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Relational union organising in a health care setting: a qualitative study

This article explores the impact of a relational organising model within a local UNISON NHS branch. While initial outcomes were modest, we argue that relational approaches have the potential to increase branch engagement with organising activity and to provide a focus on the importance of community within the workplace.

Introduction

Attempts by trade unions to reverse membership losses and extend organisation and influence have been subject to extensive enquiry and comment in recent years (Gall 2009). However, evidence as to the effectiveness of union renewal strategies is inconclusive. While strategies based on the provision of individual services may enhance recruitment in the short-run, some argue that this servicing agenda has hollowed out union organisation, severing bonds between union officials and members (Jarley, 2005).

Union organising initiatives purport to offer an alternative approach based on engaging and empowering members to self-organise around key collective workplace issues. However, despite some notable successes, the wider impact of organising strategies in the UK has been limited (Simms et al., 2013). Furthermore, there is little sign that local branches have managed to escape a vicious spiral whereby the demands of members for individual support crowd out organising initiatives and the consequent development of grass roots activity and strengthening of representative capacity (Hurd, 2004; Simms et al., 2013).

In this context, Paul Jarley has argued that unions need to adopt relational techniques to systematically develop dense networks of strong social ties between activists and both existing and potential new members. In this way he argues that a sense of mutuality and solidarity can be developed which can underpin a more effective collective approach to

advancing worker interests. In some respects this has been reflected in attempts by UK unions to forge links with community groups (McBride and Greenwood, 2009; UNISON, 2011; Wills and Simms, 2006) but the potential to build union communities *within* more conventional workplace settings has received less attention.

This paper provides an important opportunity to examine the potential of a relational approach to workplace organising by reporting on a longitudinal study of a relational organising pilot in one NHS UNISON branch, conducted between 2009 and 2011. Inspired by the example of the successful organising campaign mounted by clerical workers at Harvard University during the 1980s and 1990s, activists sought to develop social ties with individuals and groups of workers in order to: encourage members to be more pro-active in representing their interests, strengthen organisational structures and increase recruitment. In particular, the paper seeks to examine three key questions: firstly, to what extent is there a need for a relational dimension to union organising? Secondly, is a distinctive 'relational organising strategy' either realistic or desirable? Thirdly, what are the implications of a relational perspective for the debate over union renewal?

We conclude that a focus on building relationships between members and union activists offers the potential for greater branch engagement than more conventional issues-based organising. Not only does it build on the relational attributes of activists but reflects a need for sustainable organising that empowers workers '*to act for themselves*' (Simms et al., 2013:7). Although purely relational strategies may be difficult to sustain in the face of rapid organisational change and uncertainty, a relational dimension offers an opportunity to build a sense of community which is critical to solidarity and collective action (Hyman, 2007).

Developing strategies for renewal - the social dimension

Neo-liberal policies of privatisation, marketization and public expenditure cuts represent a major challenge to UK public sector unions. In Local Government and Health, membership density fell sharply between 1979 and 1995 (Waddington and Kerr, 1999) and although decline has since slowed, just 53 per cent of public sector employees now belong to unions compared to 61 per cent in 1995 (Labour Force Survey, Office for National Statistics). At the same time the scale and scope of collective bargaining has been curtailed and as a result, public sector unions, like others in the UK, have been forced to refocus strategy on individual representation and the enforcement of legal rights (Dickens, 2012).

Paul Jarley has argued that this increased emphasis on individual service provision has hollowed out internal dialogue (Jarley 2005). Jarley argues that workers find themselves members of a 'union of strangers' confined to requesting services from union officials. Perhaps more profoundly, he suggests this has fundamental consequences for the ability of unions to act collectively in defence of members as the dense social ties on which trust and solidarity have historically been based have been critically weakened. In the UK, it could be argued that the passive and instrumental orientation of many union members is nothing new (see for example, Hyman, 1979; Fosh, 1993; Carter, 2000). Indeed, although research has discounted the importance of the provision of financial and other member benefits often associated with union servicing, individual representation and support over workplace issues is central to recruitment and retention (Waddington and Whitston, 1997; Waddington and Kerr, 1999).

