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# **'THINKING OUTSIDE THE BOX': TRADE UNION ORGANISING STRATEGIES AND POLISH MIGRANT WORKERS IN THE UK**

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

On the 1 May 2004 the EU witnessed its most challenging enlargement, with the accession of eight post-communist countries (known as the A8)<sup>1</sup>. Despite the EU's espoused 'fundamental freedom' of labour mobility, the UK was only one of three countries to open up its labour market to entrants from the A8 economies<sup>2</sup>. Predictions in the UK, that the number of workers seeking jobs in the labour market from post-communist economies would only be modest, could not have been more wrong and attempts to establish accurate figures have been a source of vexation for both national and local government. All A8 workers who are employed in the UK have to register on the Worker Registration Scheme and Poles comprise 66 per cent of A8 migrants (Border and Immigration Agency, 2007). But this is a cumulative total and does not include those who are self-employed or indeed those who have just not registered. There is, however, a growing consensus that this Polish migration constitutes the largest single in-migration ever to the UK (Salt and Millar, 2006). As an interviewee commented '*what is different with this migration is the scale and in particular the Poles*' (Senior officer TUC Organising Department).

These emerging trends have demanded creative thinking and new forms of engagement on the part of trade unions. As the Research Officer from USDAW who is dealing with migrant workers noted '*...we strongly believe that you can't approach this in traditional trade union ways, we are going to have to be more imaginative and think 'out of the box'*'. This paper explores how the British TUC and some of its affiliates have responded to this challenge. The empirical material is drawn from first stage findings of an ESRC project and has involved a series of semi-structured interviews with national officials in the UK. Interviews were conducted with key national officials in the UK who have dealt with or co-ordinated the organisation of Polish workers. Key informants are officers of the TUC, two unions mainly involved in the food sector (BFAWU and USDAW) and two general unions (GMB and T&G<sup>3</sup>). In addition, we have drawn on a number of interviews from the three case study regions; the North West, North East and East of England regions of the UK.

There is some cross-over in the paper in terminology between A8s, Polish and migrant workers, as most interviewees had a broad migrant worker strategy and often spoke in those terms when asked about Polish workers. Conversely broader questions posed about A8 workers were seen as synonymous with Polish workers by some respondents. Our focus is on Polish workers in that they are the largest group of migrants to the UK from the 2004 enlargement. Further, beyond the numbers a more important justification for this focus is because of the large number and variety of initiatives, at local, national and international level, to engage these Polish migrant workers. This is not to diminish the importance of the other groups of migrants from A8 countries, but the example of Polish migrants enables the identification of shared problems and an examination of emerging new practices of engagement, which could be disseminated across other groups of migrant workers.

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<sup>1</sup> Czech Republic; Estonia; Hungary; Latvia; Lithuania; Poland; Slovakia; and Slovenia

<sup>2</sup> On the 1<sup>st</sup> January 2007 EU admitted a further two post-communist countries, Bulgaria and Rumania. This time though the UK put transitional arrangements in place to stem in particular flows of low-skilled migrants to the agricultural and food processing sectors.

<sup>3</sup> Recently merged with Amicus to form Unite.

The paper is structured as follows: in Section 2 in order to underpin our understanding of emerging strategies, we discuss the rationale for trade unions engaging with A8 migrant workers. In Section 3 we identify the literature which examines trade union strategies regarding migrant workers and discuss its relevance for A8 migrant workers. We suggest that these concepts need to be elaborated and reconfigured to take account of this new wave of migration and the rich range of responses to it. In Section 4 we posit a four fold typology to capture new forms of engagement, namely inclusion, new terrains of recruitment, reconfiguring domestic networks, and forging international linkages. This draws on and refines some of the previous categories as well as introducing new ones. In particular, we emphasis the way in which the construction of networks involving both traditional and new actors, domestically and internationally, have been at the centre of approaches to Polish migrant workers.

## **2. RATIONALES FOR ORGANISING A8 WORKERS**

In this section we examine the rationale for organising A8 migrant workers in general and those from Poland in particular, as this underpins and informs the emerging strategies. We suggest first, that the scale of migration and its occupational and geographical reach means that it is central to labour market transformation and cannot be ignored. Second, we argue that the trade union response emanates from the exploitation of A8 migrant workers and the possibility of mobilising them, which has positive implications for union renewal and revitalisation, potentially at least. Third, trade union strategies are driven by fears of social dumping by employers and an intensification of casualisation, which if unchecked, leave the door open for a divided workforce and threats to social solidarity.

### **Ubiquitousness, pervasiveness, temporality**

It is probably not an exaggeration to suggest that A8 workers in general and Polish workers, in particular, are ubiquitous. This is reflected in the Polish and Lithuanian shops that have sprung up in many small towns, notices in newsagents windows in Polish and pubs selling Polish beer and organising Polish nights. From the point of view of trade unions labour markets have been fundamentally transformed. Although A8 workers dominate particular sectors, these migrants can be found across an expanding number of sectors in manufacturing and the service sector. All interviewees recognised that this was one of a number of previous waves of migrations that the trade union movement has had to deal with '*...it's often said that everything is new, but trade unions have always had to deal with migration*' (Senior officer TUC International Department). However, approaches developed in previous periods were very different from the ones that are currently emerging and this reflects the specific characteristics of current migration.

