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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Civil society organisations in and against the state: Advice, advocacy and activism on the margins of the labour market

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Abstract

This article contributes to our understanding of the complex role of civil society organisations (CSOs) in tackling precariousness through advice, advocacy and activism. It draws on qualitative data gathered primarily from two local CSOs in the north of England that help clients navigate a highly flexible labour market and an increasingly punitive welfare system. The findings reveal that in marginalised communities, CSOs compensate for retreating state services by providing clients with individual advice and advocacy, but there is little evidence of the grassroots activism observed in labour CSOs in North America. We argue that the uneven tradition of community organising across cities in the UK combined with the complex dependencies of service-oriented CSOs on state resources has restricted their role to that of labour market intermediaries that serve primarily to integrate clients into low-wage jobs.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Recent literature has drawn attention to the increasingly important role of civil society organisations (CSOs) in protecting against precariousness, exploitation and informality in the labour market (Fine, 2006; Visser, 2017; Williams et al., 2017). In the context of weakened trade

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unions and sustained welfare cuts, CSOs fill in for retrenched state services and diminished access to legal representation by providing crucial advice and advocacy to individual workers and citizens in deprived communities (Griffin, 2020). CSOs also have potentially wider effects by helping set and enforce minimum standards in local labour markets (Lesniewski & Canon, 2016), and building pressure on employers through single-issue campaigns such as the living wage (Luce, 2014). While there is some debate about the potential complementarities and conflicts between CSOs as 'new actors' within industrial relations and more traditional actors such as trade unions (Heery et al., 2012), there is some optimism around the contribution of civil society to a new and dynamic 'regulatory state' built on shared rules and norms as distinct from traditional modes of regulation that rely primarily on state authority (Levi-Faur, 2009; MacKenzie & Martinez Lucio, 2014).

However, there is a risk is that by viewing 'civil governance', 'civil society' or the 'big society' as a coherent system of regulation, we lose sight of the distinct aims of individual CSOs rooted in specific local contexts (which can determine their legal and financial status). In turn, we potentially overstate their ability to scale up activities and build collective efficacy in marginalised communities. For example, in the United States, the decentralised nature of regulation creates scope for activists and campaigners to mobilise around issues specific to particular communities and geographies (Atlas, 2010). At the same time their successes remain highly localised and activists have begun to build broader networks of CSOs across cities (Fine & Gordon, 2010) and have formed pragmatic alliances with other actors such as trade unions in order to scale up their influence (Givan, 2007). Williams et al. (2017) identify four distinct types of CSO, including those that focus on business-focused, rights-based, advocacy and service-oriented forms of 'civil governance'. In practice, these often overlap with some CSOs engaging in various elements of these four categories, but in the UK case, the main focus of CSOs in terms of employment has relate to advocacy and service-oriented approaches (Tapia et al., 2015). In the UK case, the often urgent nature of requests for support from CSOs (e.g., relating to wage theft, social security sanctions and similar individual crises), in addition to their constrained and precarious funding and resources, mean that the more sustained, community-level deep organising assumed in much of the literature on community unionism becomes difficult to sustain.

In the UK, CSOs are more dependent on state funding to pursue national policy objectives (Williams et al., 2017) and cuts to legal aid, constraints on access to employment tribunals and restrictions on political lobbying since 2014 have reduced the role of larger CSOs to largely providing individual services such as advice and advocacy and, in the sphere of employment, a focus on supporting labour market participation rather than challenging the practices of employers and state agencies (Abbott & Williams, 2014). The historically limited engagement of trade unions in community and social organising has also resulted in some tensions between unions and CSOs at both national and local levels around how best to campaign and negotiate with employers over issues such as the living wage (Holgate et al., 2009; Prowse et al., 2017).

This requires us to look closely at the varied aims and capacities of CSOs to achieve specific goals, and how these are framed by the national and local political, legal and labour market context. The empirical contribution of this paper seeks to closely analyse both how such institutional frameworks are embodied at the local level; and the priorities, needs and lived experiences of individuals engaging with the organisations in question. Through 50 interviews with both clients and staff at two CSOs (one engaged in service-oriented work to support those on the margins of the labour market, and another with strong labour movement links and engaged in broader rights-based and advocacy-focused work) in a postindustrial region in the north of England, our research reveals the complex patchwork of actors and organisations that seek to compensate for the decline of collectively

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regulated workplaces and the steady withdrawal of state support. Our findings highlight that many CSOs in a UK context are limited to supporting clients to navigate and cope with, rather than mobilise against, the vagaries of flexible labour markets and an increasingly punitive welfare system. The article is organised as follows. The first section reviews contemporary literature on the emergence of CSOs as a response to labour market restructuring and explores the different roles CSOs can have in the labour market. The next section presents the research methods, followed by the findings and a final discussion and conclusions that identifies the key roles played and the limitations faced by the CSOs analysed.

