

Women, Trade Unions and Solidarities

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Introduction

In the search for identity and the *longing* to become a powerful force, trade unions have traditionally focused primarily on free collective bargaining as a way of negotiating conflicts of interests between labour and capital. Conflict between worker and employer was, and still is, central to the ethics of trade unionism in the aim to balance the power that is stacked against the employee, who only has their labour to sell. Up until the late 20th century, this binary division between classes was a unitary aspect of trade union identity, with the ‘rootedness’ of labour seen as a source of power, particularly in the mining villages and ‘union towns’ of the UK. However, feminists have often considered the conventional form of trade unions to be oppressive, hierarchal, and thus restrictive of women’s differences and rights. Using Hyman’s notions of ‘imagined solidarity’, this article reviews the construct of a ‘masculine’ model of union identity and considers the extent to which women’s identity has been tangential in debates about solidarity. At the same time, it explores the argument that traditional forms of unionism are outdated due to the heterogeneity of workers in post-industrial society. In this context, the article considers the need for ‘re-imagining’ plural solidarities and union renewal that goes beyond conventional forms of unionism. In drawing to a conclusion, it considers the influence of feminist movements and community action as potential coalitions for community unionism.

Imagining solidarities and the mobilisation of bias

In drawing on Durkheim’s (1933) notion of ‘mechanical solidarity’, Hyman (1999; 2001) argues that early trade unions constructed a mythical ‘archetypal worker’ (as a means to establish a ‘class in itself’) which has persisted to the present day. This reflects Marx and Engels’ (1848) point that there is no inevitability that class identity

leads to class solidarity because social relations are affected 'by those pushing for change and those resisting change' (Crow, 2002:11). Thus, a 'mass' worker image had an essential part to play in redressing this imbalance of power. As an 'ideal type', it characterised union membership as uniting workers against the imbalance in the labour contract, the exploitation of the work process, and the concentration of social and economic power in the hands of a powerful minority. However, it has been argued that, in the call for 'imagined solidarity', unions have traditionally privileged male, white, full-time, manual workers, leading inevitably to the interests of one particular gendered group of workers being placed above the needs of others. This is particularly evident in the appeal for men to earn a 'family wage' as presumed 'breadwinners', and their domination of union leadership positions (Ledwith and Colgan, 1996). Feminists have argued that such privileging has had significant ramifications for women, reinforcing passive stereotypes of women capable of satisfying the roles of homemaking, housework, and childbearing, but dependent on men. Warskett (2001) makes apt comment when she argues that formulation of trade union legitimacy was, and still is, possessed by all the characteristics of dominant cultural understandings that are predictive and male.

To an extent, socialist explanations accommodate gender concerns based on the argument that 'capitalism has long set worker against worker by trade, industry, region, skill, 'race', religion, and sex', and therefore that the struggle for economic justice should take priority over gender justice, because sexism is included within the class struggle (Coates, 1983:65). To cling to this explanation, however, suppresses contradiction in trade unionism *itself* with the failure to condemn sexism whenever issues emerge in union goals and practices.

Women's Structures

By the 1960s, 'class' as the driving force of solidarity was challenged by the re-emergence of feminism. This was a period of progressive movements of workers and students demanding radical change in the workplace, wider society and in politics. In this context, second-wave feminism was part of the challenge to the political and social hegemony significant in the fight for women's liberation (Warskett, 2001). In

counteracting the ‘mobilisation of bias’ against women *within* unions, equality initiatives from a feminist standpoint rejected the assumption that women and men are ‘on a level playing field’ in terms of union career progression (Parker and Foley, 2010). This manifested itself in the assertion of ‘a “new” kind of politics’, a type of feminist ideology, theory and practice that articulated the view that the ‘personal is the political’ (Dominell, 2006). Up to this point, the struggle for socialism had achieved very little in changing the subordinate role of women within wider society generally, and within trade unions themselves. This is not to say women were not involved in trade unionism, but as Warskett (2001) comments, generally they were relegated to positions of backroom assistants, servers of tea or secretaries.

Developing women’s self-activity involved the setting up of women’s structures (caucuses etc.) that afforded spaces for consciousness-raising and the rejection of unions’ hierarchical and bureaucratic structure through democratic decision-making. In challenging the nature of patriarchy, women’s groups developed processes of communication whereby participants gained confidence and skills to challenge external power relations in the fight against sexual harassment, racism, and pay and employment inequity (Dominell, 2006). This was a valuable step forward in highlighting the significance of other bases of interest and identities based on commonalities, whilst raising awareness of how gender inequality is compounded by factors such as disability and racism. As Parker and Foley (2010) point out, women’s structures went on to influence the organising of other union structures, such as black and Asian and LGBT union groups that engaged in the ‘politics of identity’.