Nonetheless, the channels through which members' interests can be pursued on a collective basis have continued to contract. For example, WERS2011 found an alarming reduction in the proportion of public sector employees covered by collective bargaining from 69 to 44 per cent (van Wanrooy et al., 2013). There is also some evidence of a re-ordering of priorities with a minority of union representatives (41 per cent) reporting that they primarily spent their time on collective issues (van Wanrooy et al., 2013). Moreover, almost three-quarters of

unionised workplaces have no on-site representatives (van Wanrooy et al., 2013) and even 30 per cent of workplaces in which UNISON is recognised have no on-site steward (Waddington and Kerr, 2009). Therefore, it could be suggested that Jarley's warnings of the dangers of an increasingly atomised and remote relationship between union and member are increasingly salient. Interestingly, Waddington and Kerr (1999) have found that lack of contact with representatives is a major reason for membership attrition.

Union organising offers the prospect of an antidote to this alleged malaise (Heery, 2002; Simms et al., 2013). While it covers a broad range of practices, union organising commonly involves using dedicated organisers to develop membership activism and local leadership through identifying key issues to accentuate differences between employer and worker. Critically, it can, and some argue should aim to develop a degree of self-organisation whereby empowered workers resolve their own disputes – challenging the passivity of conventional union-member relations (see Simms and Holgate, 2010a).

However, UK evidence of its impact is at best mixed – unions have been successful in some instances in securing recognition but long term increases in union density have been elusive (Gall, 2007). Simms and colleague's (2013) long term study of union organising in the UK concluded *'that thirteen years of organizing activity has made comparatively little impact on formal aggregate measures of union power'* (163).

Importantly, it would seem that organising has failed to shift the paradox in which local unions find themselves. Shrinking numbers of shop stewards increasingly struggle to cope with increasing volumes of 'case-work', leaving little time for organising (Heery and Simms, 2008; Waddington and Kerr, 2009). To fill this gap, unions generally deploy specialist organising staff – however there is a danger that local branches could resent what they see as outside interference and an influx of new members (in the short term at least) can increase already unsustainable workloads. Furthermore, in some workplaces, the

adversarial approach to industrial issues that underpins much organising sits uneasily with the commitment of lay officials to partnership working and the apparent preference of many members for stability (Heery, 2006; Hurd, 2004; Jarley, 2005). Although this organising inertia can be dismissed as a conservative attempt to resist change and protect vested interests, there seems to be a fundamental gulf between the rhetoric of union organising and the daily reality of union work as perceived by local union branches (de Turberville, 2007; Fletcher and Hurd, 1998; Hurd, 2004).

Given the limited impact of union organising, some commentators urge the adoption of more radical approaches (Simms et al., 2013) that move the focus away from traditional bargaining issues and union services towards a focus on identity and social networks (Holgate, 2005). This has been reflected in the pursuit of strategic alliances with community groups (McBride and Greenwood 2009; Wills and Simms 2006). UNISON has been at the forefront of such developments, seeing reciprocal community unionism as a crucial weapon in fighting spending cuts and privatisation (UNISON 2011). Importantly, relational one-to-one conversations are a central element of such initiatives (UNISON 2011:26).

Although there is less evidence of explicitly relational approaches being used to organise within workplaces with an existing union presence, UNISON embarked in 2008 on a seven month pilot in Camden Primary Care Trust which was modelled on a relational organising campaign mounted by the Harvard Union of Clerical and Technical Workers (HUCTW) winning recognition from Harvard University in 1988 (Hurd, 1993; Hoerr 1997).

The goal of the Camden project was that *'every member and potential member has a meaningful, personal relationship with a branch activist'* (UNISON, 2008:3). In this way, there was an emphasis on the trade union as a *'community of workers who take care of each other'* as opposed to *'an insurance company for individual representation'*. This reflected Jarley's call for unions to *'recreate community in the workplace'* by focusing on *'personal*

relationships among all members of the work group in ways that create an emotional bond among the workers and between the workers and the union leadership' (2005:12-13). The stance of the Camden organising team was based on the demands of members for learning and development and a desire to improve the quality of service to patients. Consequently, the union attempted to create a positive sense of workplace; explicitly rejecting organising *'through stoking [members] anger'* at the employer on the grounds that this was difficult to sustain, led to activist burnout and reduced a sense of well-being.