1.1 | Civil society and the labour market: Mapping the field

In the context of labour market deregulation and institutional fragmentation in liberal market economies, increasing attention has been paid to the role of CSOs as important new actors in systems of labour market regulation (Heery & Frege, 2006; Lesniewski & Canon, 2016; Williams et al., 2017). CSOs are a heterogeneous category that includes community, identity-based, single-issue, campaigning and advocacy organisations that operate at a range of scales from neighbourhoods through to the transnational level (Bartley, 2007; Fine, 2017; Fransen & Burgoon, 2014; Heery et al., 2012). The emergence of CSOs, along with non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and social economy organisations, can be seen as an organic response to the liberalisation of markets under global competitive pressures, the decline of traditional institutions such as labour law and collective bargaining, and the retreat of public services under conditions of sustained austerity (Levi-Faur, 2009; Visser, 2017). Much has been written about the complex and changing relationships between civil society actors and traditional labour market actors such as trade unions in regulating labour markets and protecting the interests of workers (Heery et al., 2012; Holgate et al., 2009; Luce, 2014). In some neighbourhoods Worker Centres have become de facto community unions, particularly where they collect membership dues (Fine, 2006), and some have gone as far as to describe civil society actors as 'alt labour' that are better placed to organise those groups historically overlooked by trade unions such as women, migrants and young workers (Eidelson, 2013).

Depending on the specific national and local context, CSOs can, however, fulfil a number of functions such as advice, advocacy and activism. CSOs such as Worker Centres can educate workers about their rights to minimum wages and social security, as well as their protections against discrimination and mistreatment at work (Visser, 2017). CSOs can also provide legal advocacy to individual workers and may also pursue collective claims-making and publicly shame big businesses over violations of labour laws (Lesniewski & Gleeson, 2022; Theodore et al., 2009). Studies have also shown how CSOs can leverage their knowledge of local labour markets and relationships with inspection agencies to set an effective floor of labour rights; what has been described as grassroots 'regulation from below' (Fine, 2006; Lesniewski & Canon, 2016). In the United States, CSOs have worked with and put pressure on municipal authorities to set local minimum wage rates that exceed the federal level (Fine & Bartley, 2019), and community groups and Worker Centres can also leverage their trusting relationships with vulnerable populations to highlight issues of non-compliance (Cordero-Guzmán, 2015). CSOs have also formed powerful alliances with other grassroots organisations through wider social justice movements such as the living wage and 'Fight for $15' campaigns (Bunyan, 2016; Luce, 2014).

Recent literature has attempted to operationalise and categorise the role (and regulatory reach) of CSOs according to their primary aims and function, and their relationships to other

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state and non-state actors within specific contexts (Abbott, 2006; Burchell & Cook, 2013). For example, in the United States, civil society is often seen as a crucial bulwark against exploitation and precariousness and an important channel of worker voice and advocacy (Meyer, 2017). In contrast in Nordic countries, CSOs can work closely with state agencies to deliver services to marginalised groups such as migrant workers, but at the same time, the expansion of civil society is seen as a potential threat to the principles of welfare universalism and established systems of voluntarist collective bargaining (Bontenbal & Lillie, 2019).

