Theorising Practice – Independent trade unions in the UK

Ness argues that 'traditional unionism, resting on institutionalised class compromises and peak-level bargaining, struggles to adapt to the new era' (Ness 2014: 11). He therefore called attention to 'new models of worker self-activity and rank-and-file participation' in the global North and South, which is based on class struggle with workers forming 'independent and democratic unions fundamentally opposed to bureaucratic domination, class compromise and concessions with employers' (Ness 2014: 6). Indeed, there are examples across the world where frustration with and the perceived exclusion from established trade unions has caused migrant, precarious and low paid workers and their supporters to organise independently through new grassroots trade unions.

This Theory into Practice piece uses theoretical underpinnings of Ness as well as Harry Cleaver and Sivanandan to explore the role of two independent trade unions that emerged in the UK in the mid 20-tens, namely the Independent Workers of Great Britain (IWGB) in 2012 and the United Voices of the World (UVW) in 2014. These independent trade unions have organised in various sectors, starting with outsourced facility workers, followed by gig economy workers (IWGB). The two unions now represent a wide range of precariously employed workers including those in hospitality, retail, paralegal services, sex work, the cultural sector, yoga teachers, foster carers and charity workers. Despite being of relatively small size (each has a membership of under 10.000) and with few financial resources, they have been praised for their ground-breaking and 'significant high-profile wins' in 'David and Goliath' battles (Hardy 2021). In this article I discuss why low paid, largely migrant workers have organised within these independent unions; and the extent to which they have applied syndicalist tactics and strategies. I thereby hope to offer honest reflections on independent unions' challenge to the historic focus of European unions on trade union recognition and partnership models.

The analysis is rooted in my practice, as someone who was involved in the establishment of the IWGB in 2012[1] and then a co-founder of the UVW in 2014. I have organised industrial action within these trade unions and was a member of the Executive Committee of both unions (in the UVW from 2016-2018 and IWGB from 2019-2020). The article also draws on interviews conducted between 2019-2022 with workers, specifically strike leaders; staff and leaders of the independent trade unions; and with organisers in established unions, namely Unison, Unite, NEU, PCS. While the article discusses the experiences of these two independent trade unions, the emphasis is on UVW.

Traditionally the relationship between theory and practice is understood as linear, as theory informing practice, practice testing theory and revising theory. Yet the reality is often far messier. In this article, I focus upon three theorists, namely Immanuel Ness, Harry Cleaver and Sivanandan. These ideas form part of the explanatory underpinnings concerning the emergence and experience of independent unions, without necessarily directly informing the practices. For me, more than any text or theory, it was my personal experiences with the people I met that inspired me to action in independent unionism. Personally, my involvement with the independent trade unions started in January 2012 together with Petros Elia, back then with the IWW. Petros (from the UK with migrant background from Cyprus) and I (from Germany and at that time new to the UK) had met during our Masters at SOAS in 2010 in the student occupation against the increase in tuition fees. Petros, who had lived in Venezuela for years then got involved in the Latin American Workers Association (LAWAS) and had linked up with the IWW. When an extended family member, Marina, a cleaner originally from Columbia faced problems at work the extent to which London's cleaning industry structurally exploited the

[1] I was not a founding official of the IWGB, which was founded by Alberto Durango, Chris Ford and Petros Elia, I did, however, put in some of the leg work required to establish this organisation.

vulnerabilities of migrant workers started to dawn on me. It was anger about these injustices that made me commit to independent trade unionism.

