

THE CHALLENGE FOR TRADE UNIONISM: SECTORAL CHANGE, POOR WORK AND ORGANISING THE UNORGANISED

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The subject of union survival in a climate of high unemployment, **casualisation**, and low labour movement morale is a child of the 1980s and 1990s. The decline of manufacturing, the former mainstay of trade unionism, has brought into sharp relief the urgency of securing collective organisation in the service economy – in maintaining it where it is established and extending it to the rapidly growing numbers of the unorganised. The case of Britain from 1979 to 1995 presents a stark scenario in which neo-liberal policy has encouraged multinational capital flight and de-industrialisation; the rise of a low-wage/low-skill service economy; the erosion of the state sector and introduction of market values and competition into public service; the further deregulation of an already unregulated labour market; and the disempowerment of trade unionism by a persistent stream of new legal restrictions.'

Within the overall context of high unemployment, government hostility towards trade unions, a string of new legal curbs on union activity, the dismantling of the state service sector and messianic zeal for labour market and wage deregulation, British unions face a formidable challenge. The most important of these is arguably trade union decline through the decimation of the organised (and mainly male) manufacturing base of the economy and expansion of the service sector based on women's low-paid, 'non-standard' jobs – a trend common throughout Europe (Bakker 1988, and more generally Jenson et al 1988)². The proportion of part-timers among employees in Britain had grown to 28.2 per cent by 1993 (1993 Labour Force Survey) and the significance of women in this employment segment is illustrated by the fact that around 90 per cent of part-timers are women, while 44.3 per cent of British women employees work part time. The consequences of de-industrialisation and tertiarisation cannot be divorced from the wider problems of employers' exclusionary strategies towards trade unions. With regard to the object of this paper, the service sector, we therefore have to look both at the problems of maintaining union organisation where it already exists and is under increasing attack; and

recruiting and organising the unorganised in the growth sectors of the economy.

Attention focuses first on the British experience of restructuring in the public service sector, especially the challenge to collective organisation posed by the new management strategies of employee participation, total quality and the like, which have proliferated across all economic sectors. In addition, however, the public sector is experiencing a specific attack on its traditionally centralised national system of industrial relations through employment restructuring implemented with the introduction of market disciplines and values. Fragmentation in the public sector is not, however, only a question of decentralised bargaining arrangements. It also adds to the growing numbers of exposed, isolated and casualised workers – a trend affecting the entire economy. Analysis therefore turns to some British examples of trade union attempts to organise the unorganised. In all these cases, a common theme is the need to reconsider the 'traditional' model of trade unionism as collective bargaining for full-time, male employees, and find ways of redrawing it as a recruiting and organising agent to mobilise other workers and their communities. A key thread in this discussion is gender and feminisation of the unions, and it must be stated at the outset that limits of space and time unfortunately eclipse other dimensions which should be incorporated into the analysis, such as race, ethnicity and age.

PUBLIC SECTOR RESTRUCTURING AND THE CHALLENGE FOR TRADE UNIONISM

For workers in the public sector, privatisation and increasing emphasis on work and employment flexibility, blur the distinctions between public and private sectors, and between services and manufacturing. Across the economy, managements have attempted to marginalise trade union **organisation** by fragmenting it, creeping de-recognition of managerial strata, marginalisation of collective channels of consultation and negotiation, increasing use of personal contracts and performance appraisal, and by the use of various versions of engaging employee commitment to business goals such as employee share ownership, team working and total quality management. Free-market rhetoric has fetishised the customer: **customer-supplier** relations pervade the 'total quality' jargon of both the assembly line and service provision, while 'customer-care' is supposed to replace an older 'service ethic'. Both at the ideological level and in the increased pressures of budgetary measurements of work, there has been a convergence between the manufacturing and service sectors. This also opens a new area of shared experience for trade unionism.

The lived experience of trade unionism is that of cost-cutting,

employment insecurity, labour intensification and increased corporate financial controls. The language of quality improvement, commitment, participation and devolution of responsibility has not, in general, 'won hearts and minds' because unequal power relations and conflicts of interest continue to confirm an us and them relationship in the workplace (Kelly and Kelly 1991, Guest and Dewe 1991). In manufacturing, there is also evidence for the resilience of shop floor control (Heaton and Linn 1989). But while 'new' systems, such as team working may not have succeeded in total union exclusion in some sectors and production systems, such as routine assembly, since trade unions have been able to exploit the shallowness of labels and the tensions and inefficiencies of such fads, workplace representatives nevertheless walk a constant tight-rope between maintaining control over new initiatives by negotiating within them, and propping up the system – thereby assisting their own demise (Pollert 1995). In the privatised public utilities, unions have also been able to subvert new management techniques: the language of total quality has highlighted deteriorating services, and the unions have been able to 'play with the resource implications of the quality message in their negotiations with the company' (Ferner and Colling 1991:401). Similarly, in retail, the shop workers' Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers (USDAW), produced a policy statement, 'Retailing in the 1990s', arguing how 'customer care' programmes have implications for staffing levels, work loads and training, which employers must meet if they want quality service for customers (Heery 1993, IRS 1995).