In the UK, Williams et al. (2017) distinguish between four broad types of civil governance that are relevant to protecting the interests of workers: *business-focused; rights-based; advocacy-based*; and *service-oriented*. These four types are shaped by the interactions between the size, resources and legal status of individual CSOs, their reliance on external funds such as grants and contracts, and their relationships with the state. *Business-focused* civil governance involves encouraging businesses to behave responsibly through corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives and accreditation schemes. This approach tends to favour larger charities and civil actors with a national presence that can persuade employers of both the business and ethical case to voluntarily adopt higher standards. However, there are risks of business co-option through CSR policies and self-audit frameworks that businesses voluntarily adopt as a way to pre-empt more binding regulation (Burchell & Cook, 2013). *Rights-based* civil governance typically involves political lobbying for changes in the law and public policy to protect specific vulnerable groups in the labour market. Examples include Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO) who strive for equal economic opportunities, rights, protection and voice particularly for women in informal work, and other organisations focused on the rights of vulnerable workers such as the Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants, Migrant Rights Network and the National Group on Homeworking (Heery et al, 2012: 149) *Advocacy-based* CSOs such as the Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) support individual workers to make them aware of their rights and seek to ensure that these rights are upheld in legal processes and disputes with employers. Unemployed Workers Centres (UWCs) take legal cases on behalf of workers, and their funding relationships with trade unions give them a degree of financial and political independence, but there are just 18 UWCs across England and Wales dealing with caseloads that exceed their capacity and resources (Griffin, 2020). *Service-oriented* CSOs support vulnerable clients to find work through training and employability interventions. This may include job clubs and voluntary return-to-work schemes alongside more targeted projects that seek to support specific groups to integrate into the labour market such as young people, those with disabilities, and prison leavers. A criticism of such approaches is that they seek largely to mould individuals to the needs of employers and the wider labour market and interventions seeking to advance the particular interests of those using such services are therefore less common.

Reviewing data from the UK, Williams et al. (2017) argue that although many civil society actors engage in a range of activities at different levels, *business* and *service-oriented* forms of civil governance predominate. The authors ascribe this to the increasingly hostile political climate around lobbying and activism in the UK since 2010, combined with the dependence of many civil society actors on business consultancy and government contracts for both financial resources and legitimacy. This means that larger CSOs, including historically politically independent actors such as the CAB, are becoming less antagonistic towards state policy (Abbott & Williams, 2014). Given the ongoing tensions around migration in the UK, many CSOs that work with migrants and refugees pragmatically occupy a space of ‘collaborative influencing’ whereby they aim to improve the system without taking an overt political stance

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(Calò et al., 2022). Sustained cuts to government funding also mean that many local organisations struggle to engage in effective political lobbying and advocacy work (Williams et al., 2017), and many legal advice centres have faced funding cuts and closures meaning support, in instances where rights are breached, is minimal (Kirk, 2018).

Evidence from Europe suggests similar complex constraints on the advocacy role of CSOs. Arvidson et al. (2018) find that Swedish CSOs with high dependence on state funding to deliver services are less likely to publicly criticise government agencies and policies; an outcome that is intensified where the political context is antagonistic and the competition between CSOs for government funding is high. Thus, a paradox emerges that where CSOs have fewer political allies, they are more likely to compromise their advocacy role to secure organisational survival, but such a context is where CSOs are most needed to act as a voice for marginalised groups. The somewhat slower, and uneven, development of community organising in the UK has arguably stymied effective bottom-up mobilisations around broader issues of social justice and inequality, particularly outside of London (Holgate et al., 2009). This has arguably resulted in more top-down and less confrontational approaches to labour market campaigns such as the living wage (Bunyan, 2016).

This literature underlines that to understand the agency and regulatory impact of civil society actors we need to situate their specific aims and capacities within their national and local contexts. The agency of CSOs is limited and constrained by wider labour market regulation, and policy paradigms oriented towards supporting increased labour market flexibility and reducing welfare spending. However, despite the constrained financial and political context of the UK, even service-oriented CSOs may provide individuals and groups with the necessary tools (and confidence) to challenge exploitation and arbitrary decision making, both in disputes with employers and increasingly the state, whose punitive approach to welfare conditionality has been successfully challenged (Dwyer et al., 2019). Given the withdrawal of state and voluntary services, the role that smaller CSOs play in supporting clients in bureaucratic and legal processes, making sure they know their rights and entitlements, and preparing them to compete for better jobs in the labour market should not be underestimated (Lesniewski & Gleeson, 2022). Such forms of 'micro-activism' may lack the overtly political agenda and mobilising power of coordinated city campaigns in the United States, but they alert us to a more nuanced and fine-grained appreciation of the role that civil society actors may play in weakly regulated labour markets in helping build both individual and collective worker agency (Griffin, 2020). Clearly, the mapping of the various roles and limits of civil society is critical to understand the changing frontiers in industrial relations (Tapia et al., 2015), and in situating CSOs within an increasingly fluid regulatory state built on a combination of soft and hard regulation (Levi-Faur, 2009). In this article, we seek to explore how local civil society actors in a UK context attempt to protect, and advance, the interests of workers through processes of advice, advocacy and (micro)activism.