Not only is the scale and speed of A8 migration different to previous arrivals, but migrants are younger with 82 per cent of A8s between 18 and 34 (Border and Immigration Agency, 2007). In contrast to previous migrations it is highly feminised with women comprising a significant proportion of new entrants 42 per cent of A8s, (ibid). Further, whereas previous migrants have been geographically and sectorally concentrated, this is not the case for A8 workers. The recent accession reports identify that more A8s have registered in the North of the country compared to London and the South East. A salient feature of this current migration in terms of its geographical reach and concentration in small towns was reflected in the comments of interviewees from the TUC, T&G and GMB:

*I think the perception before was that this affects London in particular and in a number of Northern cities the issue was people leaving those cities not coming to them, it has now turned around. (Senior officer TUC Organising Department)*

*Historically it's been different for us. Migration is now dispersed in differing sectors, geographic areas and by ethnic groups. People coming over from a small village.... and we now have to deal with that. (Lead national migrant worker officer - T&G)*

*What's distinctive here is the size of this accession migration across all industrial sectors. Organising waves of migration is not new to us, but a sector approach to organising Polish workers does not work. That gives us a whole range of new organising challenges. (Senior national officer - GMB)*

Although sectoral patterns are apparent, with concentrations in food processing and the hospitality industry, this is distorted by the large number of agency workers who are employed across a much wider range of occupations. The statistics do not capture the turbulence or traffic of migration and the Worker Registration Scheme (WRS) tells nothing about how long a worker may stay in a job or in the country. Improved and cheaper transport, the flexible nature of agency work and evidence of job sharing suggest the possibility of a much more transient workforce and this was noted in at least one of the interviews:

*It's different now, in the past Asian and West Indian migrants came here to stay. I think now it's about the globalisation of the workforce, with people on the move all the time.' (Research officer - USDAW)*

To underline this argument, A8 migrants cannot be regarded as peripheral to the workforce, their contribution in terms of numbers and the breadth of occupations in which they work has fundamentally altered the British labour market.

### **Social justice, union mobilisation and revitalisation**

Legitimising the position of A8 workers has not removed employer exploitation and abuse regarding contracts of employment and wages which has been widely documented (Fitzgerald, 2007 and 2006; Hardy and Clark, 2007, Anderson *et al*, 2006). This has included excessive working hours, inadequate breaks and no enhanced overtime. Outside of work a range of problems have been experienced in opening bank accounts and access to key services (McKay and Winkelmann-Gleed, 2005; Zaronaitė and Tirzite, 2006). Many complaints have focused on housing, frequently provided by the employer (Jordan and Duvall, 2002), which is overpriced, overcrowded and of poor quality. Problems with recruitment and temporary labour agencies are substantial, with high charges for finding employment, lower payment than promised and the withholding of wages. Women migrants face additional problems regarding maternity leave and protection at work. For example, in a recent case at Pratt's Bananas Ltd a Polish woman who suffered a miscarriage claims that this was caused by the refusal of the employer to put her on lighter duties ([news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/6682689.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/6682689.stm)).

Given the above, there are clear grounds to argue that many migrants, and in particular the Poles, are developing a strong sense of social injustice. Mobilization theory (Kelly, 1998) argues that collective organisation and activity ultimately stem from employer actions that generate a sense of injustice or illegitimacy among

employees. The experience of embracing migrant workers for the AFL-CIO was a dramatic growth in membership in some sections of the organisation (McGovern, 2007).

In the case of Polish workers it should be noted that this sense of injustice does not always emerge immediately, and it may have much more to do with relative rather than absolute exploitation. The hourly minimum wage in the UK is around four times greater than the hourly rate of a Warsaw bus driver. Short term euphoria about the comparatively high wages to be earned in the UK, is quickly dispelled by the high costs of living and flexible contracts which mean fluctuating wages. However, the biggest grievances that emerge are when it becomes apparent that migrant workers are doing the same job on different terms and conditions. At London Luton Airport in Autumn 2006, the T&G discovered that baggage handlers brought in by an agency from Poland and employed by Big Orange Handling (a jointly owned venture between EasyJet and Menzies) were being paid around £2 an hour less than the ground staff. The T&G threatened strike action unless the issue was resolved and the Polish workers won an immediate pay increase to bring them up to the same level as the permanent employees (TUC, 2006). The possibility of mobilization is given added strength by common cause with indigenous workers whose interests are not served by migrant workers undercutting the 'going rate'.

### **Social dumping and the intensification of casualisation**

Fear of social dumping raises the spectre of a divided workforce based on ethnicity and/or 'us' (indigenous workers regardless of race) and 'them' (newly arrived migrants) is central to the trade union movement's focus on recruiting migrant workers. As a senior national officer of the GMB suggests unions have been slow in the past to rise to this challenge:

*'A situation has been created where these migrant workers are being used by the employer to undercut wages and conditions, so the basis of this is a failing on our part to organise effectively and on the employer's part to divide and rule.... It is not unusual to have very committed members who are bargaining with employers based on a density of 30/40% and when you actually analyse it in a number of those workplaces you have a situation where they have never bothered to organise the migrant workers. So they have created the situation where these migrant workers are being used by the employer to undercut wages and conditions. (Senior national officer - GMB)*

Donaghey and Teague (2006) suggest that the number of industrial relations disputes concerning wage dumping and job displacement is relatively low. This view may appear to have some substance in that there has only been a small number of high profile disputes regarding the direct replacement of indigenous workers with migrants from A8 countries (see also Gilpin *et al*, 2006). However, this argument ignores the numerous instances of low level incremental dumping:

*On our organised sites we do not have a situation of separate groups, but that is not to say that some employers have not tried it. (Senior national officer – BFAWU)*

Fitzgerald (2005 and 2007) reports that in some Northern food processing plants conditions of service have deteriorated and indigenous workers have been displaced as cheaper A8 workers are introduced. This is supported by a project interview with a GMB official who described how workers at a food processing factory in East

Anglia had been replaced with migrant workers from an agency on worsened terms and conditions. There are also employer attempts to bed this into other sectors, notably in construction. A TUC North East regional construction project to engage with newly arrived A8 workers, uncovered squads of skilled workers being paid as little as £3.20 an hour, which was not only below the minimum wage but also some distance from the local rate of £14.00 (Fitzgerald, 2006).

