the subsequent behaviours of unions during the campaigns. Previous authors (Kelly and Heery 1994, Clegg et al 1961, Boraston et al 1975 and Watson 1988) have examined the roles of union officials and have considered their roles in organising and recruitment activities. In the 1970s and 1980s many British studies examined the roles of shop stewards, branches and workplace activists (amongst others Terry 1986, 1982, Batstone et al 1979, Partridge 1977, Nicholson 1976). Some studies from the US and Australia have considered the roles of paid organisers (Rooks 2003, Feekin and Widenor 2003, Reed 1989, Karsh et

al 1953). The focus here is on the roles of workplace activists, and by taking the organising campaign as the unit of analysis we gain insight into the interactions between activists and officers which allows for a greater understanding of the articulation of organising policy and practice through the different levels of the unions (Waddington and Kerr 2000).

It is important at this point to clarify the terminology being used. A distinction is made between people who take on a role as an activist within their workplace (“workplace activists”) and are employed by the target employer, and those whose primary – and often only - role is working for the union as either a paid, generalist union official or a paid, specialist organiser. As this research focuses on organising activity within un-recognised workplaces, and therefore on workplaces which do not have agreed arrangements for facility time, all of the workplace activists are volunteers who do this work in addition to their usual job. We can therefore make a useful differentiation between ‘activists’ who volunteer to take on some kind of role as a union representative within the workplace, and those who give them advice and support from the union structure outside the target workplace. Further, a distinction is made between union officers who are paid as generalist officials – usually engaged in a broad range of responsibilities relating to collective bargaining negotiations with employers, representing members who have difficulties at work, and recruitment activities – and specialist organisers who are also paid by the union, but who specialise in recruitment and organising work (Heery et al 2003). This latter group has become more high profile within the British union movement since the establishment of the TUC Organising Academy in 1998 which was deliberately set up to encourage unions to train and employ more of these specialists. The interviews undertaken for this research strongly indicate that these groups see a significant difference in their roles, and both officials and organisers self-identify these distinctions.

Two main positions have emerged from the extensive literature regarding the role of workplace activists, and specifically the roles of workplace activists in promoting union renewal. The first emphasises the importance of centralised leadership driving a *professionalisation of union activities* (including organising), as compared with the second where *rank and file activism* is emphasised so that members and activists are given access to resources to resolve their own problems. Fairbrother (2000) identifies this as a distinction between the “principle of leadership predominance” as compared to the “principle of membership participation”. What both perspectives tend to share is an acknowledgement that workplace activism is crucial for promoting successful organising activity and, in turn, promoting a renewal of trade unionism. Importantly, the debate here is largely one of emphasis rather than absolutes.

The importance of union leadership in promoting organising activity and renewal is emphasised in work by authors such as Voss and Sherman (2000) who argue based on a study of organising activity in local US unions, that the support of the national¹ union leadership is crucial in leading to revitalisation of union branches (locals). Grabelsky and Hurd (1994) also emphasise the importance of leadership in ensuring that existing union policies and structures are challenged. Quantitative data from the US also stresses the association between leaders promoting union innovation and more effective organising outcomes (Fiorito et al 1995). In the UK, authors studying TUC initiatives such as the Organising Academy have focused on the role of union officials in managing and promoting the process of transformation (Heery et al 2000a) arguing that managing the process of organisational change is crucial to broader renewal.

¹ In the US, the term ‘international’ describes national union structures.

What links these authors is their emphasis on the central union structures creating frameworks (which may be communicated in a range of ways; written policies, training programmes, rewarding particular behaviour etc.) within which local unions can organise effectively; what Waddington and Kerr (2000; 259) define as frameworks of “articulation” within union structures. These frameworks ensure that local unions have adequate skills, resources and support to organise outside their existing membership bases. Local activists can, in turn, draw on the support of the central union to legitimise their organising activity to existing members who may see such activity as too risky, too innovative or as diverting resources from existing members. Further, the central union can provide a source of ideology, values and language to legitimate potentially risky organising activity at lower levels of the union. From this perspective then, the role of central union leadership in promoting organising activity is crucial. Waddington and Kerr (2000) argue that clear articulation of policy between different levels of the union is a prerequisite for organising activity that is successful in developing a strong cadre of new workplace activists.

By contrast, theories of bureaucratisation of unions tend to emphasise the “iron law of oligarchy” (Michels 1915). From the earliest writings about trade unions (Webb and Webb 1920) to contemporary analysis (Fairbrother 2000, Bramble 1995) authors have argued that the privileged position of union officials in relation to their members leads to conservatism in their actions. Although writers disagree about the reasons for and outcomes of this conservatism, two broad positions can be identified. The first emerges from arguments made by the Webbs (1920) that union officials need to protect the scarce resources of the union against irresponsible decisions that might be made by members. Others tend to emphasise the role of the union official as an intermediary between labour and capital, preventing the full realisation of working class militancy (Kelly 1988). Both strands tend to see the bureaucratisation and conservatism of union policy as a direct result of union officials moderating the actions of a more radical and militant membership. Importantly, in these studies union membership is generally assumed to be well-established and workers are assumed to be able to express their issues and interests effectively.