2 | RESEARCH METHODS AND CONTEXT

The data analysed in this article are drawn from a wider project (Just Work in Greater Manchester) conducted between 2015 and 2019, involving a broader team of researchers analysing different aspects of work, employment and the labour market in the UK city region of Greater Manchester that has so far amassed 150 interviews in total across more than 40 organisations. The project uses the specific case of Greater Manchester to analyse key

challenges facing many postindustrial cities such as economic restructuring, the loss of relatively stable jobs in manufacturing and heavy industry, along with long-term processes of public service reorganisation and political and policy devolution.

2.1 | Context

The Greater Manchester city region covers 2.7 million people across 10 local authority areas. The economy has been restructured significantly, with the traditional industries of textiles and engineering being progressively replaced by business services, education, health, wider service industries and the 'creative' sector. However, unemployment is slightly higher than the national average and the city covers some of the country's most deprived areas. There is a high prevalence of low-paid, often precarious service sector employment, and the regeneration of the city following deindustrialisation has tended to focus on job creation with job quality and the regulation of work secondary considerations at best. Problems relating to housing, punitive administration of welfare and benefits emanating from the political centre, and precarious work underpins many of the social problems faced within the city including in-work poverty, high levels of homelessness and rising inequality. Political devolution from 2014 has provided a space where consultation with employers, their representative bodies and civil society more broadly, in conjunction with broadly progressive political influences at the regional level, appears to be feeding into decision making within the newly devolved policy arena at the regional level (Haughton et al., 2016), but this is constrained by the national nature of much social, employment and economic policy. Civil society and the local state have been significant actors during the Covid pandemic, as seen with the work of food poverty charities supported by the footballer Marcus Rashford, and with the Greater Manchester mayor Andy Burnham publicly challenging the national government in terms of the effect of lockdown measures and relatively low levels of compensation for those unable to work. Such contestation of the effects of national-level policy demonstrates the considerable energy and activity organised to contest the damaging effects of welfare and labour market policy on the region and those living in it.

2.2 | Data collection and analysis

This article uses 35 interviews with individuals on the margins of employment and the welfare system to identify the role of state agencies and CSOs in the working lives of marginalised workers. The semistructured interviews complement the existing research on the role of CSOs by providing insights into the experiences of users and covering key aspects of their trajectories and working lives, the impact of the abovementioned organisations interventions and support for marginalised workers. Individual participants were accessed mainly through two CSOs that were attempting to mitigate the damage caused by austerity and welfare reform, as well as trying to support job seekers in a highly challenging labour market context. The first CSO is an unemployed and community resource centre (herein referred to as 'The Worker Centre'), which has its origins as a union-sponsored UWC established in the early 1980s to support workers facing job loss and oppose factory closures during a period of rapid deindustrialisation. It has evolved to provide wide-ranging advice on welfare, benefits, housing, and employment rights, but it retains strong links to the labour movement and emphasises 'mutual aid, personal empowerment and practical action' as a means to combat and campaign against poverty.

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Although it is funded largely through local authority grants, the Worker Centre also draws on other charitable donations which have enabled it to retain its broader commitment to social campaigning alongside its support work. The second organisation (herein referred to as 'The Skills Centre') provides 'return to work' services funded partly by local authority grants and partly by a parent organisation that manages social housing across Greater Manchester, providing curriculum vitae(CV) and job interview advice, access to training courses as well as informal emotional support. The Skills Centre does not have any affiliation or links to the labour movement or social campaigns, although its offices located in highly deprived neighbourhoods across Manchester act as important 'community hubs' for marginalised and disempowered local residents. Furthermore, these interviews were complemented by 15 interviews with key actors working within welfare and employment support services, voluntary sector organisations with an employment focus and unions across the city region. These provide rich information about the challenges and limitations faced by these organisations in the context of austerity and precarious labour markets. The interviews have been analysed according to the three main roles (themes) identified for CSOs: advice, advocacy and activism.