In addition to explicit social dumping there is important growing evidence of the intensification of casualisation afforded by temporary employment agencies. Peck *et al* (2005 and 2007) suggest that temporary employment agencies have shifted from being stop-gap providers of labour in an *ad hoc* and pragmatic way to being institutionally embedded 'purveyors of flexibility'. The lead T&G migrant worker officer was explicit about the threat of lower paid migrant workers and employment agencies as the vehicle for their entry into the UK workforce:

*We believe it is perceptions that are preventing the government from moving further down the regularisation route. One of the key reasons for this is internal perceptions dealing with issues to do with indigenous workers over their economic well-being. We have a dual battle here in the public realm and internally..... Large numbers of our members are being caught between a rock and a hard place with agency labour increasing. Our members feel threatened.* (Lead national migrant worker officer - T&G).

The central role of agencies in supplying temporary labour has often led to the invisibility of migrant workers at the bottom of supply chains. One example of this is a group of Czech agency workers driving delivery lorries for major supermarkets on a zero hours contract and called to jobs at one hours notice. In other sectors a two tier workforce has been created, such as in large Post Office Depots where ununionised Polish agency workers crossed picket lines during the 2007 pay strikes.

Rather than viewing social dumping as the action of maverick or 'bad apple' employers, we suggest that it is structurally embedded in flexible labour markets. Taken together the use of migrant workers in driving down wage bills and intensifying casualisation poses a threat to social solidarity and the emergence of a divided workforce. This threat was clearly articulated by USDAW:

*There is always going to be the "they're taking our jobs" mentality and part of our strategy is to equip members on how to tackle those issues. For me the major issue is the appalling approach of the press and the media.... The major issue that comes over is we must support migrant workers because if we don't the employer might use them to undermine wages and conditions.* (Senior research officer – USDAW)

### **3. TRADE UNIONS AND MIGRANT WORKERS**

Several strands of literature are pertinent to and inform our discussion of the challenges of organising and engaging Polish migrant workers. First, there is a literature on contingent workers and Heery and Abbott (2000) suggest that there are essentially five trade union strategies which may be used here; exclusion, servicing, partnership, dialogue and mobilisation. This approach is useful to consider given the important role played by agencies as suppliers of A8 workers. However, it is less relevant when it is considered that many Polish migrants are employed in the hospitality, retailing and transport sectors, which are low paid, but cannot be considered as contingent. Therefore the occupational diversity of new migrants

suggests that this approach has limited usefulness in examining strategies of A8 and Polish migrant workers as a whole.

The second strand of literature on migrant workers and trade unions derives from what can broadly be termed community unionism approaches. These strategies are based on the idea that at the lower end of the labour market, where migrant workers are concentrated, new organisational forms draw on diverse actors to provide services and advocacy for unrepresented workers (Heckser and Carre, 2006). In the UK context the interconnection between work, home and community is emphasised to advocate more community based approaches (Datta *et al*, 2007; Lier, 2007). Holgate (2004), however, in contrasting the unionisation of several workplaces, emphasises that this approach cannot be universally applied and that strategies need to be specifically tailored to individual circumstances. The community unionism literature provides an important starting point for considering the new networks that are emerging, but the geographical dispersion and transient nature of A8 migration, at this point in time at least, suggest limitations to this approach. While concentrations of A8 workers are discernible, as are social focal points such as the church, communities in a broader sense, are at the very most embryonic.

The third strand of literature, points to the importance of scale, not simply in emphasising the importance of neighbourhood and local communities, but in its sensitivity to different echelons of trade union activity (Waterman and Will, 2001; Cumbers, 2005). An interrogation of scale is salient, in considering the initiation of policy and how far it is top down or bottom up. Further, the extent to which national policies are reflected regionally, locally and in workplaces is important in interrogating whether a rhetoric of cooperation is given substance at different spatial levels. A further critical dimension of scale is an investigation of the possibility of cross border cooperation and collaboration. The literature on cross border collaboration is, however, pessimistic, being described variously as an activity often of the last resort (Frege and Kelly, 2004), at best difficult to coordinate (Gennard and Newsome, 2005) and potentially competitive rather than cooperative (Lillie and Martinez Lucio, 2004).

All of these literatures are useful in informing the analysis of trade union responses to the organisation and engagement of Polish migrant workers. In the next section, drawing on some of these, we offer a typology, which highlights the four most important methods of engagement.

#### **4. NEW FORMS OF ENGAGEMENT**

In this section we consider new forms of engagement with A8 workers in general, and Polish migrant workers specifically. First we suggest that policies have been broadly inclusive rather than exclusive. Second, we suggest recruitment has been a key strategy, but that this has had to employ innovative strategies on new terrains. Third we highlight how trade unions have worked with 'new actors' (Heery and Frege, 2006) to form new alliances and coalitions, particularly at a local level. Fourth, we emphasise the importance of international links, which we suggest are more substantial than the rhetorical solidarity voiced in the bureaucratic structures of labour organisations.