Fairbrother (1989, 1996, 2000) argues that the changing political and economic environment makes workplace union activity crucial in demonstrating the effectiveness and relevance of unions to workers who may have little previous understanding of what unions do. On the subject of union leadership, he argues that leadership turnover is a pre-requisite for renewal (1989: 25) and that the process of renewal may be actively resisted by union officials (1996) who seek to perpetuate bureaucratic union structures. Fairbrother’s arguments are important because they explicitly marginalize the importance of union structures outside the workplace in promoting organising activity and renewal more broadly. Further, he views these structures as potentially limiting the opportunities for renewal, arguing that organising efforts that do not originate from workers will fail to reflect the problems that workers encounter and therefore, ultimately, fail to renew and revitalise trade unions. But his work focuses largely on renewal in workplaces where unions are already established and he makes little comment on how unions might seek to expand into new areas of representation.

Thus, in this paper, the intention is to examine campaigns in newly organising workplaces and to examine the roles workplace activists take on and what explains how and why they adopt particular roles. Examination of existing literature allows us to identify four central activities that are potentially undertaken by workplace activists. The first two refer to the interactions between activists and other workers in the target workplace. First, *recruitment* activities relate specifically to directly recruiting members to the union. Previous studies (Heery et al 2000a, 2000b, Simms and Holgate

2010) emphasise that there is variation between unions in relation to which actors take on recruitment work. We would therefore expect distinctions to be evident between campaigns where recruitment work was undertaken by specialist organisers, by officials or by activists. These might highlight different approaches towards organising campaigns between, for example, unions developing membership-led campaigns (Bronfenbrenner and Juravich 1998) and unions relying on specialist skills of organisers and officials to increase membership (Kelly and Heery 1994). Second, *organising* activities can be defined as developing workplace activism through, for example, identifying and developing activists, creating workplace structures, training, and building collective campaigns (Heery et al 2003a). Again, we might expect differences between the policies and practices adopted in these campaigns. These differences might reflect different objectives in pursuing campaigns, or different strategies for building membership amongst target groups.

The other two activities relate to building relationships between the organising campaign and the wider environment. *Dealing with the employer* is a central activity here and can include both direct negotiations with employers and representation work that is undertaken during a campaign (Heery and Simms 2004). Whether activists or paid officers take on these roles gives us insight into the kind of membership activism that the union is hoping to develop in the newly organised workplace. Evidence of attempts to devolve responsibility for these activities to workplace would support arguments about developing participatory unionism (Sciacchitano 2000, Markowitz 2000). Evidence of attempts to retain control of these activities might suggest that paid officials sought to develop a more passive membership (Bramble 1995). *Dealing with the wider union* may be important to secure resources for the campaign (Kelly and Heery 1994). This also has implications for the extent to which newly organised groups of workers are able to interact with the wider union, a point that is developed further later in this thesis. It also allows insight into the skills that activists are developing during organising campaigns.

The identification of these four core activities enables us to develop a framework through which to explain analyse similarities and differences in the roles taken on by activists in a systematic way. This contributes to our understanding of the roles taken on, and it is also necessary to explain the factors that influence activists to take on particular roles. Thus, the purpose of the research is to explore empirically the roles of workplace activists in newly organising service sector workplaces as this allows us to understand better the challenges facing unions seeking to expand into these jobs. The second objective is to understand whether there are pressures for officer/organiser control over the work of activists and the consequences of different decisions about guiding the work of activists. And the final objective is to identify explanatory factors that help clarify how and why particular dynamics of workplace activism emerge.

Case study organizations

The evidence for this paper is drawn from five longitudinal (1998-2005), ethnographic case studies of successful union organizing campaigns where unions have targeted relatively low-skill front-line service workers in workplaces that had not previously been unionized. Five employers were targeted: Scope, Typetalk, Ethel Austin, Gala casinos and Learning and Skills Councils.

1) **Scope** is a large charity employing around 4000 staff in around 150 workplaces. It represents and campaigns for the interests of people with cerebral palsy, but also runs facilities (schools, respite care etc.) for people with the disease and runs a chain of secondhand shops to raise money. It is a well-known charity and one of the top 20 charity brands in the UK. The organising campaign was run by

a union that was then known as MSF² and Unison. The campaign started in a context of considerable hostility from the employer, although that softened as the campaign progressed.

2) **Typetalk** is a smaller joint venture between telecommunications company BT and the charity, the Royal National Institute for the Deaf (RNID). During the research period, it employed just over 400 staff in 2 call centres. It is a telephone relay service that allows deaf and hearing-impaired telephone users to interact with hearing people. Text typed by the deaf user is spoken by a call centre operator and any spoken message in return is typed by the operator and sent to the deaf user's screen. The campaign was run by the Communication Workers' Union (CWU) which mainly represents staff in BT and the Royal Mail. Again, there was considerable reluctance on the part of the employer to accept the role of the union and only when threatened with a statutory recognition procedure did the employer negotiate a voluntary agreement.