2.2.1 | Findings

The complex role of CSOs in tackling precarity in Greater Manchester is analysed twofold. First, by presenting and analysing the specific experiences of clients accessing CSOs, we identify the support offered by CSOs to vulnerable groups in deprived communities, and how such services fill various gaps in state welfare provision. Second, by combining client perspectives with the perspectives of practitioners, volunteers and activists within CSOs, we are able to explore the changing role of CSOs in terms of advice, advocacy and activism.

A common theme identified by staff and volunteers at the CSOs researched was the complex and overlapping needs of vulnerable clients who existed on the margins of the labour market and welfare system. In many cases, clients that sought out advice and support for specific problems such as applying for benefits or finding work would gradually reveal interlinked issues such as rent arrears and addiction, which, in turn, could be the result of an injury at work or arbitrary dismissal which often meant unpaid wages. CSOs were also faced with entrenched problems of physical ill-health, long-term caring responsibilities, social isolation, low confidence and a lack of digital skills which are increasingly essential to deal with the bureaucratic demands of welfare and work. While CSOs performed a crucial role in supporting vulnerable clients, staff and volunteers recognised that the clients 'on the books' were only a small fraction of those in the local area that were in need of advice and advocacy services. Indeed for CSOs to begin working with individual clients, they had to be aware of local services and confident enough to walk through the door in search of help. The results of the interviews are summarised in Table 1 and discussed below.

2.3 | Advice

One of the key challenges identified by the clients of CSOs (and also by staff and volunteers) was where to go for advice on multiple complex welfare, work and social issues. The main point of reference for many clients when dealing with issues of welfare and work was Job Centre Plus (JCP). JCPs are the locally based public-facing offices of the Department for Work and Pensions

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TABLE 1 Main dimensions of action of the Skills' Centre (SC) and the Workers' Centre (WC)

Advice	Advocacy	Activism
– Relaxed atmosphere and open space to talk. – Practical advice and support for job applications and benefits claims (SC). – Assistance with CV writing and interview preparation (SC). – Access to computers and printers. – Informal advice and guidance. – Financial and housing advice.	– Free legal support on financial issues (rent and council tax, debt, etc.) (SC). – Free legal support on employment issues and benefits sanctions (WC).	– Appearance in local media to denounce the effects of welfare sanctions (WC). – Coordination of public protests against austerity and welfare reform (WC). – Limitations due to the 2014 Lobbying Act.

Note: If the CSO is not specified, the type of support is present in both.

Abbreviation: CSO, civil society organisation; CV, curriculum vitae.

Source: Own elaboration based on the interviews with users and managers of the two CSOs.

(DWP) which administers welfare benefits as well as labour market activation programmes. Local JCPs are responsible for assisting clients with 'return to work' activities such as training and work experience, but they also recommend welfare sanctions for those clients that are deemed not to have applied for enough jobs online (up to 5 per day), or who missed appointments. This dual role of support and sanctions unsurprisingly created ambiguous feelings among clients:

> ...the stress that you get off the Job Centre is unbelievable... they're trying to say that they're helping you, but they're not. They're just putting more pressure on you, pressure that you don't need... [Male, 40s]

More broadly, the welfare-to-work system was often experienced as a highly bureaucratic and impersonal 'machine' that arbitrarily applied rules and procedures irrespective of individual circumstances. For example, interviewees stressed that JCP advisors were only interested in the number of job applications completed each day or week, rather than designing tailored packages of support that might help clients find fulfilling and sustainable work. Indebtedness was common among many of our interviewees, and in some cases, this was directly related to either welfare sanctions, or simply the bureaucratic delays in processing claims:

> I'm in a tremendous amount of debt through this [the application process for welfare payments]... Because when you first put it in, you've got to wait two weeks, then your rent (...) They take hundreds of pounds before you even get your first payment. [Male, 50s]

Our interviews highlight the double bind that many job seekers find themselves in whereby they are punished by the welfare system for not moving into work quickly enough while struggling to compete for local job vacancies owing to their age, lack of experience or social circumstances. Experiences of Job Centres (and by extension the state more generally) were

characterised by punishment and sanctions, lack of adequate service provision in terms of training, advice and support, and treatment described as disrespectful and dehumanising.