The attempts by employers to neutralise, marginalise and exclude trade unions continues both openly and insidiously, and the danger remains of union incorporation and weakening in playing the partnership game. Debate continues among practitioners and academics as to whether union survival is best achieved by such social partnership with management, or by independence and opposition. Kelly (1995) makes a convincing case for the benefits of union militancy versus moderation (defined by five criteria of goals, membership resources, institutional resources, methods and ideology): partnership, he argues, is a chimeral aim in the face of overwhelming evidence of employers' hostility to unions per se. Gains from moderation in the 1980s were meagre, whether measured by membership increases or union influence and its extreme form eroded the willingness and capacity of members to challenge employers demands. Militant trade unionism which recognises the antagonism of the capitalist employment relationship and defends workers' interests builds on the only reliable foundation, namely its membership and their willingness to act (ibid.: 102) and has demonstrated membership increases in the 1980s, with the left-wing Fire Brigades Union showing Britain's second largest growth of 73 per cent between 1979 and 1992, the banking union, BIFU – an

organisation which had become increasingly militant in the 1980s – coming next with a 17 per cent growth in this period (Kelly 1995: 92).

As part of the wider attack on trade unionism in the **1980s**, there have been distinctive strategies directed at the formerly strong, nationally organised trade unionism of the public sector, which resulted from government policies specifically targeted at state employment. Since 1979, there has been a sustained government drive to privatise and introduce market mechanisms into the public sector. The strategy has been aimed at destroying national systems of tripartite consultation and regulation and fragmenting and weakening collective bargaining. How far, and in what ways, this has affected collective bargaining and trade unionism more widely, has been the subject of considerable debate in Britain. Looking across the spectrum from those industries actually privatised, to services still in state hands but increasingly operating under competitive imperatives, there is evidence that growing exposure to 'market discipline' is strengthening managerial prerogative and undermining a former consensus-forming pattern of public sector industrial relations. In the following, the main parameters of change in the British public sector since 1979 are outlined, and the signs of both union survival and weakening are discussed.

Privatisation of Public Services: Continuity or Radical Change in Industrial Relations?

Privatisation has been a major plank of Conservative Party policy since it came to power in 1979. All the major state industries have been sold off: British Telecom (BT) in 1984, British Gas in 1986, British Airways in 1987, British Steel in 1988, the water industry in 1989, electricity distribution in 1991; and British Shipbuilders and the National Bus company were broken up and sold off piecemeal (Ferner and **Colling** 1991). The TUC survey of practices in privatised companies revealed major cut-backs in employment, deteriorating pay and conditions and worsening of industrial relations, including the break-up of national bargaining machinery in the water industry, removal of bargaining recognition from managerial staff in BT and major flexibility initiatives in gas and telecommunications. Whether these changes were due to privatisation, and how far similar practices were being enacted in the public sector is a moot point. But it is arguable that pressures to reduce staff numbers increased after **privatisation** to send the right kind of signals to financial opinion formers in the City (ibid.) At the same time, it appears that there are **sectoral** differences in managers' interpretations of these pressures, their response to competition, and their strategies towards industrial relations. Ferner and **Colling** (1991) identified differences between BT and British Gas, with the first

more confrontational than the second, but both demonstrating a trend towards a duality in industrial relations, maintaining stability and continuity in their 'core' business, while using their new subsidiary activities as possible test-beds for non-union management. Strategies for union survival in the 'core', according to this analysis, must eventually face the challenge of organising the 'periphery' of the non-union, or poorly organised 'peripheral' businesses. The privatised water utilities present a different challenge for trade unions: here, the national industry was broken up into 10 water plcs and 25 water-only companies, which compete with each other on costs. In response to this pressure, managements decided to abolish national bargaining giving scope to the development of a variety of industrial relations and restructuring strategies – some committed to working with unions, others hostile, and some making a radical turn to sub-contracting, and others maintaining in-house employment (O'Connell-Davidson 1993, Ogden 1994). This clearly fragments trade unionism, making it difficult to develop a concerted response to change.

Fragmentation and Marketisation of Public Services: Union Survival, Renewal or Death?

In the (remaining) public services of local government, health and education, the introduction of market relations has brought a catalogue of changes. Public service restructuring took place in two phases: from 1979 to 1987, management reform included appointing managers with private sector experience, greater use of budgetary control and the introduction of performance related pay. After 1987, the more radical programme of developing a service market took place, with competing providers, cost cutting and 'value for money' budgeting with state provision depending on market outcomes (Bach and Winchester 1994:266). In 1991, an internal market was developed in the National Health Service, with 'purchasers' (district health authorities and doctors) separated from 'providers' (hospitals), which opted out of district health authority control as independent and competing National Health Service (NHS) Trusts, with flexibility to determine employment conditions, bargaining and consultation arrangements. Similarly, in education, local authority and teacher control has been eroded: the 1988 Education Reform Act devolved financial responsibility and staff management to school governing bodies, while schools now competed, with funding linked more directly to pupil numbers. Schools could opt out entirely from local authority control by seeking Grant Maintained Status and being funded directly by the state.

A first assault on public sector industrial relations was the abolition in 1981 of the concept of 'fair comparison' between occupational groups as one criterion of wage determination. Instead, in health, a nurses' pay

review body was set up, while in education the tripartite teachers' **Burnham** Committee – originally established in 1960 – was abolished in 1987, after widespread industrial action in 1985–6, and replaced by unilateral powers by the Secretary of State to impose terms and conditions, modified only by some consultation (*ibid.*: 270). Yet marketisation of public services has caused its own **organisational** and managerial difficulties which may undermine government plans to weaken public sector consultation. **Bach** and Winchester (1994:271) point to the resilience of national pay determination, with objections to fragmentation not only from unions, but also from managers unable to cope with its disorganising impact, and from members of the very institutions set up to replace traditional consultative arrangements, such as the nurses pay review body, who themselves helped to set up new 'quasi-bargaining' forums. However, pessimists stress the degree to which fragmentation has occurred, especially to NHS Trusts as units of employment (Beadle 1995). Despite differences regarding the effectiveness of state policy to decentralise pay bargaining, most observers agree that, at the level of the workplace, staff reductions and the intensification of labour are key responses to public sector pay limits. The implications of such restructuring on the labour movement are ambiguous. In some cases, there has been a radicalisation of rank-and-file trade unionism. For example, in the summer of 1995, the normally conservative Royal College of Nurses voted for the first time to reverse its ban on industrial action, while teachers considered action against increasing class sizes. On the other hand **service** unions are always very wary of alienating public opinion, a fear which is readily exploited by the government and the media.