3) The third campaign was run at **Ethel Austin**, a low-cost clothes retailer mainly based mainly in the North of England and employing around 2,800 staff in around 200 high street stores. By 2008 it had hit significant financial difficulties and is currently undergoing a management restructuring, but these difficulties only really came to light after the period of research. The campaign was run by the shopworkers' union USDAW. Unusually, this campaign took place against a background of considerable management support for the union. Senior HR managers hoped that the union would help negotiate the difficult restructuring that was anticipated and invited the (notably moderate) shopworkers' union into the workplace.

4) The fourth research site is also a commercial organization; **Gala casinos**. The casino business is one arm of a larger Gala Coral Group, and targets itself to the middle of the casino market. Although Gala Casinos do target the low-stakes customers, it has a lower stake business in Gala Bingo and largely stays out of the high-roller top-end market of the casino sector. 6 casinos in the Gala Casino chain (all located in London as a consequence of the regional strategy employed by the unions involved) were targeted in these campaigns. Between them, the 6 workplaces employed around 1100 staff. The casinos were targeted as part of a wider industry campaign run by two large general unions: GMB and TGWU³. This campaign took place against a background of significant employer hostility that eventually led to a successful claim for statutory recognition under the Employment Relations Act.

5) The final research site is provided business to business services associated with the public sector; the **Learning and Skills Councils (LSCs)**. Skills provision in the UK has subsequently undergone significant restructuring, but at the time, there were 47 regional LSCs each tasked with linking employers with skills training needs with local skills providers (colleges etc.). The LSCs were a quango organisation which received state funding and employed approximately 4500 staff. The campaign was run by the Public and Commercial Services union (PCS) who largely draw their membership from the large public sector and quango organisations such as the LSCs. Employer responses here were relatively benign, reflecting the managerial culture in the quasi-public sector. Managers – especially senior managers - tend to have public sector experience and are well-used to working with unions. That said, managers did resist automatic recognition and insisted that the union show that there was support within the workplace before negotiating a recognition agreement; mainly demonstrated by membership numbers.

² It has subsequently merged to form part of Unite.

³ Now also merged to form Unite.

The Research

These processes were observed using the trade union organizing campaign as the unit of analysis. The primary research interest was to explore how trade unions respond to the challenges of collectivising front-line service workers. I was keen to understand not just what unions do when they talk to and organize these workers, but wider issues about how these employees understand their daily working lives, what causes them difficulties, and how a union can (or cannot) address those concerns. I deliberately identified campaigns that were ‘successful’ in the eyes of the union (mainly defined by the fact that they were successful in achieving bargaining rights) because I wanted to know more about the conditions that allow unions to organize these workers successfully. These campaigns were then observed from the very early stages through to securing formal collective representation rights for workers. It is difficult to say definitively when a campaign ‘starts’ or ‘ends’ but critical moments are when the union decides to allocate resources to it and then to withdraw specialist organizing resources. Given the research focus of exploring the complex social meanings of these processes for key actors, the focus was on observation and interviews and was supplemented with analysis of documentary materials such as recruitment materials, websites of the union and employers, background data on the employer (company reports etc.) and collective agreements.

As a researcher, I observed the process of union involvement from the early stages of planning meetings between workers and the union (mainly in the form of union officers and specialist paid organizers), through to the development of collective actions (including, but not limited to, action such as petitions, grievances, efforts to bring collective concerns to the attention of managers, leafleting, demonstrations, press events, and eventually negotiations between managers and the union), and culminating in formal agreement from managers that the union had the right to represent workers’ interests. This observation was overt and non-participant. In other words, the union officers and the employees knew that I was a researcher and I was not directly engaged in the work of the union or of the workers.

Over the seven years of involvement in these campaigns, 102 participants were interviewed and 32 of them were interviewed more than once during that period – some as many as 4 times. Key participants included senior decision makers within the union, paid union organizers, generalist officers and negotiators, workplace activists, and workers including both members and non-members. Unfortunately, I had few opportunities to interview managers because the campaigns were, for the majority of the research period, taking place in a context of significant managerial resistance to unionisation. Nonetheless, there was opportunity to observe managers during meetings and discussions and, of course, workers and union officers were a rich source of data in relation to their own perceptions of managerial decisions including service brand values. The research was a small section of a much wider project run initially at Cardiff University⁴ looking at trade union renewal from 1998 to the current day.

⁴ The team originally comprised Professor Ed Heery, Professor Rick Delbridge, Professor Paul Stewart, Dave Simpson, John Salmon and myself. The research team has subsequently moved in different directions and to different universities. I am grateful to all concerned for the continued support and engagement with the project.