##### **Inclusion**

Trade union solidarity between indigenous and migrant workers has been complex and far from automatic and McGovern (2007) highlights the way in which trade unions have often been in the forefront of calling for restrictions on immigration. The



chequered history of UK trade unions reached a low point, in the post war period when dockers marched in support of draconian immigration policies proposed by Enoch Powell. One interviewee in particular highlighted this past history and suggested that current policies represented a new departure:

*I think there is continuity here, but we have to be upfront and say that this is not the case with policy and our attitudes to migrant workers. We were signing things that were openly discriminating against women and ethnic minorities! But policies have evolved now.* (TUC Policy Office)

The T&G lead national migrant worker officer emphasised this policy change when he commented on their migrant worker strategy ‘...in the T&G the migrant agenda is being supported top down and we believe that we can’t be credible as a trade union if we do not deal with this situation.’ In the wider movement inclusion is reflected in a plethora of projects at local and regional level to engage and include A8 migrant workers:

*There are now a range of regional projects....and there is hardly anywhere in the country where work hasn’t been done or is not going on.* (Senior officer TUC Organising Department)

*....the Poles have been really well received and they’ve taught us a thing or two about trade unionism* (leading activists quoted in Fitzgerald 2005)

The TUC have led this approach and its inclusiveness was reflected again in the following comment:

*When accession was first starting, Rick and I were generally treading around unions seeing how far we could push it.... There just has not been a dissenting voice against this migration.* (Senior officer TUC International Department)

The TUC in being proactive, to some extent anticipated the arrival of migrant workers as a result of the May 2004 enlargement, although they admit to being ‘surprised’ by the actual numbers of those who arrived ‘*what is different with this migration is the scale, in particular the Poles, and the speed of it, which took us a little by surprise*’ (Senior officer TUC Organising Department). The groundwork for union engagement with the A8s had been laid by the TUC prior to their arrival through work undertaken with Portuguese workers. A co-ordinating role was developed from the work of an officer in the International Department managing a set of ‘stand alone’ Portuguese worker projects to become in 2006 a ‘national strategy’. One early action was the production of basic home language information leaflets for newly arrived A8s outlining their employment rights and distributed when workers registered with the Home Office<sup>4</sup>.

However, within this picture of overall inclusivity two main tensions are emerging. The first is related to how inclusively should be packaged and profiled to members and a wider audience. Whilst, the second is disquiet focusing on whether there was a gap between the national and regional rhetoric of inclusiveness and some of the local workplace responses to migrant workers.

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<sup>4</sup> In a final dissemination meeting for the TUC regional migrant workers project, it was reported by an official that this was not happening in a consistent manner.

The debate on packaging and profiling campaigns was commented on by an interviewee:

*An amount of this is not about people's nationality, but about their employment status, for example agency workers. So unions have to deal with the agency question and not just the migrant question. (Senior officer TUC International Department)*

This view that concerns regarding migrant workers should be embedded in a wider set of issues is reflected in a TUC shift from having a separate national migrant worker strategy to including migrant workers under the umbrella of vulnerable workers. This may be the result of sensitivity to accusations regarding special treatment for migrant workers, particularly the Poles:

*I think this is where it is important to identify that we support vulnerable workers everywhere. We support all people who need help.... for us politically, with a small p, it sends out a message that we are interested in all workers not just those from abroad. (Senior officer TUC)*

The T&G national officer, however, was cautious about conflating policy regarding migrant and vulnerable workers:

*....migrant workers are vulnerable but is this helping their cause to continually push these issues into a wider pool? You are diluting the issue. Yes a large chunk of the workforce are vulnerable, but this is a long term issue to do with rates of pay. I'm not convinced this will help unions organise effectively. It is important to address migrant workers not as vulnerable workers, but as a specific 'migrant worker' group. (Lead national migrant worker officer - T&G)*

Instead the T&G recognised the importance of highlighting both the vulnerability of indigenous workers, including second generation BME workers, but also advocated a firmly focused migrant worker strategy.

A recent piece of work for the TUC has also echoed this latter view, noting that the potential nebulous nature of the vulnerable workers concept could lead to policy and practice that fail to respond appropriately to the specific problems that some migrant and vulnerable workers may face (Stirling, 2007).

The second source of tension is between differing scales of operation. An issue for the TUC is striking a balance between the needs of A8 workers on the one hand and the needs of their affiliates on the other. TUC policy that cannot be implemented by affiliates or indeed national union policies, which are either rejected or not followed by local memberships, are clearly counterproductive. Further, the extent to which the concept of inclusiveness espoused at national level translates at the branch and workplace level clearly needs further investigation.

Some of our non-TUC union interviewees noted underlying tensions here, accepting that there were 'frank discussions' occurring around the migrant worker issue:

*....we are having an open debate with our members where we think they may be tempted down the line of blaming migrant workers for entering on worse conditions. To get them to understand that this is not the fault of migrant workers, it is the fault of their own poor workplace organisation. So there's a very frank discussion going on. (Senior national officer – case study union)*

Indeed at one particular case study union annual conference this year a motion calling for quotas to quell the influx of migrant agency workers was on the agenda. Although this was withdrawn the evening before it was due to be debated. It would be misleading and dangerous to generalise from this one anecdote, and as we shall see many of the most imaginative initiatives that seek to 'include' migrant workers have come from below. However, this incident and these national comments do serve to reinforce the importance of examining responses at local and workplace level.

## **New terrains of recruitment and organising**

A growing element of trade union revitalisation has involved organising those who in the past have been seen as either too problematic to organise (for example agency workers) or too difficult due to their ethnicity (see Fitzgerald and Stirling 2004; Holgate 2004; and Perrett and Martinez Lucio, 2006).

All case study unions are engaged with the organising model, which has been championed by the TUC and its New Unionism task group. Essentially the TUC task groups remit has been to promote an organising culture in the movement. This has involved supporting activities that will engender this, including increased investment in organising and recruitment and the introduction of dedicated organisers. Further, the TUC is supporting the concept of broadening trade unionism, to include for example migrant workers and those at the lower paid end of the labour market. A centre piece of this has been the TUC organising academy.