While most debate as to the continuities or disruption of national pay bargaining implies that fragmentation undermines trade union power, others have a more optimistic reading of events and suggest that, paradoxically, decentralisation of industrial relations to the workplace offers workers the chance to strengthen and democratise grass-roots organisation (Fairbrother 1995). Widening the area of analysis from pay negotiations to responses to work restructuring, the thesis is that while public sector trade unionism was formerly remote, centralised, bureaucratic and **non-participatory** (Fosh 1993) decentralisation is moving the centre of gravity from national leaders and consensus-building committees, to workplace representatives and local, more democratic forms of bargaining and trade unionism. Yet, while examples of possibly emerging union renewal are drawn from civil service and social services union branches, it is arguable that such optimism is based on specific sectors and occupations. A more sombre reading of public service fragmentation points to the dangers of parochial enterprise unionism emerging and division between stronger and weaker bargaining groups – particularly full-time male workers and

women working part-time and on contracts – in a fragmented structure (Colling 1995, Colling and Ferner 1995). While Fairbrother provides the example of greater visibility of women's needs under new **workplace-**based bargaining in the civil service, with women's requests for an extension of part-time work with pay parity being satisfied, in other areas, such as cleaning and catering in the health and education sectors, there are many more examples of women service workers becoming more vulnerable than before, particularly as a result of the increasing trend to subcontract services.

The contracting out of services has increased in both manufacturing and **services** throughout the 1980s. But in the public sector, the introduction of Compulsory Competitive Tendering (CCT) in the 1988 Local Government Act was explicitly drawn up both to introduce market discipline and to minimise union presence and influence in the public sector (Colling 1995). The aim is both to cheapen labour, by making 'value for money' – usually translated into cost – the criterion in the tendering process, and increasing managerial prerogative, by severing the former links of union-management joint consultation over service provision into separate 'clients' and 'contractors', with the client 'service manager' dictating the quality and conditions of service. The impact of CCT on service provision has been to intensify labour and reduce employment, with membership loss for the unions. Although in the majority of cases, council workforces have been successful in retaining contracts for themselves (69 per cent of contracts went to 'in-house' direct service organisations, or DSOs in 1994), they have been under pressure to cut costs to beat outside competition, although they have not cut jobs as drastically as outside contractors (for example, LRD 1994a showed that on average, contractors cut 31 per cent of jobs in refuse collection, while DSOs cut 23 per cent).

The unions response to public sector workplace fragmentation has been slow and most resources and initiatives have remained at a centralised, national level (Colling and Ferner 1995). This has led to concentration on legal issues, such as the UK's version of the European Union's Acquired Rights Directive – the Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) Regulations (TUPE). Under union pressure, this was revised in 1993 to come into line with the European Court of Justice, so that employers had to protect terms and conditions upon take-over, including trade union recognition. While this has assisted workers, it is only of short-lived use for workers transferred to new employers, and of no help to those employed by DSOs. Nor is it a substitute for strategies towards workplace restructuring, which has been left to workplace trade unionism. Research on local responses to CCT (Colling 1995) in the early 1990s is less sanguine about the potential of decentralisation for union renewal than Fairbrother, revealing a patchwork of service managers' styles ranging

from conciliatory to confrontational, while union response varied from a 'strained' form of participation, to one of opposition. It appears that CCT has provoked only defensive strategies, with no signs of proactive tactics. **Moreover**, the contracting process has clearly been divisive on gender lines: stronger, more centralised occupational groups, such as male full-time employees in refuse collection or ground maintenance, where levels of unionisation were already high, successfully defended their pay and conditions, while fragmented, part-time employees in cleaning and catering which were poorly unionised, and nearly all female, lost out, and suffered worsening conditions, shorter hours and less take-home pay. A 1993 study found increased casualisation and pressures undermining equal opportunities, since DSO managers 'felt that they could not afford to implement equality initiatives (LRD 1994a), while another (EOC 1995) revealed that women's overall employment fell by 22 per cent, while men's fell by the smaller 12 per cent since 1989 and in building cleaning, it fell by as much as 31 per cent (LRD 1995a). Women's earnings were reduced by 25 per cent as a result of cuts in hours, and some even suffered basic pay rate cuts where local bargaining was implemented (LRD 1995a).

While there are sound arguments for transforming the remote, bureaucratic nature of centralised bargaining, the potential for union renewal through more democratic, less centralised trade unionism needs to be **highly** sensitive to the gendered segregation of service work and the problems of fragmentation and weak bargaining strength.