Theory in Context

Ness asserted that 'new forms of workers organization' across the globe could revitalise syndicalist tactics and strategies. Characteristically, they firstly, 'reject the collective bargaining and corporatist models in favour of direct action', secondly 'hold up the principles of class struggle unionism and direct action to defend the workers power against the bosses'; thirdly, 'are typically rooted in class solidarity that emerges in the workplace and the community; fourthly, are based on 'self-activity and rank-and-file participation' with workers forming 'independent and democratic unions fundamentally opposed to bureaucratic domination, class compromise and concessions with employers' (Ness 2014: 2-6). Standing's (2011) book T*he Precariat* argued for new organisations of class struggle that adequately represent precarious workers, organising outside of the established trade unions. Yet Standing's broad brushed 'precariat' mixes very different types of precarious workers – from the unpaid intern in the culture sector to the low paid, migrant cleaner – under one umbrella. Later, during my PhD on unemployed/unwaged workers struggles I was introduced to the writings of Harry Cleaver which I found more useful in understanding why the need arises for some, such as marginalised, precarious workers, to organise separately from established trade unions while at the same time acknowledging power differences between groups of workers. These differences are used by capital to maintain its control over the working class as the wage hierarchy is crucial in pitting one group of workers against the other. Higher waged workers are used to mediate the relations with the low paid. In order to increase the effectiveness of struggle there is a need to overcome the divisions of different segments of the working class. Yet, Cleaver also warned that, in practice, it would be difficult for all workers to unite in one institution of class struggle, as the power hierarchies caused by (wage) divisions may get reproduced. In response Cleaver argued that less powerful (meaning lower paid or unpaid) workers, should organize autonomously (Cleaver, 1979). Unity can still be achieved through alliance building, whereby 'each group organises around its need and makes alliances with other groups based on mutual benefit' (ibid.). As such he appealed for solidarity between struggles but warned against the subsuming of one struggle into the other. There is resonance in figures showing that established trade unions mostly represent higher paid workers, largely in the public sector. Whilst around 13% of workers earning under £250 a week are in a union, that figure rises to around 23% for those on between £250-£499, around 30% for those earning between £500-£999, with 22% for those earning over £1000 a week. UK born workers are also much more likely to be part of a trade union than migrant workers.[i]

In particular, outsourcing arrangements reproduce material and power differences. Subcontracting disguises the true extent of institutional income inequality[ii] and allows employers (who then become the clients for the subcontractors) to avoid their responsibility for low wages. The UVW has repeatedly argued that outsourcing 'BAME and migrant workers on worse pay and T&Cs [terms and conditions] than they would get if they weren't outsourced discriminates against them on grounds of their race'.[iii] Significantly, the recent UVW vs Royal Parks' judgment found that differential access to employment rights and benefits can constitute indirect race discrimination, breaching the Equality Act 2010.

For Cleaver non-economic divisions, such as race, gender, or nationality, are also hierarchical divisions reflected in wage differentials. In this respect, Sivanandan's writings offer insights on the institutional racism of trade unions and the possibilities of overcoming these divisions through 'inter-racial' class action. Sivanandan (1976:350, 1977:359, 1982:3–54) saw that the racially exclusionary practices against migrant labour from the Indian subcontinent and the Caribbean were based on the perceived economic benefits for white workers. He argued that the 'white' worker indirectly 'benefits from the

exploitation of the black man' (Sivanandan 1977:339). While Sivanandan did not rule out that 'white' organised labour can overcome racism and engage in 'inter-racial' class action, he remained sceptical about its immediate prospects (Virdee 2000). Sivanandan's reflections were shaped by the labour struggles of low paid migrant workers in the UK and the responses from the trade unions in the mid 20th century, particularly the establishment of the Indian Worker's Association (IWA) in 1958 that helped to organise strikes by Indian workers, the 1974 wild cat strike by Asian workers at the Imperial Typewriters and the Grunwick strike of 1976-1978. Writing about the betrayal of the Imperial Typewriters and the Grunwick strike by established unions, Sivanandan ponders whether the disputes would have had a more positive outcome if they would have relied on the 'black community and black organisations for support [rather] than to look to the trade unions' (Sivanandan 1990). His analysis of migrant workers' strikes in the years after Grunwick caused him to advocate for black 'communities of resistance' for support of migrant workers struggles (Sivanandan 1990). He explains this concept as:

> *'So that when the trade unions refused to take up the cause of the Afro-Caribbean or Asian workers over industrial disputes or racial discrimination and/or exploitation, black communities closed ranks behind them and gave them the sustenance and the support to mount a protest or conduct a strike' (Sivanandan 1990: 78-79).*

However, it is important to mention that while eventually being let down by their union, the Association of Professional, Clerical and Computer Staff (APEX), the Grunwick strikers were supported through large scale inter-racial solidarity with many white workers joining the Grunwick picket (Hardy 2021). Sivanandan's writings draw attention to two aspects: firstly, that in some circumstances migrant workers need to organise separately from (though in parallel to) established trade unions in order to protect themselves from the institutional racism in trade unions, and secondly the power of solidarity in enabling and maintaining strike action, which is especially important for less powerful groups of workers.