The recruitment of the newly more internationally mobile Polish worker brings a different set of issues and problems to those which unions have faced in the past. Large numbers of these workers are concentrated in the private sector and in agency employment, where there has been very limited success in recruitment. This problem is exacerbated by language barriers, and a lack of institutional knowledge about UK labour traditions. In some cases older Polish workers can bring workplace organisational traditions, which would generally make them more amenable to trade union membership. However, younger people, who comprise the majority of Polish migrants may have little or no knowledge of trade unions, or regard them as a legacy of the past.

Therefore, the recruitment and organisation of A8 migrant workers raises four sets of interrelated questions. First, how to locate and recruit migrant workers often in ununionised workplaces or employed by agencies. Second, once target groups of workers have been identified how they can be persuaded that joining a union is in their interests. Third, once migrant workers have joined trade unions how far do policies need to be devised to meet their particular concerns. Finally, there is a debate, driven by the organising model, as to how to move members from passive membership to self organisation and activism to create sustainable memberships and branches.

At the early stage of entry the first two questions above were foremost on the agenda. Trade unions were certainly taken by surprise by the rapid entry of A8 and Polish workers following accession. This led to pressure from affiliates on the TUC for support. In 2005 the TUC regional divisions were encouraged to bid to undertake projects with affiliates with regard to newly arrived A8 workers, with the aim of mapping and engaging/recruiting these workers. Three main projects were undertaken in the North East, North West and South West with a number of other

smaller scale projects gaining momentum in other areas<sup>5</sup>. What followed in late 2005/06 was a document entitled *Organising Migrant Workers: A National Strategy*<sup>6</sup> and a draft development fund bid<sup>7</sup>. However, as noted above a senior officer from the TUC Organising Department noted that there was not now a TUC national strategy on organising migrant workers. Instead in practical terms affiliates have begun to build on the local projects undertaken and are now either mainstreaming activities (TUC interview) within existing practices or developing strategies to target particular groups or areas.

For example, the USDAW migrant worker strategy is firmly campaign based and focuses on organising through a 'rolling programme' which will target regions and companies where they have a 'presence' and a sizeable number of agency migrant staff are employed. As part of this they are producing a guide for negotiators on bargaining for agency workers. To engage with the growing number of agency workers they have a model agreement which has led to an agency recognition agreement. Their central objective is to sign agreements with all leading agencies being used by the large retailers, such as Tesco and Morrisons.

Whilst the GMB interviewee commented that following lessons learnt from these regional pilot projects, the union was now moving from a '*reactive organising strategy to planned interventions*' (Senior national officer - GMB). A central feature of this is to '*try to focus on workplaces where migrant workers are most likely to stay. As it's not hard to run a campaign that shows 2,000 members have joined but what is hard is building sustainable membership*'.

Trade unions also often find that once they map their engagement it can be a long process whilst they gain migrant workers trust. For example Fitzgerald (2006) in one of the TUC regional projects discusses how the six month engagement with Polish workers had been long drawn out with little membership gain.

Although, one interviewee was quite optimistic about this and saw clear links and continuities with strategies that the union had pursued in the past:

*My view on this new migration is what is new? When people came over from India and Pakistan, we dealt with it, we got our hands dirty. So why can't we do it with the Poles? It's just a question of having in place structures and policies which enable you to do that* (BFAWU senior national officer)

To engage with the challenge of migrant recruitment BFAWU have used the Union Modernisation Fund (UMF) to support a workplace project that investigated the attitudes of Polish, A8 and other migrant workers to trade unions and union membership. To allow their engagement to be strategically focused with potentially fruitful outcomes.

The union learning agenda has been widely used by unions for trust building and engagement. With this turned into a recruitment tool which exhibited some of the

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<sup>5</sup> See Fitzgerald 2006 for the final report of one of three projects undertaken.

<sup>6</sup> This laid out a number of actions to be undertaken throughout 2006.

<sup>7</sup> As far as the authors know a number of the projects identified are ongoing (TUC/Solidarnosc webpage) or have been completed (see Fitzgerald 2007 for one final project report).

most imaginative strategies. *'The migrant worker strategy is fitting in neatly with for example our lifelong learning strategy.'* (Research officer – USDAW). Fitzgerald (2007) cites how both USDAW and BFAWU have used onsite learning centres to make first contact with Polish workers. Workplace representatives reported that Poles used the available computers to book flights home and communicate with family and friends. Although, the GMB senior national officer was cautious about the overall 'success rate' of learning initiatives, citing progress in the union's pilot project areas, he had a real concern that some Poles are readily using the opportunity to learn English, but that this is not then translating into either membership or activism.

Although, a successful example of engagement, recruit and inclusion through the union learning agenda is provided by the GMB in Norfolk. Here the union has recruited four Polish Union Learning Representatives in one factory and used this as a springboard for providing ESOL classes and courses on Know Your Rights. One of the more innovative initiatives is the organisation of fishing trips as a way of teaching English and reaching a wider layer of workers. It has also been aimed at reducing tensions with local anglers as Polish workers are encouraged to return their 'catches' to the water<sup>8</sup>. The GMB in the North East are also just entering a project that will use music to teach Poles how to learn English, with some members of the cohort already GMB members and the majority not.