POOR WORK AND ORGANISING THE UNORGANISED

Both the political and managerial premium placed on a 'flexible workforce' during the 1980s have made visible the previously invisible but vast contribution-of casualised, feminised 'poor work' to capital accumulation – from early industrialisation, to the nineteenth century, and now globally (Berg 1985, Rowbotham 1994, Mitter 1994). There has also been an increase in low-paid and non-standard employment everywhere, and in Britain, women part-time workers accounted for half of the low-paid³ in 1991 (Rubery 1995: 547). The tertiarisation of the economy together with the rise of non-standard employment have impressed on many trade unions the urgency of **organising the unorganised**. Legal action to improve employment protection and confront low pay, including use of equal value legislation to increase women's pay, is an important element of union strategy to help the unorganised. However, it is not a substitute for collective organisation. Unfortunately, there is ample evidence of the poor inroads of trade unionism into 'non-standard' and fragmented employment, which is partly a result of deliberate government attempts to isolate the unionised sector (ibid.: 543). The evidence for part-time

workers' unionisation in Britain is not encouraging. A survey of part-time workers' representation in trade unions in 1993 found it was lower than their representation in the labour force and did not reflect their increasing numbers (LRD 1993): they accounted for only 16 per cent of the combined membership of the 20 largest TUC unions, compared with 28 per cent of the workforce. Moreover this showed a relative decline compared with a similar survey in 1989, which had found they comprised 17 per cent of TUC membership compared with 25 per in employment. This deterioration was also reflected at the aggregate level of union density as a percentage of employees, which showed that, while part-time workers' density had held steadier than full-time workers', it showed a decline after 1992 (Table 1).

Table 1. Union density (%) by full/part time working 1989–94.

	<i>No. of workers covered (1994)</i>	<i>Density</i>					
		<i>89</i>	<i>90</i>	<i>91</i>	<i>92</i>	<i>93</i>	<i>94</i>
Full-time	16.1m	43	42	42	40	39	36
Part-time	5.4m	22	21	22	22	21	20

(Source: 1994 Labour Force Survey; in LRD 1995b).

There has been a similar slight decline in all women employees union density, which, having remained steady at 32 per cent through the 1990s, dipped in 1994 to 30 per cent (Table 2).

Table 2. Union density (%) by sex 1989–94.

	<i>No. of workers covered (1994)</i>	<i>Density</i>					
		<i>89</i>	<i>90</i>	<i>91</i>	<i>92</i>	<i>93</i>	<i>94</i>
All	21.5m	39	38	37	35	35	33
Men	11.2m	44	43	42	39	38	36
Women	10.3m	33	32	32	32	31	30

(Source: 1994 Labour Force Survey; in LRD 1995b).

Although less steep than the decline for men – from 39 to 36 per cent – it was particularly worrying as women's percentage of all employees continued to creep up to 49.2 per cent by 1993 (LRD 1994a:9; figures based on 1993 Labour Force Survey).

The low unionisation of part-time workers and women is echoed in the small firm sector, and, indeed, there is likely to be considerable overlap between 'non-standard', women's and fragmented work. In 1993–94, union density in the small firm was 12 per cent in those employing less than eleven employees, and 26 per cent in those with 11 to 50 employees (1994 Labour Force Survey, LRD 1995b). Yet the potential for **unionisation** may be considerable; as indicated earlier, some 43.3 per cent of **service** employees worked in firms employing fewer than 20 employees, where, according to a recent survey (Abbott 1993) not all employers reported hostility to union recognition. Admittedly, most (39.9 per cent) would resist their employees setting up a union, but a significant 30.9 per cent said they would accept requests for union recognition – although stated intention should be treated with caution. Yet of considerable concern was the finding of employees' resistance to unionisation: across all occupations covered in the survey, from advertising and marketing, to computer services, secretarial training, and the restaurant, public house and wine bar sector, over half employees interviewed reported they would not join a trade union, suggesting that they either felt they could manage without one, or that trade unions as they perceived them, could not help them.

The above study obviously covered a wide range of employees, from skilled professionals to routine service workers; but it does underline the need for unions to find ways of connecting with small employment units. Narrowing the problem to the low-paid end of the spectrum, the challenge facing unions in recruiting and organising involves overcoming two main obstacles to change: one is the image of trade unionism as white, male and directed at full-time, permanent workers. The other is the practical difficulty of reaching workers, recruiting them, organising them, gaining union recognition and retaining them. Obviously, the two go hand in hand; for unless the culture of trade unionism alters to appeal to the unorganised, there will be little success in winning support.

The male union image and feminising the unions

Women's under-representation in the top decision making bodies of trade unions is one **barrier** to altering the climate of trade unions. In Britain, although 12 of the 56 seats on the TUC General Council are reserved for women, only some unions have reserved seats on their national executives, and in only three unions is women's representation on the national executive close to their proportion of membership (the General, Municipal and Boiler Makers Union, the GMB; the Manufacturing, Science and Finance union, MSF; and the shopworkers' union, USDAW; LRD 1994c). Women's worst representation is among full-time officials (**FTOs**): in

1993, only four out of 68 TUC union general secretaries were women, and in none of the top 10 unions did the proportion of women FTOs – either nationally or regionally – reflect the numbers in membership. Thus, in UNISON, now Britain's largest union with 1,400,000 members since the merger of three major public sector unions in 1993, only 20 per cent of senior national officials are women compared with 68 per cent of the membership (LRD 1994c). The situation improves, but is not much better, as one goes down the FTO hierarchy to the branch or workplace. There have been attempts to offset this deficit with the creation of national women's and equality officers in 7 of the 10 top unions, while some, such as UNISON, have set targets for women to comprise 30–40 per cent of senior FTOs by the end of the century.

Clearly, one cannot simply assume that the presence of women at senior and FTO levels in unions will automatically mean that women's issues will be raised, or that the culture and image of unions will change. Research has demonstrated the difficulties, senior women union officers faced, especially when trying to raise women's issues, in the meetings behind closed doors where policy decisions were really shaped – even though many unions were now presenting a far more women-friendly face publicly (Dorgan and Grieco, 1993). Pressure to conform to the conventional male image was expressed as gaining respect, while local women FTOs saw their senior sisters gradually incorporated into a men's trade union world where it was hard to pursue a women's agenda: thus, although Women's National Officers could legitimately pursue women's and equal opportunity interests, General Secretaries were regarded as having a responsibility to 'all members' – a 'unisex' model with male gendered undertones – even though female union recruitment is arguably the major priority for union survival.