Roles of Workplace Activists

The empirical evidence shows clearly that the main roles of workplace activists in these organising campaigns are, unsurprisingly, to build membership and union organisation. However, the paper argues that variation in the roles emerges as a consequence of the level of support that the wider union (particularly officials) gives to the activists which, in turn, is influenced both by the employer's behaviour in the workplace in which the campaign takes place, and the structures and policies of the union involved.

1) Recruitment activities

In all of the campaigns, the main role of activists was to recruit new members; what differed was the workplace culture within which they attempted to do this. Because access to the workplace was agreed at the start of the Ethel Austin campaign and organising activity took place in a relatively benign context, these representatives had facility arrangements and a role recognised by management. This enabled them to gain access to information from the employer to help with direct recruitment. Examples include having access to staff lists in order to approach potential members. It is notable that despite the ease of access to this information, relatively few workplace representatives took on a recruitment role. One organiser noted that "The good ones do it. And you can tell when you get a list of new members in whether it was us [organisers] or them [activists] who recruited them. But a lot don't. That's why we are here. But where you've got a good one, you just leave them to it. We fill in the gaps." (USDAW organiser, interview). This suggests that there are variations in practice even where the role is clearly defined and supported within the workplace.

In both Scope and the LSCs, the culture varied in local workplaces, despite comparatively positive relations between managers and the union at senior levels. The precise tactics used to recruit therefore varied as some activists operate in a relatively benign managerial culture where local managers were happy for them to leaflet colleagues, put up posters and advertise the role of the union. Others operated in more hostile environments where posters were routinely taken down and recruitment activity was discouraged. In these workplaces, recruitment was done on a word-of-mouth basis with activists making time to speak to colleagues directly. Despite these differences, recruitment remained an important activity for these activists to supplement the work of officials and organisers.

In the casino campaign, the role of activists in recruiting members was particularly important in the early stages when officials and organisers did not have access to the workplace. In the run-up to the workplace ballot, statutory provisions allow officials and organisers access to workers which meant that during this period, responsibility for recruitment shifted to them. Once recognition had been granted, the activists took on this role again. Similarly, activists at Typetalk took responsibility for recruitment as officials and organisers did not have access to the workplace. Activists were the main source of information and the way in which the union could establish a workplace presence. Early in the campaign, activists formed an organising committee and were trained how to 'map' the workplace to identify potential members and areas of membership weakness. They were also encouraged to be as innovative as possible with recruitment methods and raising the profile of the union more generally. In both Typetalk and the casino campaigns most members were recruited directly by activists in the workplace. It is impossible to know with any degree of certainty the exact proportion recruited in each way as the union does not keep records of this data, interviewees

estimated that at least 60% of the members were recruited as a result of being approached inside the workplace by an activist.

This suggests that, in general, direct membership recruitment is particularly important when officers and organisers do not have access to the workplace. Indeed, whilst leafleting outside a workplace may be effective in raising the profile of the union, it is not a particularly effective way of targeting particular workers for membership. Thus, when officials and organisers cannot gain access, they must rely on activists to do this work. Where they do have access, although activists still have a key responsibility for recruitment, officials and organisers are more routinely used to supplement their work.

2) Organising activities

Activists also had responsibilities for building the strength and structures of the workplace union in all of the campaigns. Again, variation in the precise ways in which this role was taken on largely depended on the policies of the union towards building membership structures. So, for example, in Tynetalk and the early stages of the Scope and casino campaigns managers were hostile to the union and activists worked to build union strength. In the other cases, activists had more opportunity to build representation structures. So, in the LSC campaign, the branch development plans enabled activists and organisers to pick out areas where membership was weaker. It also identified training needs for new activists and representatives. A key problem was identified by PCS organisers in the training programme provided by the union. One noted “The real problem is that organising isn’t a core module in any of the training programmes offered to reps. That’s a real problem for old and new branches. It sends the wrong signals...It means they don’t have the skills they need.” (PCS organiser, interview). As a result, activists were expected to develop organising skills by applying the techniques outlined in the branch development plan toolkit rather than integrating these skills into a structured training programme.

In Ethel Austin, workplace activists had little formal responsibility for organising activity. In fact, they often appeared to be little more than being a name and telephone number on a list of local representatives that could be given to new members as contact points should they encounter problems at work. This was emphasised by the fact that activists often covered up to five or six stores. The limited time off work meant that they rarely had time to visit other stores and were expected to build up their own networks of contacts. High staff turnover in the retail sector made this difficult. However, one activist did note that “It really depends how much you want to do. If you want to go off and recruit a lot, you can. Some people do, some people don’t.” (USDAW activist, interview).