A central issue here is once Polish and migrant workers have joined a union how far policies can continue to be devised to meet their particular concerns. Others have already touched on this when discussing *'the stamp of contemporary managerialism'* and *'managed activism'*, as unions manage resources (Heery et al., 2000: 1004). With regard to migrant workers Holgate (2005: 474) in her case study also notes tensions when a full-time official well versed in servicing members engages with a newer activist trained in organising and campaigning. Whilst Wills (2005) when discussing migrant agency workers turns this on its head reporting that a number of the workers who joined the T&G did so as an 'insurance policy' against future trouble. These tensions around resource allocation and policy customisation were also present in one of the three TUC regional projects with A8 workers (Fitzgerald 2006). Here resource allocation came to the fore as sustainability of Polish membership became difficult due to the transitory nature of Polish workers. As our T&G interviewee noted overall *'there can be tensions as a number of migrant workers need to be 'serviced' because people are scattered about and they need to see that we can help them before bringing them into membership'* (interviews Lead national migrant worker officer - T&G). All in all then organising migrant workers, including the Poles, is not just about whether you use a servicing or organising model, it needs a careful multi-faceted approach which can be very resource dependent. Under these circumstances there is a tension between servicing existing members, bringing new sustainable members in and organising those who need the most assistance. As a TUC interviewee commented:

*None of our unions are sitting there with pots of money... We of course don't know how many migrant workers we have organised, but we do know that we are just scratching the surface. This is of course related to the sectors where people are working and where we are well and poorly organised.* (Senior officer TUC Organising Department)

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<sup>8</sup> For all those non-fishing people the UK tradition is apparently to throw fish back while there is a strong tradition in Poland of eating fresh water fish

Finally, around the issue of policy formulation our GMB interviewee emphasised that their migrant worker strategy must fit into their wider organising strategy. Given this the strategy had two central aims, firstly to be regionally focused so *'tackling membership decline with existing resources rather than investing extra resources'*. With regard to this he noted a *'serious political debate'* currently taking place between certain regions around integration or self-organisation. Secondly, that the strategy *'improves and empowers our members at the workplace'*, as he argued this was where the union had most influence. Discussing this second point he noted that the union had recognised that in a number of organised workplaces the union had failed to engage and thus organise migrant workers. Leading to not only the potential of 'us and them' but also social dumping.

As well as policy formulation for migrant workers a key issue for trade unions is how to transform membership from being passively serviced to activity and self organisation (see Carter 2006; Gall 2006; and Heery *et al.* 2000a & 2000b). An example of this is provided by Wills (2005) when she quotes a T&G full-time official who laments that migrant workers had *'...no sense of how to... solve their own problems'* (ibid: 151). This is hardly the self-sustaining type of recruitment that a developing UK organising model dictates.

However, some of the current wave of Poles seems to provide a more positive example. Although, this is clearly labour market based with Wills talking about the transient hotel sector and our case study national interviewees often talking about organised workplaces. Although, the GMB did identify an innovative geographic approach which is intended to assist all Polish members in a particular area. He first, interestingly spoke of Poles being *'...almost westernised Europeans with the same attitudes, they use MSN, mobiles and the internet. When you get over the language barrier there's no difference between organising these workers to organising British workers'* (Senior national officer - GMB). This has perhaps allowed a swifter adoption of specific strategies to facilitate new Polish members. The innovative approach concerns the recently constituted Southampton Polish holding branch. The central aim of this branch is to bring together dispersed numbers of Polish members and encourage confidence in speaking and debate. This is significantly the first steps towards involvement in union governance before Poles enter established branches, giving in essence these workers 'voice' (Senior national officer - GMB). The branch has also established links with Solidarnosc and Swedish and Greek trade unions. The GMB and other unions have recognised that integration and participation in the union is likely at times to be difficult for these newly recruited Polish members:

*...new Polish members have to be able to stand their own corner and it's only fair that they have a level playing field. That's why I say it's very important that unions are open to migrant workers and there are a number of levels we have to think about here. We have to think not only about being physically opening and welcoming but also that we are alive to any issues where people want to exclude these workers. In a number of industries there are issues of casualisation that present themselves and there are issues of migration.*  
(Senior national officer - GMB)

Underlying the inclusive organising approach trade unions have also put substantial efforts into recruiting a layer of activists who can relate to, recruit and organise Polish workers. All case study unions spoke of Polish activists and have begun to introduce these to branch or plant committees and importantly employed a number as full-time organisers (Fitzgerald 2007). A significant example of this is provided by the T&G

who as part of their organising strategy have appointed up to a third of either black, minority ethnic (including Poles) or women as new organisers.

### **Reconfiguring domestic networks**

In this section we argue that a new departure in union Polish worker strategies has been to build on and reconfigure existing relationships and forge new ones. These relationships can be understood at three distinct spatial levels. Nationally the TUC and member unions have engaged with the government through *campaigning and lobbying* on the issue of Polish and migrant workers. Regionally, the relationship between regional TUC and affiliate structures and regional development agencies (RDAs) can be characterised more as one of *strategy seeking* as they try to come to terms with fundamental changes in regional labour markets as a result of inward migration. At the local level there are a plethora of alliances and coalitions which are much more *ad hoc* and idiosyncratic, aimed at *firefighting* the problems that A8 migrants have faced in more localised communities. Taken together this means extending linkages and networks to cooperate with a much wider range of institutions and organisations. We examine each of these levels of cooperation in turn.

Established relationships were drawn on by the TUC and case study unions to try and improve employment law and its enforcement. There are several successful examples of lobbying and campaigning, the notable one being union pressure, led by the T&G, on the Labour government which resulted in the newly implemented Gangmasters (Licensing) Act 2004. Less dramatic and high profile was the agreement from the Home Office to include leaflets on trade union membership in information received by workers registering under the Workers' Registration Scheme. Attempts at dialogue with government are also evident in a number of TUC publications and campaigns (for example the Commission on Vulnerable Employment - CoVE). This lobbying is ongoing and at least one interviewee spoke of extending it:

*We can't replace the remit of enforcement agencies so we have to pressure them. At some stage we will have to take a very strong case to an agency and dare them not to take enforcement action. If they don't we should then consider a judicial review as they have failed to use their powers... Too much legislation effecting the workplace is voluntary and enforcement agencies are 'light touch'. What message is this sending out? (Interview Lead national migrant worker officer - T&G)*

At a regional level trade unions, and in particular the regional divisions of the TUC, have begun to engage in regional governance structures such as RDAs and learning and skills councils (Pike *et al*, 2004). These newly developing links have been drawn on following the arrival of the A8s. In two of the TUC A8 regional project areas differing types of engagement were possible to discern. In the North West the T&G have led a union championed two pronged strategy, which has as its centrepiece a webpage<sup>9</sup> and Manchester based project worker. This has, among other things, encouraged migrant worker employers to sign up to a Minimum Standards Charter. In the North East a more cautious strategy has been adopted based on the Scottish Fresh Talent initiative, which aims to attract and retain highly skilled migrants to the region and the TUC involvement here is less assured.