This mirrors the philosophy of the original Harvard campaign which portrayed organising in terms of increasing worker influence, improving the working environment and consequently making Harvard *'a better university'* (Hurd, 1993:324). Thus HUCTW activists rejected conventional distributive bargaining strategies and instead developed a collaborative approach to addressing the issues that lay at the heart of the campaign. For example, a central aspect of the eventual contract won by the HUCTW was the establishment of joint labour-management teams. While this has echoes of partnership, these teams privileged the involvement of grass roots members and activists. In addition, adversarial grievance and arbitration machinery was discarded in favour of informal approaches to resolution backed by joint problem solving and mediation (Hurd, 1993).

This should not be confused with acquiescence - the Harvard campaign grew from discontent over lack of respect from (largely male) academics towards (mainly female) administrative staff and, more specifically, pay inequalities, healthcare provision and child-care facilities. In this respect, the campaign was no different from traditional organising strategies. However, the relational approach emphasised promoting workplace justice while preserving harmony. Furthermore, the rejection of what activists saw as 'macho' adversarialism was underpinned and informed by feminist ideals which contested discriminatory behaviour from academics and management.

Nonetheless, the Harvard 'model' has been criticised as being dependent on management goodwill (Leery and Alonso, 1997). Banks and Metzger (2005) argue that while relationship building is one part of trade union organisation, unions must concern themselves with issues and must challenge existing power relations. Successful campaigns over wages and terms and conditions will do more to create social capital than simple mutuality. Certainly it could be argued that the '*anger*' of NHS workers may not need to be 'stoked' given the UK coalition government's policy agenda. But, as Hyman (2007:202) has argued, social relationships among workers not only provide unions with a '*human face*' but underpin their ability to take meaningful collective action to defend and advance worker interests.

This study explores these issues by analysing a second pilot project, which was conducted by an NHS UNISON Branch in the North West in 2009 and which like their colleagues in Camden was based on the HUCTW campaign. Therefore, this provides an ideal opportunity to examine: the tensions faced by a local union branch in balancing organising activities with maintaining member services; the issues faced in implementing a relational approach within a turbulent environment; and the potential of relational organising to extend and deepen union organisation.

Methodology

The relational organising strategy was undertaken in what was a Primary Care Trust (PCT) which was re-organised into separate provider and commissioning wings during the research. The main organising effort was concentrated in the commissioning arm, where union presence was weak. The first step involved a mapping and cleansing exercise, whereby one activist ensured that the electronic membership database was correct. Two activists were then charged with visiting workplaces and making contacts with members and non-members by conducting one-to-one conversations – the primary focus of these encounters was on the individual's interests and needs as opposed to workplace issues.

Furthermore, recruitment was not made an explicit part of any dialogue with non-members. Both activists received time-off from the employer, paid for by the union, in order to conduct this activity. Other activists supported the project via regular steering group meetings and assisting with the relational encounters in their own workplaces. The pilot was planned to run from December 2009 to January 2011.

The methodology comprised three main elements. Firstly, prior to the start of the project, in-depth interviews were conducted with all branch officers and activists available at the time. In total, six interviews were conducted, including the Branch Secretary, Branch Chair, PCT shop steward and the two activists who were primarily responsible for making contact with employees and members. In addition, a regional officer with responsibility for organising was interviewed. These were conducted towards the end of 2009. The interviews examined the challenges and issues facing the branch in recruiting new members and building workplace organisation. They also explored the views of activists about the potential of a relational approach.

Secondly, one of the researchers who held a position within the same branch (but was not directly involved in the initiative) monitored the development of the initiative by attending regular branch and other meetings at which the progress of the initiative was discussed. Notes and minutes of these meetings were collected and analysed.

Finally, a second round of eight interviews were held at the end of 2010 and beginning of 2011. All those interviewed in the first stage were re-interviewed with the exception of the regional officer who was no longer involved with the initiative. Furthermore, interviews were conducted with the Branch Treasurer, an additional shop steward who covered the provider wing of the PCT (who had been unavailable in the first round) and a new steward recruited through the organising initiative. These interviews discussed the impact of the strategy in terms of recruitment, organisation and for the individuals involved. They also looked at the

changing context within which the initiative had been undertaken and some of the problems and difficulties encountered. Interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and were recorded and transcribed. While the total number of interviews (14) is admittedly limited, the data collected provides a comprehensive examination of the attitudes and experiences of branch activists.