In the casinos, as more workers became active in the union, they formed an organising committee that was the main link between the activists and the officials in both unions. This gave everyone involved a clearer view of what both unions were doing so as to minimise any duplication of effort. In general, this approach was successful so, for example, there was an effort to make sure that rather than duplicate information by sending out both a TGWU flyer and a GMB flyer, the unions sent out flyers in different weeks on different issues. The organising committee also took responsibility for ensuring that different shifts and different work areas had representatives and that those representatives were informed of the progress on the campaign. This was particularly important during the pre-ballot phase, but has continued even since recognition has been granted as it allows activists an overview of the strength of the two unions across the different workplaces. One activist

commented that “We didn’t know whether it’d be useful or not, but it’s a good place to share information just about Gala. The branch is getting bigger now and it’s useful to have another place to talk about just the stuff that affects us.” (TGWU activist, interview).

In Typetalk, the hostility of the employer and, therefore, the difficulty this presented officials and organisers with gaining access to the workplace meant that the organising committee was extremely important in building activism. This included gaining contacts of potential activists for the organiser to chase up, using information available in the workplace (e.g. pigeon holes, e-mail distribution lists etc.) to identify members and potential members and speaking to as many different employees as possible (often during work breaks) about the union.

Similarly, in Scope, much of the organising activity also fell to workplace activists under the guidance of the organiser, but was driven by the difficulty in accessing such a large number of workplaces rather than the employer denying officials and organisers access to the workplace. Activists were involved in acquiring lists of employee names in their workplaces, identifying potential activists when they were recruiting members, involving the union in workplace issues and, in some cases, running small campaigns around those issues. This approach was particularly successful in the larger workplaces such as the headquarters and some of the residential facilities where there were large groups of employees in the same location. In workplaces such as the shops, where there were often only one or two employees, this approach was much less successful. Once a decision had been made to change the emphasis of the campaign to an approach based on a more co-operative relationship with managers, local campaigning became significantly less important for workplace activists. After the change of approach, much more of their time was spent on representing issues through the non-union representation structures (works council), recruiting members and distributing material (leaflets, posters etc.) produced by officials. Although there was some disquiet about this change in some of the larger and more active workplaces, by and large activists were happy to accept the judgements of officials on the best way to proceed with the campaign. Indeed, one expressed relief as it allowed her to focus on developing the necessary skills to be a works councillor rather than run union campaigns.

3) Dealing with the employer

In two of the campaigns (LSCs and Typetalk) the extent to which organisers and officials expected activists to take responsibility for dealing with the employer became a point of tension. In the Typetalk campaign, officials and organisers encouraged activists to take on as much responsibility for this role as possible. Their reluctance caused some frustration, leading the lead organiser to comment. “I do wish they’d take on more to do with management. I don’t want to end up servicing them and we’re heading down that road.” (CWU organiser, interview). The organising committee was, for example, largely unwilling to take responsibility for accompanying colleagues into grievance or disciplinary meetings, although by the end of the campaign there were two or three activists who were prepared to do this and after securing recognition, workplace representatives were happy to deal with simple cases. This largely reflected the lack of experience of most of these members in union issues. One key activist who was probably more confident in taking on union responsibilities said “I just don’t feel able to take that stuff on yet. It’s scary!” (Typetalk activist, discussion). The branch official noted “I’m trying to ease them in gently. Sooner or later they’re going to have to do it by themselves.” (CWU branch official, interview).

In the LSCs, there was considerable variation between activists in their levels of confidence and training in dealing with the employer. Some were being trained to take on national negotiations, whilst others lacked the confidence to do anything more than simply distribute information about the union in their workplace. This led the lead official to comment “We need to work on that [building workplace representation structures]. Even the national ones are very green...They don’t understand the details of negotiations. It worries me. I’m not letting them loose yet...But also, you’ve got a culture of reps just being post-boxes for information to get to members. They’re the hopeless ones. We need to look for new reps in some [of the LSCs].” (PCS official, interview). This highlights that not only is there considerable variation in the extent to which activists are prepared to deal with managers, but that officials were frustrated with the lack of willingness or ability of representatives to take on these roles. Another official commented that “Until we’re confident that they can deal with it [individual casework] we’re going to be overworked. But with the stress of negotiating the harmonisation [of terms and conditions] we haven’t got time. So they’re [members] not getting a very good service at the moment. We need to get the rep structure working properly.” (PCS official, interview).

The notable aspect of the Scope campaign was that in the absence of a full recognition agreement, the union was successful in putting up ‘slates’ of union-backed representatives for election to other representative roles; specifically as health and safety representatives and as representatives on the works council. This enabled the union to establish a workplace presence even in the absence of recognition for collective bargaining. The union decided to co-operate with the establishment of the works councils and to try to ‘capture’ as many seats as possible in order to ensure that there was a strong union voice being heard through these employer-determined representation structures. These activists took responsibility for dealing with management in these formal settings. Some also use their limited facility time (two hours per week) to help with individual casework, particularly where it falls within the remit of issues that can be discussed in the works councils. It was clear that this role had helped activists build confidence in dealing with management. One commented that “I really feel I know what it’s all about now. I wish we had recognition so we could talk about some of those things [issues raised by members with problems]. But the management side [of the works council] are quite careful to keep us on track...We do try to get in some other stuff, but generally they don’t listen.” (MSF activist, interview). Outside these issues, officials took lead responsibility for dealing with managers and attended all of the meetings with managers to discuss the on-going possibility of recognition. This was not regarded as a point of tension by any of the interviewees with both sides agreeing that it was a sensible allocation of roles given that officials had far more experience in these kinds of negotiations than activists.