Nevertheless, for all that is said about the success of women’s structures and the extent to which trade unionism portrays itself as being egalitarian, and pro-feminist, it remains far from being either. The growth of women’s structures has not resulted in women’s power-sharing on a *par* with men, nor has it resulted in changes in men’s attitudes (Parker and Foley, 2010). More prosaically, if power is equated with *participation* in decision-making, why then do women remain less likely to be trade union leaders, especially when female union density exceeds that of male membership? A growing body of scholars emphasise women’s integration into the

status quo rather than changes in men's attitudes as behind the problem of tackling inequalities between the sexes (see Parker and Foley, 2010). In this context, the existence of separate women's structures was deemed to have reinforced the marginalisation of women as marginal workers. Moreover, it raised questions about the extent to which unions should be more concerned with social issues generally, rather than concentrating on the narrow focus of workplace problems (Warskett, 2001). As the campaign 'Women Against Pit Closure' asserted in 1984, women's and children's lives are entangled in the mines as much as men; therefore, they should have a say on what affects the whole community. From the 1980s, however, the combined effects of long-term economic restructuring, lack of commitment to full employment and recession have produced different patterns of inequality that have contributed to a 'crisis' in trade unionism (Hobsbawn, 1981). Subsequent sections of this article outline the changing patterns of employment, some explanations, and calls for trade union renewal.

Social change

It has been argued that, since the late 20th century, traditional conceptions of unions have no longer been applicable because the boundaries between classes are no longer as clear-cut (e.g. Hyman, 1999; 2002). Since the ideological onslaught of working-class activism under Thatcherism, union mobilisation has been ineffective in challenging the deregulation of the market and public sector cuts that have affected white-collar workers (TUC, 2012). Whilst the unseen hand of the market receives praise for its efficiencies under new managerialism initiatives, trade unions are weakened with the decline in male density, as the private service sector has failed to fill the employment gap since the closure of traditional industries (Simms, 2011). In contemporary society, workers' experiences are individualised due to the severed link between work and community, as people no longer live in close proximity to their workplace or share cultural and social pursuits (Hyman, 2002). Such titles as *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society* (Bell, 1973), *The End of Organised Capitalism* (Lash and Lurry, 1987) and *The Meaning of New Times* (Hall, 1996) parallels this debate that union identity has little or no bearing on the transient, classless groupings that characterise a fragmented and variegated late modern society. As Hyman (2002)

reflects, the old adage that employers are oppressors has lost ground in academic circles; and sociologists have failed to provide a contemporary class analysis that draws white-collar workers into the working-class stratum.

Changing features of community and workplace

It seems the days of ‘machismo’ in the workplace are vanishing alongside the shrinking industrial power of the trade unions. ‘Flexible’ and family-friendly working hours to fit in with childcare responsibilities have become a ‘choice’ that benefits both women and men. This is certainly a powerful mantra from those defending neo-liberalism, but, also, from postmodernist feminists celebrating the diversity of women and the liberation of individual choices (Dominelli, 2006). This is not to say, though, that traditional grievances have disappeared. As politicians and academics speak the language of choice, freedom and autonomy, the reality is that some people *do not* have any choice; they are either in poorly paid jobs which require long hours, or are employed on heinous ‘zero contract hours’, struggling to make a ‘decent living’ (TUC, 2012). This is not new; employers have historically attempted to reduce labour costs in order to improve competitive advantage. Since the early period of industrialisation, such practices as casualisation of the labour force have had a habit of re-emerging: for example, 19th-century workers often turned up for work only to be turned away.

Contemporary social scientists focus on social changes that have effectively resulted in the growth of anxiety and fear of loss that coexist with the growth of choice over gender, race, and class relations (Melucci, 1989). As Beck’s (1992:49) analysis of ‘Risk Society’ describes, there has been a fundamental shift ‘from solidarity of need to solidarity motivated by anxiety’. Nevertheless, for all the rhetoric of ‘work–life balance’, the fact remains that women continue to dominate low-paid, part-time work that compromises women’s ‘choice’ of a career (TUC, 2012). In particular, women ethnic minority workers face further oppressions with the added variable of racism. Some argue that radical notions of feminism based on the struggle for women’s equality and the acknowledgement of the ethical implications of the sexual division of labour are superseded by a discourse of choice and consumerism (Fraser, 1997). A

key aspect to this relates to deepened alienation. Lukacs (1971) argued that ‘in an emerging “late capitalism” ... workers’ false consciousness could be exploited to keep the social and economic system running smoothly’ as people are led to believe their situation is both inevitable and rational (in Agger, 1991: 107). Indeed, whilst the influence of equal opportunities policy provided affirmation of gender equality that secured women and men equal treatment *in the eyes of the law*, it has been largely ineffective for working-class women with little scope to escape low-paying jobs, and the double burden of unpaid work in the home. Furthermore, as Warskett (2001) adds, equal opportunities policies have failed to acknowledge that, in certain sectors, the wage gap between men and women has not shrunk because of increases in women’s wages, but due to decreases in men’s conditions and pay. Thus, patriarchal practices are not easily distinguishable from class oppression.