Greater numbers of women at senior, paid-officer levels would arguably shift the balance in their favour and there is evidence of an upsurge in female recruitment to FTO level during the 1980s. A study of women FTOs (Heery and Kelly 1988) found that 59 per cent had been recruited to these posts during the 1980s, suggesting some positive steps were being taken to redress their under-representation. However, the initiative appeared to be women's rather than the unions', with only one fifth of the FTO sample reporting that their unions had policies to encourage more women bargainers, while only one sixth said their union was actively looking for a women to do their job when they were appointed. Union recruitment practices therefore display limited commitment to positive action to reverse existing imbalances. Moreover, most women officials tended to work in certain types of unions – mainly in those with large numbers and percentages of women members – and even in many of these, the percentage of women FTOs fell far below the membership percentage.

If a small number of women at very senior union levels become isolated and overpowered, a key question is whether more women FTOs throughout the union organisation have different agendas from the majority of male colleagues who, as some have argued, pursue strategies which maintain male privileges over women (Cockburn 1985). Heery and Kelly's research established first that the majority of the women FTOs studied felt the fight for women's equality was central to the labour movement, 88 per cent saying they took a special interest in women's issues such as equal pay, parental leave, sexual harassment, women's health, problems of part-time workers and low pay, regardless of whether they served a predominantly female membership or not, and most felt their priorities differed from men's. This was borne out by more detailed comparisons between what men and women FTOs regarded as 'women's issues in collective bargaining' – women having a much broader conception, including the **integration** of paid and domestic labour (Heery and Kelly 1988: 495). Further, only 13.3 per cent of male FTOs saw these as a major priority; if however, bargaining issues could be presented in a gender blind way, such as 'help for the low paid', over 60 per cent of male FTOs saw this as a priority. In sum, the evidence suggests that the priorities of FTOs are gender related, and that union feminisation would alter both the image and the practice of unions.

In terms of women FTOs effectiveness, it is significant that just 76 per cent said their jobs allowed them to pursue women's interests, suggesting that the rest could not, echoing again the pressures to 'conform' of more senior women officers. Nevertheless, the field study observing women FTOs through collective bargaining processes did identify success in pursuing issues such as equal pay, where male colleagues were less enthusiastic – although the authors caution that they also observed male FTOs pressing for 'women's issues' – arguably because of the growing influence of feminist ideas in the labour movement (Heery and Kelly 1988: 498). Despite this, it appeared that there was a difference in the work routines of women and men, with more women (almost half) **prioritising** organising and recruitment rather than routine office work and conducting negotiations, than men (less than a third). More women FTOs also guided lay representatives and attended branch meetings. While the above could simply reflect that women FTOs tended to work in unions where recruitment had to be a priority because membership organisation was weak – and therefore that they were following union policy, rather than a woman's agenda – it is difficult to separate the two. **As** Heery and Kelly (1988) conclude, since the recruitment of women to unions is a priority for union renewal, the role of women in promoting women's causes in collective bargaining, as well as their emphasis on organising, underlines the importance of feminising the unions, since the gender of officers does

seem to make a difference to their priorities.

The above discussion, while highlighting the connections between the gendering of trade unions and their culture and orientation, should not be over-stretched as a simplistic equation with feminisation of the unions and a new womens agenda and culture. Clearly, there are divisions among women **FTOs** and lay members on numerous criteria, including those based on whether they are newly active or with previous experience, and on various union allegiances and priorities. There may also be divisions among union activists between old and young, not to mention links based on ethnicity, nationality and so forth, which transcend sexual division. This said, the power and influence of women in unions is arguably one vital strand towards making trade unions more inclusive, less sectionally divisive, and as concerned with recruitment and organisation as with collective bargaining.

Several case studies of different unions' attempts to address the needs of 'non-standard' workers and recruit the unorganised reiterate the need to establish a recruitment culture at the grass roots. They chart the problems encountered both in the external environment, such as high labour turnover of 'non-standard' workers, and employers' recognition refusals, as well as internal barriers to change – not least the reluctance of both **FTOs** and lay union workers to activate an **organising** trade unionism.

UNION RECRUITMENT DRIVES: CASE STUDIES

I. The Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers (USDAW) Recruitment Drive in the late 1980s

USDAW's recent attempt to recruit shop workers demonstrates the many difficulties confronting a union attempting to organised a fluctuating, largely part-time and fragmented labour force; the potential opportunities provided by concentration in retailing; and the barriers to unionisation where access to the workplace is denied by employers. Union organisation among Britains 3.2 million retail and wholesale workers was only 11.7 per cent in 1990 – a decline from 13.46 per cent in 1982 (Upchurch and **Donnelly 1993:61**).⁴ Between 1980 and 1990 **USDAW** lost 20 per cent of its members; partly during the **recessionary** slump of the early 1980s, when both sector employment and recruitment dropped, but also because membership declined faster than the drop in employment from 1988–1990. The sector has major problems for union organisation: half the 2.1 million retail workers are in family or single-employers shops; a high proportion of workers are part-time (25 per cent of union members are part-time); and turnover is extremely high, so that the union must annually recruit one third of its membership merely to stand still.