Although a before and after survey of views and attitudes of rank and file members would have provided useful additional data, this was not done for two reasons. Firstly, given the context at the time of the research, it was felt that a survey of members would be unlikely to achieve a meaningful response rate. Secondly, there was a concern that a survey threatened to cut across attempts to develop personal relationships between the Branch and individual members. Nonetheless, this inevitably means that the analysis below relies on the perceptions of branch activists as to the impact of the initiative and any conclusions drawn need to be considered with this in mind.

Findings

i) The organising context – the need for a new approach?

The PCT staff were located at five main sites, with a significant number working in the community, spread across local clinics and health centres. While density had remained stable in recent years at around 16% (not including other unions such as UNITE, GMB and RCN), this masked a significant turnover of members. Notably, the union only had workplace activists in two locations and consequently, the branch accepted that many workers would never come into contact with a representative.

Importantly, interviews with respondents before the initiative painted a picture of activity that evoked Jarley's description of hollowed out union organisation. Branch activists formed a

closely knit and cohesive group with strong personal social ties, partly forged through their union work and the common pressures that they experienced. But, this did not extend to the wider membership which had become increasingly passive in recent years with very little participation in the day-today life and work of the union.

Contact with members was generally limited to the provision of advice and support when members experienced problems at work. Moreover, the service provided was inevitably distant in that the steward or representative would not normally know the member concerned. This could cause significant problems. One respondent described a case where a decision was made by the union (in conjunction with its solicitors) not to support a legal action on behalf of a member who then became angry and abusive:

'he's disgusted ... he doesn't feel the level of service that he's getting ... He's paid his money and that's what he expects ... He's having a right go at me ... I just feel really sorry for the guy that he thinks that he is part of this massive trade union movement and that he's been let down by not only the trade union but also let down by the union itself, by the solicitors.'

This was a common experience among representatives who pointed out that disgruntled members could also have a negative impact on their work-mates' attitudes towards the union, making recruitment and retention difficult. However, it was due to such experiences that respondents felt that there was a need to try to rebuild relations between branch officers and members. In short, such situations could be managed more effectively where the member knows and trusts the representative that they are dealing with:

'If he knew me a bit more personally and knew how hard and how much effort that I put into this job then maybe he wouldn't have shouted at me ...'

For members, the union was a vital source of support in times of trouble – for representation in grievance and disciplinary cases or if facing the threat of redundancy (see Waddington and Whitston, 1997; Waddington and Kerr, 1999). However, this also meant that engagement with the union invariably had negative connotations. A more relational approach was seen as a way of changing this dynamic:

'I really think we need to get this barrier down where the union's only involved if there's a problem ... as soon as you go in and you mention union the hairs on the back of their neck stand up don't they and go, oh God, what's going on? ... we're not just here to fight battles; we're here to make sure everything's running alright for you but we're also here as a mate ...'

The provision of services was not only difficult to sustain but also tended to squeeze out recruitment or organising activities (Heery and Simms, 2008; Waddington and Kerr, 2009). This was further exacerbated by a lack of facility time which was generally limited to representation in disciplinary and grievance cases. Interestingly, our findings did not suggest that the branch was wedded to service provision (Fletcher and Hurd, 1998; Hurd, 2004). In fact they were conscious of the need to shift their orientation away from servicing; nonetheless they clearly felt locked into providing individual case representation.

This also led to antipathy to previous union attempts to boost organising and what was seen as pressure from the regional and national union to recruit:

'Every time you speak to anybody from a management point of view in the union, or your regional officers, all they ever say is, recruit, recruit, recruit ...'

This was seen as counterproductive, building expectations that could not be met, making retention of new members difficult, and giving existing activists unsustainable caseloads.

These circumstances made it difficult to attract new activists into representative roles and reinforced a sense that the regional and national union's notion of organising did not take into account the reality of supporting members at a local level.

For this reason, the emphasis in the proposed project on building relationships first, on which sustainable 'recruitment' could subsequently be built, was attractive to branch officers:

'... it's not just about going in and recruiting, you're going in and you're building some relationships up, putting names to faces, letting people see who their reps are, getting to know them on a personal basis ...'