Similarly, in the casino campaign, responsibility for meeting management was largely left to officials of both unions until the later stages of the campaign when it became clear that the unions were likely to gain recognition. Once recognition had been granted, workplace activists became elected representatives and were sent on the relevant training courses provided by the regional education department. At that point, they took increasing responsibility for both personal casework and negotiations with managers, although the lead official continued to have a formal responsibility for more complex meetings and discussions.

In contrast to the other campaigns where activists were encouraged to have some responsibility for dealing with management in individual casework, if not in collective negotiations, in Ethel Austin although some workplace representatives have been trained to help with grievance and disciplinary issues, officials do not necessarily *expect* activists to take this on. Indeed, most activists did not take

on any responsibility for dealing with management at local or national levels. There is certainly no evidence of any attempt to train activists to take on a role in collective bargaining as this role was entirely left to trained negotiators.

4) Dealing with the wider union

There was considerable variation over the extent to which activists formed a link between the workplace and the wider union. This can be explained partly in relation to the union structures and partly in relation to the organising policies pursued in the different unions. In both the LSCs and casinos, activists had an important role in feeding into branch structures and then into the wider union. In the LSCs, they were the main point of contact for officials and organisers and acted as a channel of communication in both directions. As the union was confident of recognition from an early stage, a 'shadow'⁵ branch structure was established which allowed activists a formal connection to the wider union. So, although the branch was not allowed to send voting delegates to conferences and other decision making bodies until it had a formal status under a recognition agreement, part of the training for the national representatives was to start to attend these meetings to familiarise themselves with the structures and decision making processes of the wider union. This link between workplace activists and the wider union was developed at a very early stage and was central to the campaign strategy. Similarly, in the TGWU the relevant branch covered all casino workers in the region, even prior to recognition. Because workplace activists were involved with the branch for several years prior to the start of this campaign, they have good contacts in the wider union and, unlike the other campaigns, were very aware of how the union structures and decision making processes worked before recognition was granted. The existence of the branch was important in ensuring that the region allocated adequate resources to the campaign as, alongside the efforts of the official, the branch was able to persuade regional decision makers (notably the Regional Secretary) that the casino sector was suitable for a statutory recognition campaign.

In USDAW, although Ethel Austin fell within a branch structure, there were few links between workplace activists and the wider union. Some activists attended conferences, and while this is not actively discouraged, neither is it seen as a crucial role for workplace activists. In Scope and Typetalk, there was even less evidence of activists developing links with the wider union. In Typetalk, the main point of contact between activists and the wider union was the branch. In order to, for example, attend meetings or conferences, activists must be nominated or elected through their branch structures. In this case, Typetalk was a sub-section of a local branch that was dominated by employees from another employer, BT. Typetalk was run as an independent campaign and workplace representatives rarely attended branch meetings. This effectively meant that they had little opportunity to make links beyond the branch structures as they rarely attended the meetings where delegates were elected. In practice, however, the lead activist reported that this was not an immediate problem "We've got so much to do here [in Typetalk] that we don't really have time to think about the rest of the union...or to go to branch meetings. They wouldn't keep us out, it's just not very interesting to go and listen to two hours of stuff about BT." (CWU activist, interview).

There was a clear exception to this. At several large national meetings, including national conferences, fringe events were held to consider issues around organising outside BT and the Royal Mail. At these events, Typetalk activists and activists in other newly organising employers were invited to speak. As a result, Typetalk activists did get some opportunity to observe the normal

⁵ i.e. not yet fully recognised within the constitution of the union.

business of the national union conference. Interviewing activists at these events indicated that they were very much taken aback by the running of them. One activist commented that “It’s been a real eye opener being here. I didn’t have any idea about how a union was run. It’s all very new to us...I’m not sure how we fit into it all.” (CWU activist, interview). Similarly, in Scope activists have had very few contacts with the wider union other than meeting officials on away days. Here there were few opportunities to participate in the wider decision making structures of the union even if the activists had wanted to take on this role.

Discussion

The evidence consistently suggests that the primary roles of workplace activists are to build membership and union organisation within the workplace. This reinforces existing research from both the US and the UK which emphasises the importance of workplace activists in establishing the workplace union (Fantasia 1988, Early 1998, Wills 2003) and using “rank and file intensive tactics” (Bronfenbrenner and Juravich 1998). However, the roles that workplace activists developed differed considerably, particularly in the extent to which officials and organisers supported activists in these tasks. This is in part explained by the workplace culture in which activists operated and in part by union structures.