It is now well-documented that unions should search for renewal strategies that address the needs of women and other discriminated groups with a focus on moving beyond workplace issues towards plural solidarities based on identities and differences (e.g. Hyman, 1999; Wills, 2008; Simms *et al.* 2013).

Trade union renewal in the 21st century

In describing unions as ‘bureaucratic bargaining agents ... unable to operate as a social movement’, Hyman (2002) concludes rather than there being a ‘crisis’ of trade unions, the traditional model of the union is the problem. This is due to the fact that the impact of industrialisation and localised class experiences is now less significant to a highly diverse workforce. In his calls for renewal of trade unionism, he mirrors the viewpoint of Melucci (1989), one of the founders of New Social Movement (NSM) theory, in recognising that collective actions expressed through NSMs are ‘interwoven with the fabric of everyday life and individual experiences’ (1989:12). Here emphasis is on a ‘plurality of perspectives, meanings, and relationships’ that reflect the diversity of participants of NSMs consisting of different economic and ethnic backgrounds, ages, gender, and sexual orientation (Melucci, 1989:20). In this context, the approach to community organising depends on building alliances with community groups and NGOs in order to re-establish the link between community

and union activism, at a time when relationships of solidarity seem to have withered. As Tattersall (2010) acknowledges unions should be visible as community-based organising entities that are less focused on collective bargaining and more focused on wider social issues. Thus, ‘organic solidarities’ should be drawn into the union agenda because of the potential to reach non-members that have traditionally been left out of decision-making (women, the unemployed, ethnic minorities). To be sure, for every worker, there is a family, and a community – thus, a cost-benefit analysis of union renewal is worthy of consideration. As a result, unions will be able to (re)gain public legitimacy and enhanced power with the recruitment of new members built on strong relationships with faith groups, social groups, co-operatives, and single-issue pressure groups. In addition, such strategic orientations supports Young’s (1997) feminist viewpoint on social movements, that there is potential to evolve from identity formation to politicising participants united in a common cause.

As a horizontal structure within the vertical structure of unions, ‘community unionism’ is in part recognition that ‘workers’ interests and solidarities extend beyond the workplace and that the workplace is not the only location of struggle in the relationship between capital and labour’ (Simms, 2011:102). But, in reality, there has been very little discussion of community unionism in the UK, and, when it has occurred, the usual case studies based on London Citizens’ campaigns for a living wage, and the London-based Justice for Cleaners Campaign, are cited by union scholars (e.g. Holgate and Wills, 2007; Wills, 2008). Some trade union scholars argue that tactics and tensions of organising are ingrained with a functionalist viewpoint that privileges collective bargaining and growing membership, over reciprocal coalitions with community organisations (Holgate and Wills, 2007). As empirical studies suggest, alliances seem to be dependent on, and mainly subject to, a union’s need to recruit new groups of workers, rather than a wider constituency (e.g. Wills, 2008). This is a missed opportunity. The fact that women’s groups have historically engaged with trade unions to secure support for home workers, equal pay, women, and children’s well-being, whilst challenging trade unions’ own racist and sexist nature, demonstrates that a ‘re-imagining’ of trade unionism needs to be taken more seriously by trade unions, academics and policy directives. Perhaps the TUC’s (2012) recent

affiliations with feminist groups such as the Fawcett Society, the Charter for Women, and UK Feminista that are involved in the recent developments of regional grassroots organising will be a force for change.

Conclusion

This article identifies the extent to which unions are ‘part of and an antagonism to capitalism’, as trade unionism provides a constant challenge to the dominance of capital and those who enjoy the profits of workers’ labour (Coates, 1983). However, while unions emerged as a result of exploitation, their organisation and intentions have privileged a particular, gendered group over other groups. Therefore trade union formulation has privileged ‘men’s jobs’ over women’s in its identity and strategic orientations. That said, feminist influences have been able to shape the trade union agenda in the development of the society-axis and this has allowed for more emphasis on issues that affect workers outside of the workplace. Because women are grounded in the community as carers, and employed as paid workers, the union agenda has broadened to become wider than men’s interests. Such orientations can be replicated under proposals for union renewal. ‘Community’ is not external to unions, and it should be defined on the lines of a social structure in which workers and their families are entrenched. If unions are to learn anything, they should draw on the many examples of women’s involvement in community action that have influenced policy and wider change on societal issues, such as childcare, improving community life, women’s health and multicultural issues (Dominelli, 2006). Union grievances do not have to be based on ‘mechanical solidarity’ because the building of ‘organic solidarities’ has the potential to unite workers beyond their workplace experiences, including taking on board single-issues that have traditionally been sidelined in union formation. The combination of all these factors means that unions have the potential to embark upon diverse campaigns. In this way, trade unions are more likely to find themselves addressing social and political questions which are broader than its traditional emphasis on economics and conventional trade union action. Indeed, trade unions will continue to rely on strong membership that can ‘mobilise against countervailing power resources’ (Hyman, 1999:3) to recapture the ideological initiative against oppressive structures in the workplace and wider society.

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