Furthermore, there was a belief that if the project was successful, rank and file members could become more empowered and willing to raise and deal with issues directly. In this way, the burden on a small number of activists to 'service' the membership would be reduced:

'the union has got this dilemma ... which is how can we actually move away from an expectation that the union just services people's demands so that people are a little bit more empowered ... It takes a bit of heat off the Shop Stewards and that's why they're keen on these things like this relational model because I suppose the idea would be that if people do feel more connected to the union, they don't think the union is something else. They see the unions as us ... That in itself could energise people to do more sticking up for themselves ...'

Researchers have argued that local branches can represent a cultural block to union organising, due partly to perceived tensions with service provision and also the threat posed to existing positions of power and influence by the development of new activists (Hurd 2004).

However, the branch in this study welcomed an approach which they saw as a way of changing the dynamic of service and support in which they were increasingly trapped.

ii) The Relational Approach – ‘Just Doing What We Used to Do’?

Rather than a radical departure, respondents viewed the ‘relational model’ as something of a return to ‘basics’ involving a more traditional personal approach to union members. Importantly, this relational organising was seen to fit with the disposition and skills of those involved. The involvement of existing activists was crucial to the potential success of the project. Their local knowledge and work experiences offering significant advantages over full time organisers or union officers. For respondents, while the original idea had been initiated at the ‘top’ of the union, its implementation reflected grass-roots concerns:

‘I don’t see the point of a regional officer going around going, oh hello, I’m the Regional Officer of UNISON. It’s got to be about people in the work places who are local, who know the knowledge, who know the managers, who know the systems, who know when the clinics are busy and when they’re not busy, who can get the time at night when it’s appropriate to go in and when it’s not appropriate ...’

In addition, respondents appreciated the ‘relational model’ as an alternative to organising approaches which tended to emphasise conflictual issues. This was partly expressed as a desire to portray trade union involvement in a ‘positive’ light but also because they felt that the stereotypical view of trade unions as militant and confrontational was a barrier to recruitment:

‘... sadly, people can only see confrontational issues where unions are concerned and that is what’s portrayed through the media and obviously through the Thatcher

years, and we still see these visuals on the TV about the miners' strike and it's all confrontational'.

Furthermore, this tied into the notion of partnership working within the NHS which for all respondents was an inevitable and immovable component of the local industrial relations environment. For some, this was a reflection of reduced union power, with partnership a necessity to protect members' interests:

'... we haven't got the clout that we had previously So it's all about working in partnership with the PCT to preserve as many jobs and terms and conditions as possible but being realistic because there's only a finite amount of money to actually go round.'

While representatives were fully prepared to challenge management over collective and individual issues, it was argued that partnership working had helped to sustain union organisation in terms of facility time and in building acceptance that there was a need for more stewards. Importantly, the fact that two existing branch activists had been seconded to carry out the project gave them space away from the day-to-day demands for member support and representation:

'I suppose that's where we've had a good working relationship, industrial relations. We've not ... had a lot of problems. We've had good partnership working with the organisation in the community. We always have had. And I suppose that has helped in some way.'

Nonetheless, workplace partnership within the PCT was under strain as a result of on-going NHS restructuring, widespread redundancies and the introduction of the Health and Social Care Act. In this context, it was difficult to disentangle the relational goals of the organising

campaign from members' expectations regarding representation and support – hence activists could not escape the logic of service provision. Consequently, the intended focus of conversations on 'people' rather than 'issues' was difficult to sustain as some members inevitably wanted to discuss problems, seeking advice and support.

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The turbulent environment not only deepened the need of members for support but placed an added strain on the branch as two experienced activists decided to take early retirement. Branch activists were increasingly wrapped up in case-work and negotiations with the employer as they sought to defend changes to terms and conditions and threats to jobs. Therefore, trying to take a more relational approach was a luxury:

'I think people just want their problems resolved and I don't think it's an appropriate situation where relationships can be built up and I think it's a lot to ask.'

Against this backdrop, the results of the relational organising initiative were mixed. Over the lifetime of the project, respondents reported a significant increase in membership. However, it was impossible to distinguish the effects of more intense organising activity from the impact of workers seeking the protection of union membership in the context of cost saving and re-organisation.

