

What collaborative lessons can be learnt from the recent Polish migration? The trade union story

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The May 2004 accession of the Central and Eastern European countries (termed the A8s) proved an important and significant period for testing progressive trade union strategies. Trade unions of course offer social justice to those who need it most. But this has been measured in the past when they have been slow to respond to new BME communities (Perrett, 2007; Fitzgerald and Stirling, 2004; Wrench, 2000). Although, given the TUC support for the new European migration it might be expected that a more progressive inclusive approach would now be shown. Further, there were also early indications that a less workplace centred, inclusive approach was now beginning to be recognised, an example being the London Living Wage Campaign (Kloosterboer and Piet Göbbels, 2005). This latter engagement involved trade unions in collaborations with groups who they had not always seen as compatible.

Given the above the recent Polish migration offers an opportunity to begin to analyse trade union responses, approaches and strategies. It is worth pointing out that whatever the current situation of Polish migrant workers with regard to scope and extent in the labour market this is in many ways now not relevant. This bold statement is based on three assertions, each of which is positioned within a context of near crisis. The first is historical, I would argue that much of what occurred in the initial stages of the Polish migration is now 'historical' and is unlikely to occur again. Thus the initial migration was not only unprecedented it also provided an opportune period for trade unions to begin, extend or indeed cultivate the external workplace initiatives that had been operating at the time. The second relates to a longer term challenge which is firmly fixed within the context of an evolving 'neo-liberal' labour market. In short the changing nature of the employment relationship means that unions have no option but to effectively develop means to recruit and organise a growing number of fragmented groups of workers outside of the workplace. Parallel to this is the need to identify and then effectively negotiate with the actual employer. Lastly and possibly most significantly the future will mean a substantial demise of the state as an employer. Thus the bedrock of trade unionism is now under unprecedented threat. Again the challenge is how to maintain contact and sustain organisation with potentially fragmented groups of works and employers.

Overall then the recent Polish migration gives us an insight into how trade unions have operated when faced with a dramatic crisis. This paper is very much a discussion piece and is as yet under developed. But it does argue that many trade unions and their representatives were willing to engage with this challenge and collaborate with those who they would not normally work with at a time of need. However, the question becomes how many of these linkages were short-term and what is currently in place to reinvigorate and learn from collaborative engagements.

Polish Migrant Workers and UK Trade Unions

Before discussing the trade union response to new Polish migrants and the path taken by UK trade unions, it is worth reminding ourselves of the past reaction of UK trade unions to new migrants. Wrench (2000, 2004) discusses this in some detail, including noting that ex-Polish servicemen were recruited following the Second World War but

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under strict TUC (The UK trade union federation) guidelines. However, the main bulk of engagement here was with ex-colonial mainly black workers who were sometimes excluded from union membership and openly discriminated against. Although Castles and Kosack (1973) do note some divergent responses to migrant workers at workplace level including some active recruitment drives using leaflets in other languages. Overall though there was a negative response to new migrants, until the introduction of trade union anti-racist education and initiatives to support black and new migrant workers. Thus moving into more recent times unions were more positive towards BME members at a national level. Although, what must be considered is that whilst the national trade union response evolved a more complex situation existed at the workplace where some anti migrant attitudes remained (see Jefferys and Ouali, 2007). Therefore as Penninx and Roosblad (2000) remind us it is not just that trade unions nationally should support or not oppose migrants introduction into a national labour market. It is more that they are willing to include these workers into membership and indeed into organisational structures.

The early Polish migration

Thus entering the period of the new Polish migration of 2004 it is not surprising to report that UK trade unions at a national level supported the entry of Polish workers into the UK labour market through policy documents, statements and some initiatives. Indeed there was already underway, following the death of Chinese migrant workers, a national and sector campaign to introduce the Gangmasters Act 2004. This would make it illegal to operate a business that supplied labour, often mostly migrant, without a licence in the agriculture, food processing and packaging sectors. The trade unions, in particular the T&G, were at the forefront of this successful campaign. Following the A8 accession at a regional level, trade unions, and in particular the regional divisions of the TUC, supported new migrants through a number of policy and campaign initiatives (see Fitzgerald and Hardy, 2010).

Policy and campaign initiatives often also supported already emerging local ad hoc meetings and activities which were jointly organised by trade unions, local government, community activists and NGOs. These also involved business, and other government services. Here advice and information were provided to new Polish migrants with regard to housing, social benefits, wages, bank accounts etc. (see Fitzgerald, 2008)

Some indications of why inclusion was chosen

The inclusionary support given by trade unions at a national level was based on a number of factors. First, as indicated it was not surprising given a more open acceptance of migration in a multicultural UK. Second, the UK had a number of skill shortages and new migrants were not seen as displacing indigenous workers. Indeed it was estimated that a manageable number of A8 workers would come to the UK (Dustman et al., 2003). Third, Fitzgerald and Hardy (2010: 137) report a more open union approach to new migrants given that these were European and of course white. However, by 2006 both the scale and scope of the accession migration were believed to be unprecedented, affecting most areas of the labour market, with Poles the largest single national group (Salt and Millar, 2006). This meant that most UK organisations were ill-prepared to deal with new Polish migrants. The overwhelming response was what can best be described as crisis management, so for trade unions when they encountered Poles there were questions and needs outside of their main collective bargaining duties. So this necessitated involvement in collaborations with organisations that they would not normally deal, hence as noted above the large number of local ad hoc meetings and

activities (Fitzgerald, 2008). There were in essence a number of ‘marriages of convenience’ to deal with and support Polish workers and families in the community. It should also be pointed out that support was also provided through more structured strategies such as the union learning agenda (see Fitzgerald and Hardy, 2010).