In this context, both the Skills Centre and the Worker Centre provided a crucial community-building function for isolated and vulnerable clients to develop trust and rapport with staff, volunteers and peers. The relaxed and friendly environment at both the Worker Centre and the Skills Centre stood in stark contrast with the experience of compulsory attendance at appointments at Job Centre Plus:

> .... It's more relaxed here, more...you know, you can talk more openly to staff and they do help you with your job search...it's really good here actually... at the Job Centre...you feel like you are being rushed or watched too much. [Female, 30s]

The pastoral role of staff and volunteers was especially valued by those experiencing mental health issues:

> Some of us do get upset and that sort of thing, I mean I suffer from depression. When I suffer from depression I don't come out for, sometimes a week at a time... cause I just don't feel like chatting to anybody. But the staff in here are always telling you like, just come in if you want a chat, just sit in there and have a brew. [Male, 50s]

The 'bread and butter' activities of both the Worker Centre and the Skills Centre were to provide practical advice and support to clients for job applications and benefits claims, as well as assistance for CV writing and interview preparation. In this regard, they provided some of the services that would have historically been offered by Job Centre Plus. Many clients also needed access to computers and printers, and the informal advice and guidance offered by staff and volunteers. The fact that these resources were available locally was important for many clients who otherwise would have to travel long distances by bus into the city centre:

> .... at home we don't have internet or anything like that...so having somewhere, a job club like this, around here really does help a lot of people because...if you do not do your job search then you get sanctioned, you have no money whatsoever. Which is why it's really good because it's local, it's within walking distance... [Female, aged 19]

The Skills Centre's remit was primarily to support those clients that were looking for work, but invariably this involved a wide range of support and advice activities around employability and job searches, as well as financial and housing advice. The Skills Centre relied on a mixture of funding streams including charitable awards and grants, municipal council funding for specific training and skills projects, and some funding from the parent organisation (a housing association). This meant that while individual staff and volunteers recognised the deleterious effects of austerity on local public services, and the intense pressures being placed on job seekers by the welfare system, the organisation itself remained non-political. Nevertheless, the combination of practical and emotional support was highly valued by clients:

> when I didn't get the position, I didn't come in for two days and it just sent me under to be honest with you, because...I tried so hard, and [anonymised] phoned

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> me and said I've noticed you've not been in (...) and he said please don't go and do this, you are better than that, you've got to pick yourself up and get back on there, or so to speak (...) come in and have a chat. So I came in the next day and spoke with him (...) [He told me] don't let it be ruined just because you didn't get one position, you've just got to keep trying. [Female, 40s]

This highlights the crucial but limited role of CSOs, to an extent supported by the local state, in mitigating some of the damage driven by national-level state policy relating to the nature of the benefits systems and the regulation of work. Such support went beyond practical employment and benefits advice and involved substantive support for the emotional and mental health issues faced by those accessing these services.

2.4 | Advocacy

Historically, those in need of specialist advice and advocacy in relation to work, benefits or housing issues might have approached the Citizen's Advice Bureau, but a reduction in local offices combined with a shift to online services meant that many clients lacked effective representation. The withdrawal of these services combined with cuts to free legal advice and representation meant that those with legitimate legal cases against employers, landlords or even the welfare system were often faced with the prospect of pursuing claims alone, with little or no knowledge of the legal system. Similarly, the limited presence of unions in many industries meant that specialist employment support and representation within the workplace were absent. At both the Worker Centre and the Skills Centre, interviewees highlighted the critical importance of free legal advice relating to financial issues such as rent and council tax arrears or paying credit card bills. The Skills Centre offered weekly 'surgeries' around legal and financial issues, and the Worker Centre offered both legal advice and support for workers to take forward complaints against employers and enforce their employment rights. The latter organisation would in some cases support clients to challenge sanctions imposed by the DWP and Jobcentre Plus, offering support and representation in dealing with creditors, and challenging employers both informally and in some cases through legal support and taking disputes to tribunals. Cases of unpaid wages were increasing and the centre had supported clients in challenging employers to recover what they were owed. The capacity of the Worker Centre to take on such work was limited by funding, but they were determined to challenge rather than simply mitigate the many problems faced by those on the margins of the labour market and the benefits system.