Respondents also found that workplace 'issues' were unavoidable as these defined reasons for becoming involved with the union. Organisers explained that while they went into workplaces with the intention of 'getting to know' staff, as soon as people realised that they were union representatives they wanted to discuss problems. Non-members generally assumed the union was at their workplace to recruit:

'As soon as we said we were UNISON reps. people assumed we were doing a recruitment exercise until we told them, no, we're here for you to get to know us ... they were asking us for application forms so we're not going to say, well no ...'

Consequently, as the project developed, a hybrid approach was adopted whereby the initial contact more closely resembled traditional organising. For example, the union would set up a table or a stall in a workplace, arrange meetings and/or introduce themselves to staff in canteens and rest areas. Furthermore, accounts of recruitment successes often reflected the importance of being seen to have an impact on local issues concerning members. These 'wins' on relatively simple issues developed trust in the union, forming the basis to create relational ties with individuals or groups of members. A good example was provided by one respondent who had recruited thirty new members as a result of resolving one member's problem:

'It was over a parking permit ... and before I left that was sorted so a couple of the girls then said "Can I have a form?"... it was just a case of me picking up the phone and saying, this girl's been waiting for this parking permit and nearly got a ticket the other day, is there anything we can do? And she said I haven't received her form and I just gave her all the details over the phone there and then and she said tell her I'll apply for it today and I'll email her as soon as it's here ... by sorting hers out I then sorted out others...It was a little stupid squabble and it just made everybody feel great.'

This showed that while a focus on people was important, building relationships was inevitably intertwined with service and support. Trust and a sense of mutuality were established by helping members in person as opposed to through a solicitor or at the end of a telephone. Thus, in some respects the value of a relational approach lay in the way it

shaped and informed union representation and organising as opposed to being an organising strategy in itself.

Respondents argued that despite the difficulties outlined above, the initiative had a positive impact and had strengthened branch organisation. Most notably, the project had directly resulted in the recruitment of a new representative in a workplace previously lacking a steward, increasing the visibility of the union and leading to increased recruitment of members:

‘She’s got an enthusiasm and drive and ... been able to organise in her workplace very well. So you can see that in her particular area in one of the commissioning buildings that she has driven membership up ... But it’s also because she’s now getting herself known and publicising herself within the workplace that ... new members have been recruited and people now have a point that they know that they’ve got somebody onsite. And I think that’s had a major influence in that building.’

Such a modest achievement was very significant in a context where there had been little success in developing new representatives. Interestingly, the new steward had not been a union member before meeting one of the relational organisers. In addition, workplace contacts were established which were subsequently used to successfully recruit ‘pensions champions’ as part of the pensions campaign of 2011/12.

iii) Implications for union organising – people power?

It is important to acknowledge that while the union’s approach claimed to be modelled on the Harvard experience, there were a number of crucial differences which arguably explain some of the difficulties encountered. Firstly, while the PCT branch initially attempted to

exclude issues from conversations, the Harvard organising campaign revolved around fundamental concerns over respect and equality. Secondly, a crucial ingredient of the Harvard 'model' was the development of an approach to industrial issues which emphasised collaboration and workplace justice. For example, this provided the space for a rejection of adversarial grievance handling and the promotion of alternative dispute resolution processes. However, the branch in our study had no choice but to work within existing procedural approaches, which generated a demand for servicing. More broadly, Harvard was a 'greenfield' organising site as opposed to the PCT in which there was an existing and, in some areas, relatively strong, union presence. While this could be seen as an advantage it undoubtedly limited the extent to which a new agenda could be developed.

Despite this, the emphasis on relationship building resonated with respondents in part due to the nature of their work within the PCT and consequently the 'interpersonal' attributes of branch activists. The relational dimension was compatible with the notion of nursing and other healthcare jobs as caring professions and with the degree of community involvement, both directly and indirectly involved in the work of the representatives:

'... the majority of people who work in the NHS work in the NHS because there's something inside them that wants to give to others ... we want services to be the best for our communities, for me when I get older; for me when I went to the hospital the other week ... service protection is important and a link across should be made.'