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<sup>9</sup> Migrant Workers North West web link <http://www.migrantworkersnorthwest.org/>

At the local level engagement by trade unions demonstrates the most innovative strategies. Trade unions have forged new linkages with local councils, NGOs and members of the established Polish community and churches to provide support and information for newly arrived A8 workers. For example, nationally government have recognised this and a recent good practice guide for local councils (I&DEA 2007) encourages councils to operate multi-agency approaches, including involving trade unions, when dealing with new European migration (ibid: 22). Whilst a number of trade unions have engaged with developing Polish communities and through established parish committees of older generation Poles. Present here have been two main practical types of information session in the evenings and at weekends. First, multi-agency sessions with NGOs which are often drop-in sessions with Polish food and refreshments provided; second more focused union 'advertising' sessions where the union explains what it does and how it can help Polish workers.

The pressure for this type of engagement has come from two, often interlinked, sources. Firstly, trade unions have faced hostile employers and had to deal with frightened Polish workers who fear losing their jobs. For example, Fitzgerald (2006) reports how following months of ad hoc engagement, often disrupted by antagonistic employers or difficult because workers were afraid to lose their jobs, an information night was held for Polish workers at a Polish club attached to the parish church. Here 50 of the 70 Polish workers that attended the meeting joined the union, although lack of bank accounts delayed or derailed final membership. The second pressure, which is often the driver for multi agency engagement, is the many problems faced by Poles outside of the workplace with, for example, the need for assistance with opening bank accounts, finding acceptable accommodation and help following accidents at work. With regard to this differing and often diverse 'organisations' have been involved at a very early stage with Polish and migrant workers. In particular, the Citizens' Advice Bureaux (CABx) have published a number of reports highlighting the plight of migrant workers (CABx 2003, CABx 2005a and CABx 2005b) and assisted migrant workers in finding trade unions locally for help (Fitzgerald, 2005). This is in line with claims that, CABx are playing an increasingly important role in dealing with workplace issues which were once dealt with by the trade unions (Abbott, 2004). Significantly, the TUC are working with the CABx, with regard to Polish migrant workers, in the development of a joint TUC/Solidarnosc webpage. It is too early to establish whether this is an expedient short term alliance or whether it may develop into a long-term relationship.

An exemplar of these new localised strategies and linkages is provided by the relationship between the GMB and Keystone Trust in Norfolk. This provided a place for meeting and education and the trade union full timer worked with A8 employees to provide a range of services and advocacy. The Keystone Trust NGO is the largest social entrepreneurship organisation in the country and has received funding from local, national, and European sources to undertake a range of projects, many of which are directly and indirectly aimed at the large number of migrant workers in the area.

The project team is currently engaging with an established parish committee in the North of England to investigate the significance and tensions present within these developing relationships. Interestingly, at a national union level this type of network building was not, however, met with unequivocal support. The senior national officer from the GMB suggested that the union was cautious when dealing with local 'service providers'. He specifically cited the potential problem that can arise from the GMB sharing platforms with service providers, where *'these providers often involve us in promising services that we are not able to deliver'*. Although, these types of newly



developing networks and engagement have in places been successful, the sort of managed activism identified by Heery *et al.* (2000b) and implied in a number of other interviews with case study unions, seems to indicate a union fear about campaigns getting 'out of control' and/or the recruitment of members who were not cost-effective to service.

### **Forging new international linkages**

The issue of migration, particularly since the 1<sup>st</sup> May 2004 accession, is writ large on the agenda of the ETUC:

*I have just been to a seminar in Brussels where we spent two days talking about cross border co-operation between trade unions. What we are doing is now happening all over Europe with other confederations and it is all about building understanding.* (TUC interviewee)

Further, at the European level a number of the case study unions are jointly campaigning for the introduction of the Temporary Agency Workers Directive and supporting campaigns against the Services Directive and the Posted-workers Directive.

In addition to established policy making forums, forging cross border linkages has been a significant strand of the strategy of the TUC and individual unions. However, international collaboration is viewed as problematic in some quarters. Woolfson and Summers (2006) rightly suggest that agreements between employers in old Europe and unions in new Europe to supply labour at less than the going rate systematises social dumping. The Union of Seamen and Fishermen in Poland for example, rather than forging links with unions in the UK, have transformed themselves into an agency supplying labour for employers (Hardy, 2007). Lillie and Martinez Lucio (2004: 160) also strike a cautionary note in suggesting that '*...many transnational union interactions are competitive rather than solidaristic and can result in unions seeking to undermine each other*'.

The TUC's recent collaboration with Polish unions relies on a 'model' of collaboration established with the Portuguese CGTP. Although, there have been some contacts with Hungarian unions and OPZZ in Poland, Solidarnosc collaboration dominates. As '*there is an amount of linkage from the 1980s campaigns, that's probably why we are closer to NSZZ than OPZZ*' (Senior officer TUC International Department).