Although traditionally regarded as a moderate union, following a

national leadership change in 1986, USDAW adopted a more campaigning style, with a prioritisation of recruitment activity for **FTOs**, and several issue campaigns, such as a campaign against Sunday trading, and a **Part-Time Workers' Charter**. However, research on the effectiveness of the campaigns revealed a contrast between successful recruitment in already unionised workplaces, and failure to penetrate non-union areas. Thus, where there were concrete examples of effective workers defence on local issues in already unionised workplaces, such as countering attempts to force up working hours in two London West-End stores, union recruitment as a result was successful (Upchurch and **Donnelly** 1992). Similarly, a number of successful equal-value pay claims in unionised retail supermarket chains between women checkout staff and male warehouse staff brought advances to the union in unionised workplaces including invitations to join job-evaluation panels, provision of check-off facilities, as well as encouraging recruitment campaigns elsewhere (*ibid.*: 67). However, hopes that the creation of large supermarkets would necessarily assist union organisation were disappointed: in some cases, unionisation in such workplaces was successful – but this was arguably due to the transfer of already unionised workers to these premises. In new shopping-malls, where stores were unwilling to offer recruitment facilities, the presence of security officers obstructed access to union workers.

On the other hand, despite the difficulties of generating a 'recruitment culture' in unions generally, it appears that **USDAW's** focus on this activity bore some fruit: one fifth of new members in 1991 were a result of **organisers'** direct efforts. The importance of locally relevant issues for recruitment was also revealed: while **USDAW** attempted to target key groups such as women and young workers with particular campaigns, it appears the mobilisation has only been successful where a local campaigning issue arose, such as the outbreak of Legionnaires' Disease in a number of London's West End shops in 1989, when membership in smaller shops rose by 20 per cent. Considering the major obstacles to collective organisation of temporary and part-time work, and a young workforce unfamiliar with trade unionism, **USDAW** has been quite successful in simply stopping a landslide of union membership.

2. The Transport and General Workers' Union (TGWU) Link Up Campaign

The Link Up campaign, like the **TUC's** 'Union Yes' campaign, was largely inspired by the US example of increasing emphasis on targeted recruitment campaigns, following the critical decline in membership in the early 1980s. Its declared aim was to reach the unorganised in the frontiers of trade unionism – part time, contract and temporary workers, particularly since

TGWU membership had declined by 34 per cent between 1979 and the start of the campaign in 1987. Whether the Link Up campaign succeeded either in the short term, in increasing TGWU membership, or in the longer term, in altering the union's culture and mobilising its full-time officers and lay members behind the recruitment campaign are the two issues to examine (Snape 1994).

The first stages of the campaign were aimed at convincing those inside the union of the need to prioritise recruitment and involved the establishment of a National **Co-ordinating** Committee, Regional Organisers reporting local progress, a Link Up 'Organiser's **Pack**' for lay activists which included a TGWU Charter for Temporary and Part Time Workers, and a model collective agreement. It aimed to address community and welfare issues and the union organised a conference to discuss them in 1987. To counteract the male, white, middle aged image of the union, Regional Women's Advisory Committees, as well as Regional Race Advisory Committees were set up, and a National Women's Secretary and an Equalities National Officer were appointed to promote equal opportunities. A national youth conference and national officer responsible for youth affairs were established, and in 1991, advisory youth forums were set up at regional and national levels. Agriculture, construction, commercial and road transport and public services were the major targets in the first phase of Link Up in 1988, with a schedule of quarterly trade group meetings on recruitment campaigns. Phase Two of the campaign, started in 1989, aimed both to consolidate existing membership and continue to recruit part-time and temporary workers, with the emphasis on health and safety, training and equal opportunities. Again, national and local events were organised on equal opportunities, child care and Health and Safety, and card inspection and membership audits were conducted for branches and workplaces to involve branch secretaries and shop stewards in a bid for 100 per cent membership. In 1990 the union announced a further two year programme, including a national 'Recruit-a-Mate' campaign. Regions selected their own targets, combining a mixture of extending membership where there was already union recognition and entering virgin territory.

However, evaluation of the campaign by the union in the early 1990s endorsed Kelly and Heery's (1994) findings on the low priority given to recruitment by **FTOs** and revealed problems in developing a 'recruitment culture' among officers. Among lay union activists the experience was mixed, with some reporting small 'core' teams as effective recruiters, while others displayed a pattern of disillusion after meeting with indifferent responses to their efforts. Although there were some successes, such as the recruitment of contract cleaners in the North West area, Link Up's declared aim in terms of membership growth was disappointing in terms of

failing to halt annual membership decline, with the outflow of members greater than the inflow, although this improved in the late 1980s. Many officers interviewed by Snape saw the problem of union decline more in terms of membership loss through high turnover, than recruitment failure: 'peripheral' workers could be recruited but could not be retained since isolation and small numbers prevented the consolidation of collectivism. Thus, as Link Up continued in 1990, retention became more of an issue than recruitment. This was addressed at a number of levels, including reduced membership dues for the unemployed and offering financial and legal advice services. However, it appears that Link Up failed in a widespread winning of recognition deals.

A number of factors inhibited the success of this campaign; external factors – the rate of unemployment, problems of reaching small, isolated workplaces and employees on diverse, fragmented shifts and a hostile political economic climate – all figure. At the same time, as another study argued (Hudson 1989), factors internal to the union must be addressed: these included not only financial and time constraints on full-time and lay officers, but hindrances to the long term aims of the campaign in changing the culture of the TGWU from its traditional manufacturing, male, full-time worker model to one responsive to the contemporary employment. Hudson's research suggested that, although the campaign organised events, set up institutions and committees targeted at specific groups such as women and youth, and produced publicity material, there seemed insufficient provision for local organisers to creatively respond to local issues. Standardised 'packages' and big events did not necessarily connect with issues on the ground which could have mobilised and empowered people. Shortage of resources may have been a major obstacle, but it appears that an over-centralised, standardised strategy here replicates the problems discussed regarding the slow response of public sector unions to fragmentation in the public service sector.