However, this was not simply a way of reducing the burden of individual representation or of building friendships. Importantly, the project reinforced the need for stronger links between the branch and its members in order to build support and mobilise members around broader collective issues (Hyman, 2007). For example, organising and taking part in demonstrations could help to build relationships between members:

'I mean if there was an issue going on and you needed the back-up of the membership to support you, it's got to be to our advantage if you actually know who you're speaking to and what you're speaking about and that they see that you're there in the work places other than you just get a phone call and because of terms and conditions we expect you to start looking at taking some industrial action.'

It is also important to consider the broader impact of the initiative. Firstly, respondents argued that it had begun, albeit in a small way, to re-shape relationships between the branch and the existing membership. It encouraged engagement across a broader range of topics and provided a human face to the union:

'But it's not just about recruiting members; I think it's actually about making members feel that they are part of something because we can recruit members and not even speak to them or see them ever again because the union subs are paid through the banks'

Respondents argued that many members and potential members with whom they had had conversations had welcomed the fact that the union wanted to get to know them as opposed to simply trying to recruit them:

'And people see that ... this person isn't just after my money; they're after, you know, some sort of an encounter with me, do you know what I mean? And at the very least what you've done is you've opened up yourself to that so they get to know you'

While the role of representatives in providing a service through individual representation remained a dominant feature of branch life, there was a sense that the initiative had started to challenge the detached dependence that had previously characterised union-member relationships.

Secondly, involvement in the project had a positive impact on the two organisers involved. Both claimed that it had increased their confidence and in one case had led to the person concerned extending and developing their role within the branch:

‘... it did give you confidence to go out and meet these people. You didn’t know what they were going to say to you sometimes but it does boost your confidence.’

Finally, their involvement with the relational model had re-orientated the attitudes and approach of activists within the branch. There was a realisation that there was a need to try and reconnect with members at a social level:

‘You’ve got to be a person who they can trust, who can empathise as well as be straight with somebody.’

There was a sense that this allowed them to rediscover the sense of collectivity that had underpinned their original motivations to become branch representatives – which in turn was often linked to wider interests in local politics and community activism. The relational approach also made sense because it tapped into the sort of values and skills that were part of their professional role, as nurses for instance.

Furthermore, activists were perhaps more aware that union activities could be a way of forging social ties and bonds. In particular, there was a clear fit between the relational approach and union learning. Engaging with members in terms of their own professional and personal development created a more positive and active relationship between the union and rank and file members. One respondent explained that a member who had been helped to access nurse training was happy to become a union learning representative because of the help she had received:

‘... she’s really, really happy to support the union in that way because she’s seen how the union’s supported her ... once somebody’s been supported through something positive from the union, they then want to get involved and support somebody else.’

In addition, the provision of non-work related courses through union learning provided an environment in which relationships could be formed and the union linked to positive outcomes:

‘... somebody knows that I want to go and do Spanish on a Wednesday and [name] helped me and she’s from the union and she’s sorted that out for me, and her mate’s told her and she’s said, well I’m not in the union, do you think [name] will help me? And she’ll go why don’t you join?’

These different examples of activity arguably illustrate a sense that union involvement reflects a wish to be part of a community. But it is more than simply finding a group of new friends; instead revolving around a desire to improve their own working lives and their workplace.

Discussion and conclusion

Despite the increased emphasis on union organising in the UK, solid and sustainable gains in union activity and influence have been elusive. Although, there have been isolated cases of success, the broader picture implies a movement increasingly tied to recruitment-led approaches to organising (Simms et al., 2013:171) as unions seek to bolster diminishing ranks of members and activists in the face of austerity and radical restructuring, particularly in the public sector.

Godard's (2008) review of the determinants of union formation makes the case for organising initiatives to be tuned into the institutional context. It certainly could be argued that UK NHS provides a conducive setting given lack of employer resistance, ease of access to workplaces and a wide range of organising issues flowing from a radical programme of change and restructuring. Nonetheless, the challenges facing the branch in this study are indicative of a hollowing out of union organisation (Jarley 2005). Even if it is not yet a 'union of strangers', there is certainly evidence that ties between members and between the rank and file and union officers have been weakened. The life of the branch increasingly revolves around individual representation (Dickens, 2012) and officers' time is consumed by case-work, crowding out involvement in broader organising campaigns. Inevitably, therefore, close social ties are developed among activists but are less likely to extend to rank and file members.