Theory into Practice

The emergence of the independent trade unions in the UK

There is an emerging literature on these developments (see Hardy 2021; Pero 2020; Schenker 2019; Alberti and Pero 2018; Mayor-Lee and Lopez 2017; Kirkpatrick 2014) with some debate over their relevance in the organisation of low paid and migrant workers. Pero (2020) praises them as the beginning of an 'effective representation of the precariat'. On the other hand, Hardy has dismissed them as radical breakaway unions that are in a "red bubble" and 'avoid the necessity of persuading and winning over the majority of the workers'. By organising autonomously from the established trade unions, she argues, they 'leave the majority of the workers in the hands of old bureaucrats who then face a reduced challenge from below' (Hardy 2021).

In this article I suggest going beyond this binary by arguing that the ground-breaking victories of independent trade unions have offered lessons for the union movement as a whole. Independent unions were created in London in the mid 20-tens as a result of the neglect by traditional unions in the organising of low paid migrant workers. They are not affiliated to the Trade Union Congress (TUC) and thus not obliged to follow the territorialism set out in the Bridlington agreement of 1939. They took on struggles that the established unions perceived to be too resource intensive or that were informally considered as no-go areas in particular outsourced facility workers and then the gig economy (IWGB). The new unions were made by victories; their successful struggles shaped the creation of both unions and – almost embarrassingly – prompted the established trade unions to move back into the struggles of low paid, outsourced workers (various interviews with organisers in established trade unions). They have punched above their weight and demonstrate that big wins by

low paid migrant workers are possible. Their struggles and pioneering victories had ripple effects for the wider trade union movement.

Both unions, IWGB and UVW, emerged from the organisation of outsourced cleaners in London, informed by and rooted in a long history of sporadic cleaners struggles in London since the late 1970s involving women and migrant workers. While individual disputes erupted in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, they never manifested in a widespread campaign. These struggles were often side-lined by the established unions. A number were organised outside of the trade union movements, such as the Women's Liberation Movement (for an overview see Rowbotham 2006) or erupted *despite* the lack of trade union support (for example the long dispute in Barking hospital in 1984 and the Hillingdon Hospital in West London in 1995). The 'Justice for Janitors' campaign in the US in the 1980s, which was documented in Ken Loach's film ''Bread and Roses'' in 1998 were also significant inspiration for action.

The apparent ambivalence of traditional unions to migrant workers struggles led to the establishment of the independent trade unions. A group of workers linked to the Latin American Workers Association (LAWAS) had initially organised as part of Unite's Justice for Cleaner's branch in the early 2000s but then left Unite – the largest union in the UK – to join a small, anarchist trade union, the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). After a brief period within the IWW the cleaner's branch created their own independent trade union, the Industrial Workers of Great Britain (IWGB), which was later renamed to Independent Trade Union of Great Britain (for a more detailed overview of these developments see Kirkpatrick 2014). United Voices of the World (UVW) was founded in 2014 and roughly at the same time the University of London/Senate House Justice for Cleaners campaign broke away from Unison and joined the IWGB (for a more detailed overview of these developments see Moyer-Lee and Lopez 2017). Shortly after, the original cleaners branch in the IWGB broke away and founded the Cleaners and Allies Independent Workers Union (CAIWU). Confirming Ness's theory (2014), what all of these union-creations and break-aways from old unions had in common was the negative experiences with the bureaucracy of the established unions, frustration with the side-lining of their disputes and the discouragement of militancy, as expressed by one IWGB member:

> *"The IWGB is worker led; it's a grass roots operation. So from that point of view, it gives a different dynamic, it encourages workers themselves to do things for themself. So I think that's very very powerful indeed. So ostensibly a lot of the workers had been members previously of other unions and of course the representation that they've received has not been up to standard. When I say that, the lack of engagement between branch officials and the workers has been quite distant. A lot of patronising going on in terms of representation and actually when you look into this more deeply, there's just a whole range of people who are just effectively trying to maintain their positions within their own internal hierarchies" (security guard, member of IWGB)*

There are differences between the two independent unions, in terms of the sectors they are organising in as well as structural variations (see below). In the IWGB the focus is on the gig economy, whereas the UVW places a greater emphasis on disputes in the facility sector outside of universities. Both have led ground-breaking campaigns. The IWGB for example organised protests, strikes and large demonstrations of couriers and private hire drivers. The UVW achieved pioneering victories bringing workers outsourced by universities and hospitals back inhouse. (LSE, 2017; St Mary's, 2019; Great Ormond Street, 2020). Both unions also engage in radical advocacy work on behalf of workers, for example foster carers (IWGB) and the decriminalisation of sex work (UVW).