3. Organising the Unorganised: Race and Poor Work

A third case study charts the experience of the TGWU in a specific local recruitment campaign of ethnic minority women cleaners at London's **Heathrow** Airport in 1990 (Wrench and Virdee 1995). The problems already raised in relation to unions becoming more women-friendly in terms of developing a recruitment and **organising** culture and responding to womens specific needs are overlaid in the case of minority women with the critical need for involvement in locally based communities.

The processes of migration have made ethnic minority women one of the largest groups of vulnerable workers across the world. Trade union responses to ethnic minorities in Britain have been through several phases

since the post-Second World War entry of commonwealth immigrants, from racism, to a policy of equal treatment at a time when both sex-blind and race-blind approaches to trade unionism prevailed, to the beginnings in the late 1970 and early 1980s, of more pro-active policies to combat racial discrimination and address ethnic minority needs, whether of language, rights of dress or other issues (Wrench and Virdee 1995). Recently, despite the fact that the first generation of Asian and West Indian workers had an above average propensity to join unions, unions have begun to pay greater attention to the recruitment of minority workers, partly because second generation workers no longer display any particular predilection towards unionisation (possibly because of negative experiences), but also because of the swelling numbers of under-unionised ethnic **minority/migrant** workers in the unregulated sweat shop and service sector.

The recruitment drive by the TGWU of mainly female South Asian cleaners at **Heathrow** can hardly be called a success story: in two years, union membership rose from six to fifty – just five per cent of the total of 1000 workers. Beside the hostile political environment and demobilising trade union legislation which inhibited better organised workers at **Heathrow** from taking solidarity action to defend the more vulnerable, external difficulties included the employers' refusal to grant union recognition and the union's inability to **organise** at the workplace, which forced recruitment tactics into a time consuming door-to-door effort. The cleaners' shift work, long hours and often second jobs to supplement their low pay, made them more intractable during home visits. However, Wrench and Virdee (1995) also point to avoidable organisational errors, such as the failure to hold a single branch meeting of the fifty new recruits, the replacement of the special officer for the cleaners by another who had to share his time between the cleaners and another group, and the unwillingness of the local branch to take special measures for Asian workers: the local branch office was all-white, and there had been no co-operation with the local Asian community.

Following a review of the campaign, it appears that some lessons had been learned and the local TGWU began working with the Indian Workers' Association. However, Wrench and Virdee also highlight some of the potential difficulties encountered where co-operation between a trade union and a community organisation is attempted. The example is drawn from a strike for union recognition at a metal-finishing-sweat-shop subcontractor to the motor industry, Burstall, in the West-Midlands in 1992 – 1993, led by the General, Municipal and Boiler Workers' Union (the GMB). After sustained picketing for two years, the fight was lost, largely because workers in other firms **failed to** boycott Burstall's products, both through apathy and intimidation by laws against secondary action preventing the boycotting of goods, while a mass picket of the firm itself

was rejected by the union on the grounds that it would have exposed it to major fines – (British picketing laws have made mass pickets illegal). In the context of the **paralysing** effect of anti-union legislation under the Conservative Government, this strike highlighted the tactical and **organisational** problems of operating within the law, or outside it. The ensuing bitter attack by local Asian support groups, including the Indian Workers' Association, on the GMB for 'betraying' the workers by confining its action to remain within the law, demonstrated the divisive impact of such legislation on co-operation. The union, on the other hand, pointed out it had paid strike pay, managed to get entitlement to social security benefits for the strikers and done all it could. Breaking the law would have threatened the union with sequestration of its funds rather than the support groups'. The community group, on the other hand, argued that unless workers began to challenge such laws, they would remain disempowered. In general, while both of these cases point to the importance of community support for union recruitment and recognition drives, they also depressingly illustrate how the increase in 'poor work' creates major obstacles for organisation in a hostile union legal framework which encourages selfish insularity among better organised groups and intimidates solidaristic behaviour, and poses a genuine threats to union finances. It also points to the need to develop the political means to challenge the state.

CONCLUSIONS

The discussion of both the public and the private service sectors has returned to the consistent theme of decentralisation and fragmentation of employment and bargaining units and the rise of 'non-standard' and poor work. The evidence on the British union response suggests that attempts are being made to confront this situation, not necessarily for the moral reasons of greater sensitisation to the needs of the unorganised who, while increasing in numbers, have always been there, but for very basic reasons of union survival. In some unions there have been attempts to move the agenda away from the male, full-time, manufacturing model – but successes in organisation and recruitment have been equalled and probably outnumbered by failures.

As the last two cases illustrate, the strategies needed to organise casualised work transcend **sectoral** boundaries. Whatever their inadequacies, the recognised and established organisations of the labour movement are essential for the organisation of the unorganised. As Mitter (1994: 32) found, successful alternative strategies of organisation, such as the Self-Employed Women's Association in India, or co-operatives, have been in areas where the trade union movement is strong, which points to the need to strengthen existing labour movement institutions, as well as

seeking new **forms of organising**. She also points out that the most **self-critical** and imaginative union developments have been in Canada, both in terms of affirmative action to increase the numbers of women in leading union posts, in integrating more women and family-friendly issues, such as equal pay and opportunities and child care, into mainstream union concerns, and in working with communities. **Briskin** (1994) outlines in more detail Canadian unions' strategies such as the Canadian Auto Workers' store-front workers' centre to attract non-union workers and possibilities of establishing union centres which are based in communities as well as workplaces, to respond to the reality that many people's employment fluctuates between workplaces, as it does between employment and unemployment.

