

# ETUI Policy Brief

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### Community organising and the implications for union revitalisation

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#### Policy recommendations

Trade unions across the EU have, today, a weaker capacity to regulate work and employment than they did in the past. This is a result of changing labour markets, variations on traditional employment patterns – including temporary and precarious work – and of the effects of recent austerity measures. Institutional support for collective bargaining has been reduced, while the political influence of unions has declined. At the same time, employment-related migration across the EU has increased, a development that has been manipulated by some political parties to whip up anti-migrant sentiment resulting in higher levels of racism and xenophobia. Taken together, these factors suggest that unions need to (re)consider the ways in which they organise and mobilise workers. There is a need to broaden the base of unions to include people from all sections of society and to recognise that current institutional structures are not necessarily the best way to do this. It is argued here that community-organising approaches involving coalition-building with organisations in local communities but outside the employment relationship can provide a means to revitalise unions across the EU.

#### Introduction

The redefining of work, and the insecurities created by temporary, part-time and contingent labour, challenge the traditional forms of union structures and spatial organisation. Without some reconsideration of what constitutes the core constituency of trade unions and what is meant by the workplace, unions will, however inadvertently, exclude substantial numbers of workers in need of their protection. An increasing number of low-paid workers have no fixed workplace and are transported daily to different jobs. How are unions, which focus solely on the workplace, to organise these workers? How are migrant and undocumented workers to be accommodated in the fight for social justice? These are some of the big questions facing unions today as they struggle to rebuild themselves after years of declining power, membership and influence. This Policy Brief argues that community-based organising offers trade unions a way of rebuilding the union movement by broadening its base to include other civil society organisations as partners.

#### Community organising in a trade union context

Community organising involves working with or alongside other formations, outside the traditional employment relationship, including non-governmental organisations, faith groups, charities

and local issue-based community groups. It provides a means of reaching groups of workers who are not yet members of unions by engaging them in the communities of which they do feel they are a part. Social networks in local communities (based on culture, ethnicity, language, religion, etc.) afford unions opportunities to organise in the spaces and places where people feel safe – something which is of particular importance for many migrant workers who often feel vulnerable in the labour market and wider society. The rise of precarious work and fragmented employment is an additional factor making it more difficult for unions to organise in small or non-place-based 'workplaces'. The traditional model of unionism based on large-scale sectoral collective bargaining and servicing of individual members has been eroded/eroding across Europe over the last three decades. Community-based organising, however, gives unions a way of tapping into resources in communities using the methods and tactics associated with this rather different form of organising. As such, they are able

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to overcome some of the difficulties associated with the current union organising approaches that, in some cases, are no longer fit for purpose.

Before going any further, it is not argued here that unions organising in the community is a new phenomenon. Indeed, much of the history of union formation is inextricably linked to the places and spaces in which people lived as well as worked, but the strong links between trade union consciousness and community consciousness have been so severely weakened that, in many places, they no longer exist. Over time, unions have become more institutionally than community embedded, with employed professionals operating on behalf of workers rather than organising workers to organise themselves. Further, the attacks on unions, particularly during the growth of neoliberal ideology from the 1980s onward, meant that many unions became inward-looking and more focused on servicing the surviving membership; as a result, trade unions became less visible in the wider community. Community unionism thus provides a way for unions to (re)build activity from the grassroots in the communities in which workers are most active in their daily lives.

## What is community organising?

To effect change in society requires people to come together and organise, to put forward demands, to understand power dynamics and to find the means to challenge individuals/companies/organisations that have the authority to agree to those demands. While this has always taken place in society, models of community organising have been developed to enable people to work together effectively and to design an approach that is successful in achieving the outcomes desired. In recent years, unions in the UK, USA and Australia have become increasingly interested in how they might incorporate community-organising methods into their repertoire of union organising practice. As such, we have seen growing academic and practitioner interests in the notion of 'community unionism'.

Community unionism tends to take place at a more localised level where the organising approach is to form coalitions of local community groups and unions around issues of common concern (Tattersall 2010). But how do unions engage with groups and individuals beyond their membership and in local communities that have different structures and cultures?

Attempts have been made to categorise the different ways in which unions engage with community partners. For Janice Fine, who has researched and written on workers' centres in the USA, there are three central features shared by community unions: their *local place-based focus* – usually the local labour market; their *mini-social movement character* – where they draw in activists from beyond the workplace; and the *centrality of identity* as a factor around which to organise. The latter has been shown in a number of different studies to be of key importance. As Fine (2005:155) notes, 'in community unionism, forms of identity such as race, ethnicity, and gender, stand in for craft or industry as the principle means of recruitment and strongest bond between workers'. It is in confronting exploitation of some of the lowest-paid workers

(often reinforced by racism, sexism and immigration status) that community organising has been at its strongest. In the UK and the USA this is evidenced most powerfully through numerous living-wage campaigns where, using those strong community ties just mentioned, unions and community organisations have worked together to raise the wages of largely un-organised workers (Holgate and Wills 2007; Luce 2004).