Punching above their weight: Bold Demands

The independent trade unions not only organised in sectors that established trade unions did not , they also started to make demands that exceeded t their traditional counterparts for union recognition and the London Living Wage (LLW). The independent unions demanded sick pay in the private sector (for example for cleaners and porters at Sotheby's in 2015) and parity between directly employed and outsourced workers in universities (the 3 Cosas Campaign at the University of London in 2012), hence challenging outsourcing. My interviews revealed that at that time in the mid to late 20-tens those organising low paid migrant workers in traditional unions were discouraged or at times even forbidden to go beyond such limited demands and to launch quick strike actions , though there were notable exceptions such as at Unison at SOAS.

Indeed, pioneering campaigns to bring cleaners inhouse had been going on at SOAS (Unison) and University of London/Senate House (first Unison then IWGB) for a number of years. However, it was at the LSE in 2017 that the UVW won the first reversal of an outsourced facility contract through industrial action. This historic victory had repercussions for the wider trade union movement; Independent and established unions alike won battles to bring facility services in London's higher education sector inhouse. In January 2020 UVW achieved another ground-breaking victory; cleaners at St Mary's hospital won their campaign to be brought in-house and for parity with NHS staff. This was the first time in UK history that outsourced workers had successfully forced an NHS Trust to make them direct employees of the NHS. The victory resulted in 1,200 workers across five hospitals being made direct employees of the NHS with each of them receiving a minimum pay rise of £10,000 and improved terms and conditions of employment. Again, there were wider repercussions, in December 2020 cleaners at Great Ormond Street Hospital (GOSH) achieved inhouse status and full parity with NHS workers in October 2021. Security guards at GOSH followed with strike action for inhouse status. At least in part influenced by the victories of UVW, Unite organised outsourced facility workers at St Barts hospital trust (comprising five hospitals) to demand an end to outsourcing. It is the largest facility workers strike in the UK's history to date and resulted in a commitment to bringing nearly 1,800 facility workers inhouse by 1 May 2023.

It's a class struggle: A dispute strategy

As outlined above, Ness (2014) rejects partnership models in favour of direct action as the key strategy of new, syndicalist forms of worker organisation. Indeed, a distinctive feature of the independent unions', and in particular UVW's political strategy, is their readiness to take (strike) action fast, rather than to drive an institutional or partnership approach. It is a way of seeing trade unionism as a class struggle, as a fight between workers and employers, rather than understanding the union's role as a mediator between workers and their employer. As explained by a UVW member, a cleaner at the LSE:

> *"LSE did not recognise the UVW and we [the workers] are saying that does not matter! … UVW is independent and independent union is better to have because if the union is working with management, or the directors or the [subcontracted] company than you [the workers] don't have much say, because when they are in meetings they're gonna negotiate to each others …And if they say you can't get it [the demands] the union is just gonna shut up. But when you are independent you have <u>all</u> the say and its best to join an independent union" (Interview with LSE cleaner).*

An action orientated, militant strategy first and foremost gives importance to the struggle in the streets – meaning in particular on the picket line. To prepare for the picket regular meetings with the workers are key to not only ensure the strike is led by the workers, but also for trust and confidence building purposes. This approach to organising can best be explained through the words of a cleaner at St Mary's hospital. Like many other workers she had previously been 'dissatisfied with the experience of the unions'. When she and her colleagues had approached the existing union on site

about problems with their employer [at that time the cleaning company ISS], the union representative just spoke to the manager and 'nothing happened'. The cleaner's experience was that the union gave the workers 'sugar coated words … but when it comes to actions, they don't do it'. When she first attended a UVW meeting she at first did not trust the union, she was sceptical and thought to herself 'here we go again, a union so loyal to the employer'. However, in the meeting she saw a different approach to trade unionism, where 'the need for strike action was well explained' by the UVW organisers. She started to trust the union as she 'saw their sincerity' [of the union organisers] and that they 'would really have our back' when out on strike, but importantly that the union 'is really fast' (Interview with a St Mary's Hospital cleaner).