In the context of such a 'leading-edge' free market state as Britain, debate continues as to whether trade unionism has weathered the storm, or is undergoing terminal decline. Whether one takes sides with the pessimists, or the optimists, several questions of union strategy have emerged. One is the issue of union centralisation and decentralisation. This has arisen in the context of public sector trade unionism, which, unlike the decentralised pattern increasingly typical of British manufacturing – and the norm in North America – has been centralised on national bargaining lines. The evidence regarding its fragmentation, as a result of privatisation and marketisation, is uneven, with some pointing to the resilience of national pay bargaining, and others, the increase in single-employer bargaining and fragmented industrial relations. Within this framework of unevenness, there has been debate as to whether fragmentation augurs union 'renewal or rigor **mortis**' (**Colling** 1995): some have pointed to the potential of workplace democracy and participation posed by management decentralisation as a welcome challenge to a former over-centralised, bureaucratic and distant form of national industrial relations system. Others stress the exposure of vulnerable groups to casualisation in a divisive development in which there may be winners – the well organised – but only at the expense of the losers. It seems that there is something to be learned from both these positions, and to equate centralisation with **non-participatory** trade unionism may be misleading: certainly, there is evidence that a turn to workplace bargaining in the service sector may degenerate into parochial enterprise-unionism, leaving part-time, subcontract and isolated workers – especially women and ethnic minorities – out in the cold (**Colling** and Ferner 1995). This suggests that the unions' policy of defending a broad-based, national bargaining system against the attempts to fragment it are in labour's interests. At the same time, this is not to condone over-centralised, bureaucratic trade unionism. New forms of democratic participation are not an optional extra if the values of collectivism are to survive the challenges of a managerial agenda of participation

in the **form** of business values and individualism.

It is here that the analysis of maintaining union organisation in the unionised sector meshes with the wider concerns of redefining trade unions in order to make them relevant for 'non-standard' employees in 'poor work'. The question of feminising the unions, both in **response** to the feminisation of the labour force, and as a force to alter the organisational culture and priorities of trade unions has been a significant theme of this paper. Unless trade unions alter their image of white, male, middle aged manufacturing workers, they will have little appeal to women, people of colour, the young, part-time, temporary workers and other workers. But the problem is not just one of image: unions need to defend their existing members, but also change from a negotiating culture, to one of recruitment and organisation. **As** we saw, this is proving a very long-term task; pressure from women, minorities and others will have to be sustained to effect change. But as well as attitudinal and organisational problems, **under-resourcing** remains a constant barrier to change. In these circumstances, devising simple, imaginative means of organisation will undoubtedly need to draw on local resourcefulness, which, in turn, would lead to a more inclusive democratic model of trade unionism, in which workers and their communities had real input into the agenda.

NOTES

1. Dickens (1988) analyses the ways in which most non-standard workers fall through the safety net of Britain's limited employment protection. For a discussion of British employment and industrial relations legislation in the context of Western Europe, see Hyman 1994. For details of British legislation since 1979, see Dickens and Hall 1995.
2. Trade union decline has been the main trend in Europe from the end of the 1970s and accelerating during the **1980s**, particularly in the private sector. (Sweden, Finland and Norway avoided it by an expansion of the public sector, and Denmark, by the unions' involvement in unemployment insurance administration: Visser 1994: 82). Germany, Austria and Switzerland remained stable, but Britain, France, Ireland, the Netherlands, Spain and Portugal experienced severe decline. By 1994, Britain's aggregate union density had fallen to 33 per cent. Disaggregation by gender reveals the major drop in male union density in the total: while this was 66.9 per cent in 1979, it fell by 30.9 per cent to 36 per cent in 1994. Women's union density in 1979 was only 40.4 per cent, but fell by only 10.4 per cent to 30 per cent in 1994 (Employment Gazette 103, no. 5, May 1995). This underlines the importance of major **sectoral** restructuring and the loss of former male manufacturing union strong-holds.

The picture for the service sector is **worrying** given the decline of public sector employment from 27 to 22 per cent of the labour force between 1971 and 1991 (Thompson and Beaumont 1978 and Economic Trends 1991). While high membership density in the public sector continues, with, for instance, 75 per cent of energy and water workers, 86 per cent of posts and telecommunications, and 70 per cent of local government employees unionised in 1990, in private services, with the exception of the well organised banking, finance and insurance sector (53 per cent employees unionised), it is extremely low. In 1990, there was 3 per cent union density in hotels, catering and repairs, **11** per cent in business services and 25 per cent in retail distribution (Main indicators of union presence

- by industry, 1990, Table 3A, in Millward et al 1992). Furthermore, this data covered only workplaces employing 25 or more workers; the low figures for many parts of the service sector are likely to overestimate union density, since many employees in the service sector (43.3 per cent in 1987) work in firms with fewer than 20 employees (Abbott 1993).
3. Low pay defined by £3 per hour, or the legal minimum wage as defined by wages councils in 1991, or 60 per cent of median earnings.
 4. Source USDAW Annual Reports, which gives only USDAW membership and is therefore lower than 25 per cent density for retail in 1990 in Millward et al 1992, which includes other unions.
 5. Kelly and Heery (1994) found that FTOs (with the sample dominated by men) considered that negotiating better pay and conditions for existing members was more important than recruiting new members: 55 per cent ranked higher basic pay as their priority, compared with 21 per cent citing recruitment and 11 per equal opportunities. In other words, they were more responsive to members as 'economic insiders' pressing for better pay and conditions, than to top union policies, which emphasised recruitment, or to 'economic outsiders on the periphery of the labour market'.

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