## What are the methods of community organising?

Saul Alinsky (1972) is seen by many as the 'godfather' of community organising. His research into urban poverty in the 1930s taught him that building strong reciprocal networks in local communities had the potential to challenge the power of money and dominance of political elites. Many organisations have since adopted the methodology of the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) that Alinsky established in the stockyards of Chicago; this community-organising network has grown to 60 IAF affiliates organising mainly in the USA, but also in Canada, Germany, the UK, and more recently, Australia, nearly all of which are organising in predominantly poor, black and migrant communities.

Since the 1960s there has been a growth in networks similar to the IAF – all of which adopt a community-organising approach that grew out of the Alinsky model. Some of these are predominantly faith-based organisations, whereas others have a much broader civil-society base. But what does a community-organising model entail?

Alinsky's community-organising approach revolves around three main elements – power, self-interest and public relationships. Power is conceptualised in terms of organised people and organised money – and the former often need to challenge the latter in order for change to occur. Community organising teaches that self-interest, rather than altruism, is what often motivates most people to act, particularly people from poor or marginalised communities. Thirdly, the building of public relationships within and between member organisations is essential as it helps to establish a strong, stable and sustainable base from which to build power for the community, and to challenge those with power over the community.

Training of community leaders is also key to community organising and this is done through the method of 'relational organising' – one-to-one meetings so as to understand different perspectives and to build relationships of trust. With trust comes the ability to work together, to work collaboratively and through consensus, and to sustain the organisation beyond a particular issue. This aspect represents a significant shift away from traditional union-organising approaches, insofar as unions are focused more on 'the issues' rather than building/sustaining the organisation. The purpose of community-organising training and the continual development of leaders is influenced by Alinsky's golden rule: 'never do for others what they can do for themselves'. Leadership is considered to be a practice – not a position. Thus a good leader is seen not as someone who has followers, but as someone who is able to create more leaders. Again this is different from what

happens in unions where the focus has shifted from rank-and-file activity (grass roots) to professional officers (top down) who service the members and negotiate on their behalf. In community organising it is always the members that lead and speak for themselves, not paid staff.

## Can community organising help unions across Europe revitalise?

I argue that for renewal to be effective requires trade unions to have a much broader engagement with understanding the relationship that workers have with each other and with the broader social and economic environment of which they are part. As others have argued, workers are not *just* workers; they are also embedded in social and cultural structures in society at large and unions need to consider how these factors affect their working lives and their decisions about whether or not to join unions (Alberti *et al.* 2013).

While it could be argued that unions in continental Europe are more institutionally embedded, compared to those in the UK or USA, and are thus more 'inwardly-focused', it is maintained that community organising still has much to offer in terms of union revitalisation as it is a way of reactivating the grass roots and mobilising unorganised workers. While unions tend to be bureaucratic organisations that are often slow to react – a tendency that can become even more pronounced the more deeply institutionally embedded they are – local community-based organisations are much more nimble and able to respond more quickly to events. Also, being more rooted at the local level, community organisations are more embedded in the social and cultural networks of workers' lives outside the workplace. Jane McAlevey (2003), academic and long-time union/community organiser, argues for a focus on a concept of 'whole worker' organising. This is an approach according to which, when workers are organised into unions, their relationships *outside* the workplace are assumed to be just as important as their relationships *inside* the workplace.

The need to understand and harness the power of workers' relationships before, during, and after work is at the centre of the 'whole worker organising' approach advocated by McAlevey – the issues in workers' lives are not neatly divided into the separate spheres of 'work' and 'home'; they are very much interconnected and influence each other. This is where the notion of unions as broad social movements (as they were in the past) needs to be brought back into union practice. Then, perhaps, they would be in a better position to challenge, for example, some of the anti-immigrant, anti-racist, anti-Muslim/Jewish sentiments we have recently seen across Europe and that have such an adverse effect on people whether at home or at work. To be effective, union organising needs to be more responsive to these and other social justice issues, and community organising can provide unions with a way of engaging with whole groups of workers who are precarious, are in atypical and contracted-out jobs, on zero-hours contracts, who change jobs frequently, or who are between jobs.

For many workers/unemployed people their concerns are not those relating just to the world of work but are matters relating

to the broader social and economic environment in which they find themselves; for these people their localities are thus the most appropriate places and spaces in which to organise them into unions. An example of this is the living-wage campaign in which a work-related demand (increased pay) is framed as a wider community issue. While many countries across the EU have the benefit of *minimum* wage legislation, there are nevertheless vast numbers of workers in vulnerable 'employment' whose wages fall below the statutory minimum, and it is often these precarious workers who do not have a union to negotiate their pay and conditions. We have seen that even in countries where workers do have a national minimum wage, like the UK, its level is not sufficient to allow a decent standard of living, so that workers have to apply to the state for tax credits to top up their wages.