There is evidence of tension emerging in some campaigns over the extent to which workplace activists are prepared to take responsibility for dealing with the employer, although in other campaigns a clear demarcation of these responsibilities between activists and officials is seen. Further, there is variation in the extent to which activists have links with the wider union; with some using these links to ensure support for the campaign, but others remaining entirely separate from the wider union. Where the latter is the case, questions remain about the implications for the access of these newly organising groups of workers to the decision making structures of the union (Markowitz 2000, Simms 2006). Notably, in none of the campaigns is there evidence of activists building links with groups outside the union and no evidence of any attempt to build sustainable alliances with non-union groups. This presents an important counter perspective to the literature on the importance of forms of community unionism and social movement unionism that has received growing attention in the UK and beyond (Wills and Simms 2004, Fine 2005, Tattersall 2005, McBride and Greenwood (eds.) 2009). The contention here is not that this kind of activity is unimportant but that it is not routinely considered to be part of the roles of workplace activists’ role in these campaigns, even though they are greenfield campaigns.

What is perhaps most interesting here is why the LSC and Ethel Austin campaigns have not relied on building the responsibilities of workplace activists, given the US evidence (Bronfenbrenner and Juravich 1998, Early 1998) on the links between membership activism and organising success. Most notably, this seems to be accounted for by the (relatively) favourable responses of the employer towards the union. Building membership activism in organising campaigns only seems to be a focus of union objectives when confronted with employer opposition.

However, there were other factors that explain these patterns. In the LSCs the comparative lack of emphasis on workplace activism was also partly accounted for by the fact that until staff had fully transferred into the new LSC structure, the workplaces were in a significant state of flux. It was only after the transfer to the new system had been completed and redundancies, relocations and rationalisation of services had taken place was it clear who was working where and on what grades. Further, the negotiations relating to this reorganisation were long and complex and left little time for paid officials and organisers to work with members and potential members, and to identify activists.

They therefore relied heavily on recruitment through mailshots and roadshows. The union hoped that once the detailed negotiations had been concluded, there would be an opportunity to undertake what one official called “proper organising” (PCS official, interview). In Ethel Austin, as discussed above, structural factors again accounted for the lack of emphasis on organising work undertaken by workplace activists. Both the (lack of) skills of members, and the emphasis on recruitment work in the organisers’ roles are important explanations.

The Typetalk campaign, the casino campaign and the early phases of the Scope campaign were the cases where there was most emphasis on the importance of workplace activists in building support for the union. In these workplaces, union activists took the bulk of the responsibility for recruitment and identifying key workplace issues around which to campaign. Whilst some specialist roles such as the complex negotiation of the recognition agreement at Typetalk were taken on by officials, much of the responsibility for the day-to-day recruitment, campaigning and representation has been taken on by workplace activists. Again, this has been driven largely by the (relative) hostility of the employer and the difficulties other actors have had in accessing the workplaces. But it has also been explicitly driven by the beliefs of organisers and officials that workplace activists ‘should’ adopt these roles. In interviews with all of these actors, it is clear that they have a belief system that emphasises the importance of workplace activists taking on responsibility for organising campaigns.

The later stages of the MSF campaign at Scope lies somewhere between these, with officers taking the lead role in recruitment and negotiating with the employers, but with activists building support for the union inside the workplace. Again, the importance of employer behaviour is evident. Here the later efforts to build a more consensual relationship with the employer meant that officials explicitly wanted less activist-led campaigning around workplace issue. Whilst this might be interpreted as efforts to impose a ‘moderate’ agenda on activists, in practice few objected to the change of emphasis and switched to developing their roles as works council representatives. The Scope campaign illustrates a further important point about the influence of structural contingencies on the roles adopted by actors. The union at Scope is strongest in the headquarters where there is the largest group of workers together in one place. Further, the workplace campaigns run by these activists were the highest profile. In part, this reflects the fact that these workers are skilled campaigners who use these skills in their normal job, campaigning for the rights of disabled people. It is therefore of little surprise that they are able to apply these same skills in their union activism. Thus, in the same way that the lack of basic skills amongst many USDAW members limits the roles that their union expects them to adopt in the workplace, these workers are aided in their union organising by the expertise they bring to their job.

These distinctions are important because they illustrate how the different unions view the relationship between workplace representatives and paid union organisers and officials. Little has previously been known about how unions instil these values in newly organised members. It is clear from these case study campaigns that whilst some of this process is explicit, much of it is not. The importance of training courses in explicitly communicating to new representatives the expected role of workplace reps is, of course, important. But it would be wrong to imagine that all of the representatives identified in these campaigns have been sent on formal training courses. The majority have not and have learnt about the role and expectations through meeting with organisers and officials and by learning ‘on the job’. And it is here that existing the culture and structure of the union is most evident in influencing the ways in which these representatives come to understand their roles. The ‘taken for granted’ role of, for example, USDAW and PCS officials in representing members is communicated in recruitment literature and in training programmes but perhaps most

importantly in the interactions between officials and activists which lead activists to understand that this is not part of their role. This contrasts with the 'taken for granted' communication between officials and activists in, say, the CWU or casinos where activists were expected to take on the responsibility of dealing with casework.