The situation for Polish workers and some examples of initiatives

For a large number of Polish workers the early migration meant suffering quite horrendous conditions both in the workplace and in the community. This included unpaid wages, poor working conditions, poor housing and indeed destitution, as well as reported slave and forced labour (see Fitzgerald, 2006; Carby-Hall, 2007; and Craig et al., 2007). This situation did improve due to the assistance provided by trade unions and NGOs (including the long standing ZPWB²) and due to the flow of a growing amount of targeted Polish language information (see Fitzgerald, 2008). New Polish communities and their networks also began to form which brought together sometimes dispersed migrants. This included a growing network of Polish language, Polish administered community websites (see Fitzgerald et al., 2012) and the rise of Polish community associations. Activity here was often based around Polish cafes, pubs and shops that had begun to be opened in town and cities throughout the UK. Trade unions and other organisations did support some of these developments and worked with newly emerging Polish community activists.

However, as much of the above went on outside of the control or boundaries of trade unions they found it difficult to sustain their engagement with new Polish communities. This is not to say that there was not, and is not, community organising by trade unions. Important examples include the union learning agenda, which was government funded and provided organising opportunities for unions. This occurred through the provision of learning opportunities for Polish and other migrant workers in the workplace and community (for further critical discussions see Perrett et al., 2011). Fitzgerald (2009) also gives an account of union Polish community engagement through the church and other community spaces. Although, he notes that unions often found it difficult to support initiatives without significant membership gain.

Unfortunately, trade unions are still very much focused on the workplace and even though community initiatives such as the London Living Wage Campaign have had support from the trade unions; they still rely on the energy and determination of migrant communities and their activists. Finally, trade unions have employed and supported new Polish trade union officials. The GMB also provided a separate Polish branch (the member level democratic structure of a UK trade union) which was established in a learning and organising centre in Southampton (Branch M-48). This branch had Polish elected officials and was conducted in Polish which allowed people to communicate effectively and to gain the confidence to engage in debate. Meetings attracted large numbers of Polish workers from the South Coast area. The branch though was only a ‘holding’ branch which meant that it would close at some point or merge with another branch. It now seems that this point is near as it currently has no branch secretary and meetings are not occurring. Again whilst these approaches were inclusionary Jefferys and Ouali (2007: 416) warn against assimilation that supports new migrants at a price. What they mean by this is that new migrants have to accept the prevailing union bargaining and group priorities rather than these changing to take account of racist social injustice.

² The ZPWB is the Federation of Poles in Great Britain.

The collaborative lessons of Polish engagement

It is argued here that inclusion has been high on many unions agendas meaning that approaches to Polish migrants have not only been in the workplace but also been extended beyond. But what of collaboration, well this can be viewed in two interlinked ways. Firstly, with regard to Polish community organisations and activists, this in the north of England, has been evident but also piecemeal. It seems that it has often not surprisingly relied on not only limited funding but also the drive, determination and leadership of representatives from both trade unions and the Polish community. Secondly and associated to this leadership role have been organisational engagements involving trade unions in wider alliances with NGOs and businesses. This though it is argued has often not been of a considered strategic nature but more of a crisis nature. So in essence marriages of convenience, which takes us back to their disjointed nature. For example Perrett et al. (2011) note with the trade union learning agenda that a marketised logic is evident. This has been exacerbated by the lack of stable union community structures. So internally trade union learning may have received substantial investment but this is focused on particular projects causing problems of project linkage. Which overall '*...appears to create complex and internally competitive environments between unions and even their subsections*' (ibid.: 13). Fitzgerald (2008) points to a number of particular projects that go wider than the learning agenda but as with Perrett et al. (2011) he identifies the need for a more concerted strategic approach which is based in and has regard to the community.

One thing, though, that unions can do is effectively disseminate learning from these projects and identify the strengths and weaknesses of approaches. This will have of course begun but whether this has been done within a non-competitive apolitical environment is not known. If the project management literature, where collaboration on short term projects dominates, is consulted this identifies that organisations must learn both from the '*...general processes of successful collaboration and about the specific characteristics of ... partners*' (Leufkens and Noorderhaven, 2011; Inkpen and Tsang, 2007). Also important is that when collaborating those involved are aware of the latent social dilemma that exists (Dawes, 1980). Here the concern is that collaborators will choose short-term more competitive gains rather than the opportunities offered by longer term engagement. So the argument here would be that extended union networks into communities as argued for by numerous academics must be supported from the core of union policy. Thus as with the initial Polish migration unions have to go back to asking 'what can we do and how'. Given what has occurred and what will continue with public sector funding perhaps this can be staffed by unemployed trade union activists. With NGO activists also invited to be part of a voluntary activist force for social justice. This of course must be based on support structures into the union which allow potential career development to follow. Whilst the union itself as an organisation must at last begin to effectively change its culture and seriously question its role beyond the workplace. This quite clearly needs further discussion and should also be linked to our now 'global' economy.

The point about crisis management is that when challenged and questioned with regard to social justice trade unions responded in a positive manner. Other organisations including NGOs followed and out of crisis came opportunity. Where the problem lay is that the trade union as an organisational structure did not respond and still remains firmly based on a workplace/employer scenario that is becoming harder to identify and organise. It is argued here that the recent Polish migration brought to the fore many community based engagements. Each with their own key individuals and collective

entities, we need only to retrace our steps and accept that trade union organisation must restructure to effectively engage with our 21st century world.

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