As such living-wage campaigns have been community-led where they have involved low-paid workers in their own struggles for better pay, through new forms of community organising that have helped empower workers who otherwise lack representation in the workplace. Tactics used have included moral argument and public pressure on business leaders and politicians, and these have proved successful in gaining wage increases for workers not in unions. In addition, public procurement can be an effective means of changing behaviour among private sector employers as contracts are let (and sub-let) by local and national government. This type of approach provides an opportunity for unions to adopt place-based campaigns using the collective strength and resources of people and organisations outside of the traditional employment relationships.

The economic crisis and the austerity measures imposed upon countries across Europe require unions (with their depleted resources and power) to rethink whether or not they are still able (either through peak-level social dialogue or enterprise-level industrial action) to gain significant benefits for members. If not, there is an urgent need to search for new allies and new approaches to mobilise and organise the majority of workers who do not participate in or are not members of unions. Across the world, including in Europe, there are many examples of successful alliances but these have often been temporary and short-lived. Yet working with such groups adopting community-organising methods provides one way of rebuilding mobilising capacity and strengthening organisations so that they are able to challenge institutional power whilst at the same time increasing the legitimacy of unions by showing that they are more than self-interested organisations at a far remove from the concerns of many in society.

A key finding of my research is that community organising has given unions an opportunity to find out more about their members – their interests, their hopes, their aspirations and, importantly, what they wanted their unions to do about certain issues. For example, it was through adopting community-organising methodology – the listening campaigns and the many one-to-one conversations that took place in each of the union/community coalitions I studied – that union members (and leaders) in Sydney unions understood more about their members' issues inside and outside of work and about how these concerns were shared by other sections of society. The realisation that people in the

community were prepared to devote their time and energy to supporting union causes, and that unions were prepared to do the same to campaign for wider social justice issues, had a strong effect in the building of long-term collective solidarities. Learning that people are multifaceted and that union members have all sorts of aspects to their lives outside of work is an approach whereby unions can come to think differently about how to organise and build support for unionism within, but also outside, the workplace.

## What lessons can European unions learn from community organising?

While it is important not to exaggerate the extent to which unions are engaging in community organising, it is, however, noteworthy that the UK's Trades Union Congress and a number of its affiliated unions have in recent years been taking significant steps to broaden their base and engage with communities outside their normal spheres of operation (Holgate 2013a). From observation of community organising involving trade unions in the UK over the last 14 years, there are a number of key lessons that stand out and from which unions can learn, not just in the UK but across the EU overall (Holgate 2013b). Firstly, community organising takes time; it is resource intensive, often involving numerous meetings and lots of one-to-one conversations to build up understanding and develop trust. In the past, unions have often called upon people and organisations to support them in times of need (often in relation to industrial action), but such relationships have tended to fall apart when the immediate threat dissipated. Community organising, however, means building reciprocal relationships and alliances that are sustainable and where organisations support each other even when the issues at stake might not be directly relevant to a union's 'core mission'.

One factor that has proved difficult for unions has been figuring out how to adapt to different ways of working alongside community partners. Unions are seen as bureaucratic organisations slow to change and adjust to altered circumstances, whereas community organisations are much more nimble and adaptable. Community organising means being prepared to consider how to reconfigure union structures so that they work better to involve members in different ways; to think differently about how democracy is practised in coalition working so that it is not just about voting on motions or slates of candidates but is based around activity and consensus; and to reflect on how union cultures may be unwelcoming or off-putting for those not used to the way unions operate. A problematic area for unions in the UK has been the challenge of working with diverse groups, particularly faith communities, who may have different views on issues of gender, reproductive rights and sexuality. Despite these issues not coming to the fore in actual campaigns, many trade unionists have objected to working alongside groups who do not share their views on these issues. As such, the test has been to rethink how to work on issues of common concern and to leave other more contentious issues to one side.

My research (Holgate 2013b) has shown that where union engagement in community coalitions is shallow and instrumental (as in London), there are problems in developing lasting

relationships, even though there can still be some tangible benefits (e.g. living wage). However, with a deep involvement and commitment to long-term engagement with coalitions there exists the potential to create cultural change (as in Sydney and Seattle) so that unions are truly organising unions, responsive to member's concerns, with the ability to draw in new constituencies and to develop a form of leadership capacity that is less reliant on the servicing of members.

To continue to conceptualise the industrial relations system as comprising the key actors (employer, state, unions) is to underestimate the way in which a whole host of 'other actors' could potentially have a significant impact on workers' pay and conditions. With the increased global activism around corporate social responsibility, tax avoidance and fair deals for workers and their conditions of employment (e.g. the Occupy movement, UK Uncut, garment workers in Bangladesh, Wisconsin, etc.), how can unions tap into this form of activism and community organising? I would argue that it requires unions to step out of institutional structures and workplaces where they are comfortable and into the social networks in the places and spaces of local communities. These require significant change to current patterns of practice and might be more 'messy' and unpredictable, but they are where the majority of non-unionised workers are to be found.

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