Conclusion

The evidence strongly indicates that there is no one universal experience of the roles workplace activists adopt in organising activity. Whilst there is some evidence that officials have considerable influence in setting the objectives and expectations of activists, there is no evidence that tendencies towards bureaucratisation are universal. These findings contradict the arguments of authors such as Michels (1915), Bramble (1995) and Fairbrother (2000) that the expertise of union officials inevitably promotes conservatism and bureaucracy. Theories that emphasise both actor-centred (Heery and Kelly 1994) and the structures of unions (Voss and Sherman 2000) appear to have much more explanatory potential when examining the roles adopted. What emerges from this analysis is that the precise roles adopted by activists are the outcome of a complex interaction of contingencies. Three particularly influential factors appear to explain differences and have consistently been identified in the evidence above: 1) the structures and policies of the union in relation to organising and recruitment, 2) the structures of the workplace(s) in which the campaign is taking place, and 3) the actions of the employer.

Union policies relating to the approach of the union to employers, the approach of the union to building membership in new areas, demarcations of responsibilities between specialist organisers and generalist officials, expectations that officials and organisers have of activists and the roles they will adopt, and training opportunities for the actors all influence the roles adopted. This suggests support for arguments that it is possible to develop articulated union structures where the central union can support organising activity in workplaces through clear policies (Waddington and Kerr 2000). Policies and structures – notably, although not exclusively training - can also have an effect in developing the beliefs and expectations actors have about each others roles. This supports evidence from the US (Feekin and Widenor 2003, Rooks 2003) which emphasise the central role of training in developing the expectations and beliefs about the roles of organisers. This research develops these findings by illustrating that such training influences the roles adopted by other actors as well and is extremely influential in building the expectations of all actors in organising campaigns.

The *structures of the workplace(s)* in which unions are developing membership affects the roles adopted by dictating the skills of workers and the accessibility of the workplaces to officials and organisers. Bargaining units with diverse workforces which are broken into many workplaces pose greater organisational challenges to the unions as officials and organisers will often be unable to visit workers regularly. This echoes findings in studies of shop stewards which examined the challenges facing stewards in large and dispersed constituencies (Terry 1982, Kessler 1986, Kessler and Heron 2001) and in many respects, similar pressures were evident in the development of "key stewards" in local government workplaces where their role was to co-ordinate and unify the actions of other activists (Terry 1982). What is notable, however, is that in Scope, Ethel Austin and the LSCs – the campaigns where the bargaining units were most diverse - there was little evidence of activists adopting this role; in these campaigns it was organisers who took on these responsibilities. This has been driven by the complexity of the bargaining units which means that inexperienced workplace activists with little or no facility time have little opportunity to act as "key stewards". But it also reflects the policies of these unions to develop a clearly demarcated role for specialist organisers, which in turn has partly been prompted by the realisation that inexperienced activists have little

opportunity to develop this role. But what is clear is that the structure of the workplace(s) in which the campaign is operating have an influence on the roles adopted during organising campaigns.

The *attitude of the employer* towards unionisation can also have the effect of enabling or limiting access to workers and, thus, the extent to which officials and organisers can take direct responsibility for organising and recruitment activity. This supports Snape's findings (1994) on the importance of workplace access to the success officials have in building workplace membership prior to recognition. Whilst some US unions have responded to the challenge of a lack of access to workers in a hostile organising campaign by employing 'salts' (Mello 2004) to work in the target workplace, there is no evidence of similar roles being adopted by UK organisers. Building on Snape's findings (1994), campaigns where officials and organisers are denied access to the workplace are not necessarily unsuccessful in gaining recognition (e.g. Typetalk); the roles adopted by actors are just different. These campaigns necessarily place far greater responsibilities on workplace activists to build membership and organisation, and to demonstrate the effectiveness of the union

Another finding from these case studies is that these roles change and develop over time and that there are clear tensions between some of the roles. Tensions are evident both between the respective roles of generalist officials and specialist organisers, and the extent to which workplace activists are prepared to take on particular roles and responsibilities. This suggests that the division of labour that emerges between the different actors is contested and variable; dependent largely on the skills and beliefs of different actors. These skills and beliefs are developed both through formal training, but also through experiences over time. Several of the campaigns also illustrate tensions between the roles that organisers and officials want or expect workplace activists to adopt and their confidence and skills to take them on effectively. This relates particularly to taking responsibility for dealing with managers, but also to developing the necessary skills to recruit and organise members. In both of these situations there is evidence of officials and organisers pushing members to take on more responsibility than they felt able to cope with. This further contradicts arguments about the inherently bureaucratising pressures of officials (Bramble 1995) and suggests that in some situations they can in fact cause tension by trying to pass on too much responsibility to activists before they are trained and able to take it.

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