The pioneering campaign by the US Harvard Union of Clerical and Technical Workers (Hoerr 1997) offered a radical and distinctive approach which explicitly challenges the passive and dependent nature of union relations described in the findings above. However, replicating this approach within the PCT examined in this research was problematic for a number of reasons. Firstly, building lasting social relationships is a long and slow process. In the case of the Harvard workers, the campaign lasted for 15 years. This also does not sit easily with the demands of UK national unions to demonstrate a return on organising investment.

Secondly, both the relational approach and the preference of activists to develop social ties with members was difficult to sustain within an environment in which members were subject to uncertainty and change, in turn generating further demand for representation. But perhaps most importantly, Harvard activists, working on a blank canvas, were able to shape a new approach which went beyond creating and maintaining personal relationships with new and existing members and developed an industrial agenda informed by feminist principles that

rejected traditional adversarial and 'macho' practices of grievance handling and conflict resolution. Moreover, it embodied a collaborative stance combining avowed support for the organisation within the context of a campaign for workplace justice (see also Reich, 2012).

In contrast, the branch in our research was deeply embedded within a fairly conventional array of processes, structures and orientations. Thus there was no fundamental challenge to the existing industrial relations order. The interpretation of the Harvard 'model' by the branch initially sought to exclude workplace issues from relational encounters, whereas the Harvard campaign itself foregrounded matters of equality and respect. Therefore, there was tension between the softer relational approaches pursued by the PCT branch and traditional representational strategies. As a result attempts to create relationships jarred with the climate of rapid change, uncertainty and discontent.

Nonetheless, it is notable that the attitude of the local branch both before and after the project was extremely positive. This lies in stark contrast to the opposition, suspicion and hostility with which local officials often greet organising initiatives and with which local branches are often stereotyped. That the initiative was developed and implemented by the Branch, using organisers from among its small cadre of activists was undoubtedly important. Here, organising was not being imposed on the branch but relied on the existing social ties and relational skills of those involved.

Unlike previous organising experiences, the Branch did not fear additional demands for member support associated with increased recruitment. Instead, they not only saw a relational approach as a chance to rebuild branch capacity but also as a way of re-kindling collectivity. Importantly, the principles and practices of the relational approach resonated with both activists' sense of collectivism and trade unionism and also their skills and affinities in building relationships routinely exhibited in their occupational roles in healthcare. Furthermore, in an environment dominated by women workers, the preference of activists for

a more relational approach arguably reflects the feminist dimensions of the original Harvard campaign (see also Cunnison 1995, Briskin, 2011a, 2011b).

We do not argue the Harvard experience is a blueprint for union organising and renewal partly because it implies a fundamental shift in the way that unions conduct employment relations, for example by pursuing more collaborative approaches to workplace justice. It is also important to recognise that our assessment of the impact of the project relies on the views of activists as opposed to rank and file members and clearly more research is needed to examine the longer term impact of such initiatives. Nonetheless, our research provides a focus on the organising practices within which relational ties can be built (such as union learning) and underlines the broader importance of trust and reciprocity between activists and members. Furthermore, for the Branch in our research it offered a way of organising that did not contradict the dominant (and in this context) accepted paradigm of partnership and what was perceived as members' lack of appetite for workplace conflict.

It might be argued that a relational approach fails to confront the power relations that are often the focus of issue based organising (see Banks and Metzger, 2005). Certainly it could be difficult to sustain in a political and industrial climate in which anger among public service workers is widespread. However, in our view, this neglects three crucial matters: firstly, unless unions can create social ties with and between members, the trust and solidarity needed to generate bargaining power and therefore influence issues in the workplace will be difficult to find (Hyman, 2007). Secondly, a more relational approach, by broadening the terms of membership encounters beyond the confines of individual issues and terms and conditions involves an engagement with members and non-members in terms of their position within their communities, both at home and work. In this case, that involved notions of public service which fed into wider political awareness over the impact of austerity on jobs, pensions and quality of care. Thirdly, whereas partnership arguably links industrial harmony with economic gains in terms of performance and job security, the Harvard approach was

based on achieving workplace justice in order to maintain harmony and improve the institution. Thus, it potentially offers a more collaborative approach but not one that surrenders control to capital.

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