According to a CAB volunteer not all claimants (even with the support of CSOs) would feel confident about entering into a formal legal process such as an employment tribunal:

> When I started you could take a case to an employment tribunal if you had a reasonably good idea that you stood a chance of winning and you could represent yourself. But over the years employment tribunals have become legalistic...[our clients] put a claim in and then they find that the other side is going to be represented by a barrister. They immediately will drop the case because of the fear...they don't feel like being cross-examined by someone whose job it is to bring them to tears

Even if a claimant was successful at the tribunal in many cases, this often did not result in financial compensation as employers sometimes refused to pay, or more commonly declared themselves bankrupt owing money to both employees and creditors. It appears that while staff and volunteers within CSOs could be powerful advocates for clients, a great deal hinged on the determination of clients to pursue formal legal challenges in a context of a weakly regulated labour market, a punitive benefits system and highly asymmetric power relations.

2.5 | Activism

The situation since 2010 has become particularly challenging for CSOs in the UK. On the one hand, the retreat of state provision means municipal councils have become increasingly reliant on the voluntary sector to deliver support services, but on the other hand deep and sustained cuts to public budgets have severely reduced the overall resources available for deprived communities. For some CSOs this marriage of convenience had brought about positive changes, and increasing overlaps with the state in a context of austerity and retrenchment had, perhaps ironically, strengthened their institutional position:

> the ironic thing is that austerity and massive cuts to our local authorities, and other public institutions, has caused them to really rethink what they're doing and, in a bizarre way, it's been a positive thing. It's done huge damage to people obviously, but...the relationship that we now have with the public sector particularly, has been transformed. [Manager, regional CSO association]

In contrast, an experienced manager from the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS) recognised the broader threat to independent voices resulting from sustained downward pressure on public budgets:

> ACAS was always very, very independent...and there is absolutely no doubt at all that over the last ten years that has become less and less so...whilst it's not directly managed by the state, the state actively influences it's activities by managing its budget... (ACAS regional manager)

Most individual CSOs reported that they were ‘at capacity’ and did not have the resources for active outreach work. Furthermore, the historical funding for the projects that had helped build broader networks with other CSOs and community groups disappeared after 2010. Nevertheless, the recurring challenges of precarious work and welfare cuts were increasingly the focus of public and community campaigning activity across the local area. Unite the union had established community branches and had a significant unwaged membership engaged in grassroots campaigning against centralised welfare cuts. However, several union interviewees reported that their main focus was on addressing myriad workplace problems and casework on behalf of current members, leaving them with little capacity to engage more widely with community issues which effectively put the onus back on CSOs to fill gaps.

A particular challenge for CSOs in the UK in this respect is that organisations with charitable status cannot pursue a ‘political’ cause, and the 2014 Lobbying Act was introduced to restrict the political campaigning of NGOs (especially trade unions). Whereas the Skills Centre was apolitical and did not engage in campaigning, the strong historical connections of the

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Worker Centre to the labour movement gave it a more *activist orientation* in respect of issues of fairness, equality and justice in the labour market. Staff and volunteers within the Worker Centre vividly recalled the decimation of the local economy and public services during an extended period of Conservative rule in the 1980s and saw clear parallels with the post-financial crisis programme of welfare cuts and labour market deregulation. Staff within the centre had regularly appeared in local media to highlight the effects of welfare sanctions and coordinated public protests against welfare cuts. In view of the various cuts to the social safety net for vulnerable workers and clients, organisations such as the Worker Centre were a crucial last defence against exploitation and wage theft, and staff and volunteers were proud of their successful 'micro-activism' (Griffin, 2020) in challenging employers and shaming them into making reparations:

> …we still do cases and staggeringly we win a lot and I think the reason we win them is that the employers…are so ashamed of what they have done to people… (Worker Centre Manager)

Beyond rogue employers, an increasingly important form of microactivism among many of the CSOs was challenging benefit sanctions and the withdrawal of enhanced disability payments since 2010. It has been estimated that in 2015 close to 60% of all appeals against sanctions handed down by the DWP were successful and a local law centre in London achieved a 100% success rate on appeal[1]. Citizen's Advice had supported clients to successfully overturn sanctions, and the Worker Centre had even taken the DWP to the European Court of Human Rights. However, with few paid staff and many volunteers close to retirement the ability of small, and politically isolated, CSOs to successfully campaign against and challenge structural issues in the welfare system and labour market is clearly quite limited given the national character of much social and employment policy and the sheer extent of the social and employment problems such policy has fostered.

3 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION—CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS (RE)STITCHING THE SOCIAL FABRIC?