This collaboration is operating on two main levels, firstly through practical projects, the first of which was the introduction of a Polish full-time organiser to the North West, who also worked in the North East:

*It was important that this was undertaken at a regional level as nationally we don't go into workplaces. Working with Tomasz showed us what worked and what didn't and the limitations of approaches.* (Senior officer TUC Organising Department)

As noted above a webpage is also currently being jointly developed with Solidarnosc, which includes the CABx. Secondly, they are about to sign a memorandum of understanding with Solidarnosc. '*We felt that this memorandum had to have the active buy in of our affiliates*' (Senior officer TUC Organising Department). This will essentially articulate what is already happening and be a demonstration of cooperation on migration issues.

With regard to other unions BFAWU have recently concluded an agreement with a North West based employment agency which gives them not only the type of rights that other unions have negotiated with agencies (T&G and Manpower for example), but also a broader remit to audit for example Polish agency accommodation (Fitzgerald 2005). This agreement is international in character as when the agency undertakes recruitment in Poland it 'suggests' to Poles recruited that they join the union. Whilst the union suggests to locally based employers that they engage with this agency as they are 'reputable'. As the BFAWU interviewee stated '*...if people are coming from Poland to here why wait until they get here?*' The key to this is likely to be the current restructuring that is occurring with regard to agencies in the food processing sector (Fitzgerald 2007) and having BFAWU as a partner may provide a short-term competitive edge. Significantly, the union have also signed an understanding with the President of the Solidarnosc food sector, which involves the exchange of materials, with Solidarnosc proof reading draft BFAWU Polish language material and some BFAWU literature carrying both logos.

The national response of the GMB, USDAW and T&G to cross border linkages has been more cautious. The GMB interviewee noted there was currently an internal debate going on about the extent of Solidarnosc collaboration. The union had been to Poland to meet Solidarnosc on specific organising campaigns, but he commented that:

*...it is very clear that our industrial policies are very different and that some people represent regions in Solidarnosc. We are not convinced by the joint union membership argument... but we do have agreement from Solidarnosc that we can use their logo. Even though there is internal discussion about this I think that many of these Poles coming over are too young to know about the politics of Solidarnosc; my instincts are that if I was an organiser on the ground I would use this branding.* (Senior national officer - GMB)

He finished with a further cautionary note:

*The proportion of Polish migrants that were actually Solidarnosc members is probably low, thus what contact does the union really have with those workers coming over? We need to be clear here and not get carried away with the romanticism of this, but I think we will end up with a compromise that allows people to use the brand if they think it will be useful. This has to be judged on the ground.* (Senior national officer - GMB)

Similarly the USDAW research officer emphasised that the union were taking a cautious approach to Polish trade union collaboration:

*...as with the history of trade unionism in Eastern Europe it could be counter productive to speak to some of the unions over there. Some Eastern Europeans view unions suspiciously, a hang-over from the communist days. So we have to be informed and take this step-by-step and judge each case on its own merits.* (Research officer – USDAW)

The current Polish migration has clearly been of the historic type identified by Frege and Kelly (2004), particularly for local and regional trade union officials. So to find that some case study unions have either directly collaborated with Solidarnosc (TUC) or are just undertaking that route (BFAWU) is perhaps not surprising. Although, it is interesting that others have not yet followed. These as noted are more cautious at the national level and seem in some way to be dealing with the migration in more

familiar ways. As Lillie and Martinez Lucio (2004) suggest '*international strategy... (is) best understood as a set of transnational relationships of and between union organisations, rather than as the outcome of the revitalisation strategy of any particular national labour movement*' (Ibid: 159). Importantly the point here is that the differing cultures, national institutions and strategies of industrial relations may in fact as noted above '*compete in the shaping of the new internationalism*' (Lillie and Martinez Lucio 2004: 177).

The central issue is that if these relationships are being formed on a short-term or crisis basis then there is a strong likelihood of failure, as cooperation has to be developed over the long term (Ramsay, 1997). It is interesting that with our case study unions only the TUC were trying to develop a longer term relationship with Solidarnosc. The TUC also noted in interview that they were currently developing a relationship with the Bulgarian unions. This followed the Bulgarians approaching the TUC prior to accession to ask for assistance with accessing European funding. Other union engagement seems to be either piecemeal, for example USDAW who had apparently not developed a relationship with Solidarnosc following the Tesco campaign. Just beginning (BFAWU), was still being debated (GMB) or was not evident (T&G).

## **5. CONCLUSION**

While the need to service members is important for any union, it is clear that any concept of purely a servicing union is flawed, especially when posited to migrant workers. Instead as stated the idea of an organising union is in vogue. All of our unions either expressed this directly or it was implicit when discussing their activities with regard to Polish migrant workers. This is not surprising, and would be present when discussing a number of other issues, with the density levels we currently have and the real fear that trade unionism is now often not part of the psyche of many workers, particularly young people. So organising is certainly the 'new kid on the block'. But a number of other practices and ideas are also present with regard to the current Polish UK migration and the trade union response. The path of this engagement has been at the beginning very much based on the pattern of labour market entry with agencies playing a leading role. We would argue that this is beginning to change as unions make strategic decisions based around resource constraints. To understand the type of engagement that has gone on and is likely to develop in the future we have argued that there is a need to introduce a four fold typology of engagement. These categories of engagement are not mutually exclusive and as the story unfolds will most certainly develop and change. We also certainly believe that there are growing grounds to talk about renewal when discussing recruitment of Polish workers and further investigation of this will take place with our approaching workplace case studies. Further we would cautiously propose that renewal may take on international connotations given the transitory nature of a number of Poles. As one of our interviewees commented:

*One of the reasons why we are getting involved with Solidarnosc is that people may be coming back again. Indeed there are likely to be Poles who get their first experience of trade unionism here and then take it back to Poland. It is not a one-way traffic.* (Senior officer TUC International Department)

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