The findings from the research underpinning this paper demonstrate a significant and important role for CSOs in various forms in mitigating and in some cases challenging problems faced by workers deriving from the benefits system, the practices of employers and more individualised issues for which support from healthcare and other public services were increasingly limited. The workers interviewed for this study faced a wide range of problems relating to work, the benefits system and associated organisations, employer strategies oriented around precarious work, and myriad health and social issues which a decade of austerity had made intensely difficult for individuals to address. CSOs played a crucial role in providing advice and support to workers dealing with issues arising from the coercive policies and practices of state institutions including the DWP and lack of support from local authorities, healthcare services and similar (Redman, 2021). In some cases, this translated from advice and dealing with the outcomes of problems to advocacy and more assertive, rights-based

[1]http://data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/committeeevidence.svc/evidencedocument/work-and-pensions-committee/benefit-delivery/written/20918.html (Accessed January 19, 2021).

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approaches. This was most notable with issues faced at work and in regard to work-related benefits, and more feasible in the Worker Centre case where, given its origins in the labour movement, there was more of an organic link to notions of worker representation, challenging the practices of management within employers and the contestation of decisions deriving from state bureaucracies. More 'activist' focused approaches, entailing CSOs engaging more politically to challenge social policy, the outcomes of employment regulation, and state agencies perpetuating the problems faced by the workers interviewed in this research were, however, constrained, especially in the Skills Centre case. The reliance on state support, legal pressures concerning the political 'neutrality' of CSOs and limited capacity being focused on the immediate material problems faced by those accessing their services militated against such an organisation engaging in the more activist-oriented approaches that have been highlighted in examples such as worker centres in the United States (Cordero-Guzmán, 2015; Fine, 2006; Lesniewski & Canon, 2016; Theodore et al., 2009; Visser, 2017) and in grassroots citizens movements elsewhere (Tapia et al., 2015). The main reasons why we are less likely to see such forms of activism and mobilisation centred on CSOs in the British context relates to the reliance on state support and the wider legal context preventing such organisations from acting in ways deemed 'political', combined with the relatively patchy tradition of community organising in the UK and the sheer scale of problems faced by vulnerable workers on the margins of the labour market. These factors severely limit the capacity of CSOs to effectively contest and challenge systemic problems.

CSO engagement with community organising, mobilisation and challenging the problems created by precarious employment practices and the benefits system is more feasible when such organisations have institutional linkages to more 'traditional' labour movement networks but again this is constrained by a degree of reliance on the state for funding in the form of legal aid and similar. Notably, in the US examples of worker centres and 'alt-labor' (Eidelson, 2013) that have been highlighted elsewhere, the substitution effect of worker centres mobilising within spaces that have been vacated by unions themselves has led to a degree of counter-mobilisation by political actors of the right, creating further challenges and constraints on CSOs acting in a more radical and assertive fashion. The integrated and overlapping nature of the state and civil society (e.g., Gramsci, 1971; Jessop, 2020) creates institutional forms which partly mitigate the problems faced by those on the margins of the labour market, but such a role is beset by contradictions as many of these problems are essentially caused or driven by other state agencies and state preferences in terms of flexible, weakly regulated labour markets. This resonates with longer standing tensions identified by critical actors within the public sector on their position 'in and against the state' (LEWRG, 1979). The atomised and constrained nature of CSOs arguably requires stronger levels of coordination within civil society itself and a means of addressing the often artificial divisions between civil society on the one hand and the labour movement on the other as a basis for challenging labour market and welfare policy in a less piecemeal fashion. Even in the United States where worker centres are seen as a crucial mechanism through which workers seek individual and collective legal redress 'their claims-making interventions are not sufficient to achieve the necessary change in industries where workplace violations have become hardwired into the business model' (Lesniewski & Gleeson, 2022, p. 14).

These tensions raise wider questions in regard to political devolution in a city region such as Greater Manchester. While much has been said about the potentially innovative developments in terms of social protection and support for vulnerable workers in devolved political contexts involving collaboration between state actors and civil society, much of this innovative activity

has sought to mitigate the damaging effects of policy deriving from the state at the central or national level, with punitive approaches to welfare entitlement and weakly regulated, precarious employment relationships dominating much of the policy space and creating problems that other parts of the state and CSOs are then obliged to address.

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