Cutting across the triangular employment relations of outsourcing

Rather than targeting the immediate employer, in other words the outsourced company, the independent unions target the client. In so doing they cut across the triangle of employment relations where the client is abnegated from any responsibility for the pay and working conditions of the outsourced staff. It is the client that draws up the contracts and the contract determines the wages and terms and conditions of the outsourced staff. It is the client's choice to outsource in the first place, usually the tenders are won on the basis of price, hence there is huge competition between facility companies to win contracts on the basis of cutting labour costs. As such the focus of any campaign and industrial action is the client. For example, the St Mary's Hospital strike actions targeted, the Imperial Trust (the client), and in particular its flagship hospital, St Mary's hospital and not Sodexo (the subcontractor). When the strike action started Sodexo invited the UVW to a meeting, but the union was not particularly interested. As one of the UVW organisers recalls: 'we met with them [Sodexo] once to suss them out but basically we made clear that the only people we wanted to meet where the decision makers which were the Imperial Trust.' (Interview). Consequently, UVW declined further requests by Sodexo for meetings.

As the independent trade unions reject 'partnership' arrangements between unions and the employer, they do not shy away from disruptive actions that disturb the operations; performative actions that gain the attention of the public; and/or naming and shaming actions that target the client where it hurts the most – usually their reputation. These actions are seen as a last resort, as a tactic when meetings are declined, and emails and strike actions ignored. Direct action has been led by the workers themselves, as it was the case of a quiet and undisruptive but very symbolic sit-in of the workers in St Mary's hospital demanding a meeting with management. However, where direct action would put workers at risk it has been based on inter-racial solidarity led by predominately white supporters who have occupied management offices or invaded board meetings. Other protests by UVW members and supporters have targeted flagship events of importance to clients, such as premieres of plays in the Barbican, auctions at Sotheby's and public appearances by university vice chancellors.

Worker-led disputes

Both the IWGB and the UVW are consciously committed to a worker-led approach. Firstly, disputes usually do not start with a recruitment or organising drive that is part of an overall political strategy as may be the case in established unions. In the disputes described above workers came to the unions, rather than the other way around. Word of mouth leads workers to the union, who usually come because they have some problem at work (e.g. unpaid wages, discrimination, suspension or redundancies.). Right from the beginning both IWGB and UVW have taken the individual problems of the workers seriously and have built up case worker teams. This approach differs from that of established unions where individual case work by trade union staff is seen as too resource intensive.

It has often been dismissed as “radical servicing”, the “NGOisation of trade unionism” that distracts from the organising deemed to be the real job of a trade union (various interviews with organisers in established unions). Yet, what is thereby overlooked is how case work and organising are interlinked. Feminist have long reminded us that the personal is political. The key to the independent union organising strategy has been to turn individual (case work) problems into collective ones, and that does not just mean collective grievances, it means collective action.

Strikes!

Ness argues that ‘the strike is the principal strategy to achieve concessions and gains from management’ (2014: 6). While the independent unions in the beginning had a stronger emphasis on protests and naming and shaming, strikes became the most important weapon. Firstly, due to their long working hours the strike is also the only way workers can come together, actually meeting each other on the picket line. Petros Elia, General Secretary of the UVW explains

> *‘strikes are where the spirit of solidarity is created. Both between workers and between workers and supporters and activists and the wider movement. Strikes are the ultimate way for workers to express their anger, their defiance and power, and their courage.’ (Interview).*

In particular, the tactic of coordinated strike actions can facilitate connections between different groups of workers, either intra-union by bringing different groups out on strike at the same time or cross-union by linking up with other industrial disputes. This confirms Cleaver’s theory on the importance of alliance building, whereby 'each group organises around its need and makes alliances with other groups based on mutual benefit' (Cleaver 1979). Pickets have been very lively, creative and usually fun designed to keep energy up, to continuously create unity and stronger links between different groups of workers and supporters and to channel anger against injustices into a collective fighting spirit.

Conventional trade unionism has it that density is power and hence emphasis is put first on recruitment with a view to formal recognition and bargaining. Yet membership numbers usually go up during strike actions – suggesting that action is an important recruitment strategy (Hodder et al., 2020). As explained by one UVW organiser with reference to the St Mary’s hospital campaign:

> *‘The point is that recruitment would follow the prospect of action. Which it did: we initially had one worker, then a meeting with 20, then once we were ready to move to the ballot we had 85 workers that were part of the initial ballot, by the time the ballot closed we had a 105 members and that increased to over 200 members during the months of the dispute (interview).’*

Further, the Trade Union Act of 2016 set out a threshold of 50% turnout for ballots to be valid. In fact, a lower, but committed union density can make it easier to meet the threshold. Workers can still join the strike after the ballot. Balloting in advance of recruitment can therefore also be a strategic way to deal with the anti-union legislation. Both the turn out and yes vote in the independent unions has usually been above 90%, with the number of strike days determined not by the union bureaucracy but voted upon by the workers involved in the dispute. It is important to say that both independent unions always aimed for membership density once a campaign was launched, yet small memberships did not stop UVW from launching disputes. As one striking worker at the LSE explains:

> *‘I was still in that mentality you have to get 20% of the workforce before the union was coming to talk to us. But this was not the case with UVW because they said “no, no, no, all what you need, just get nine people to come, and then we will kick off and start”.’ (Cleaner, UVW member).*

This experience is not unique to UVW and has inspired other unions. For example, the dispute of outsourced workers at the London base of the Government’s Department of Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) started with only around 10 striking workers. By the time they won their dispute (not even a year later) they had achieved nearly 100 per cent density of around 200 outsourced facility and catering workers (Interview with PCS).

The power of solidarity: Communities of resistance

Another crucial aspect of the political strategy of the UVW is community. The notion of community is not to be confused with the idea of community unionism, which advocates a move away from the workplace to identify 'other actors', such as faith-based organisations (Wills and Simms 2004). The focus of the academic literature has been how trade unions can 'tap into' existing communities and how they can mobilise and connect with migrant networks (Lucio and Perrett 2009). Often a very static approach is put forward, that does not recognise that community is something that is actively created, that needs to be nurtured ((Weghmann 2019). The UVW strategy is much more in line with Sivanandan's concept of 'communities of resistance' where strikes by migrant workers were sustained by their communities. The vast majority of workers that organise within the UVW have never been on strike or engaged in any other type of activism before. Community of resistance is not only important for building power, but also emotional support to challenge isolation and provide confidence. Communities of resistance provide the foundation for action and for building power (see also Pero 2020).

Self-activity and rank-and-file participation

Both unions, despite key organisational differences, are committed to a worker-led approach to trade unionism. Their organisational distinctiveness is in part reflected by their different births: the current IWGB emerged out of University of London/Senate House Justice for Cleaners campaign with Unison. From the beginning the IWGB based its organisational structure on principles of representative democracy with structures nearer to those of established unions; a focus on branches and developing elected positions. All meetings are held in English and Spanish. Over the years some active members transitioned into key leadership positions, currently the position of the general secretary is occupied by a former cleaner and the president is a former bicycle courier.

The UVW drew much more on syndicalist traditions with a focus on community building and cross-sector solidarity and initially followed a participatory democracy approach. At least in part, UVW was influenced by movements such as Occupy and the Arab Spring that were resonant at the time of its creation. In the beginning the union had no office and organisation was initially in cafés, restaurants and parks, then in the Common House – a self-organised activist space in Bethnal Green. It held assembly style meetings in English and Spanish (and sometimes also Portuguese and Polish) with hundreds of workers first fortnightly and then once a month. Child-care was provided and the meetings always ended with a party. UVW also provided training workshops on employment law as well as English classes. The Common House helped the union to link up with other activist movements that were also using the venue as a meeting space and with whom joint parties were organised. However, the union quickly outgrew the venue and geographical limitations made it hard to hold mass assemblies. Eventually, the union found an office space in Elephant and Castle, the centre of the Latin American community in London, soon to be demolished due to the gentrification process and therefore rented out for little money. Decisions were made not by representatives or officers but by the general membership in these assembly style meetings, yet only worker-members could vote. Supporters were allowed to come and contribute with suggestions but had no decision-making function. This distinction between members and supporters was also adopted by the refugee struggles in Berlin that were going on at the time and influenced thinking. The parties after the general meetings were not only good fun but created solidarity links between workers and supporters - everybody was welcome.

In order to gain legal protections both the IWW and UVW registered as trade unions through the Union certification office in 2012 and 2014. To do so each had to name a general secretary, a president, a treasurer, have 100 members and a constitution. These requirements were inimical to the UVW's principles around participatory democracy. Initially the membership assemblies where were decisions were made. Petros Elia, as the co-founder, was widely accepted as the 'leader' or 'general secretary'.

Albeiro Hernandez, a cleaners and strike leader at the Barbican, was UVW's first president, but with UVW gaining in reputation, there started to be competition for union positions. I was politically always opposed to these hierarchies and pushed for more horizontal organising and following a heated discussion in a general meeting on who should become UVW's president it was decided to just abolish the positions altogether. This was a very bold and historically unique move based on a legal loophole. While there are strict laws in the UK on how to elect trade union officials, which demand postal ballots if these positions are contested, the law said nothing about abolishing themonce the trade union was established (clearly such non-hierarchical thinking went beyond the imaginations of the rule makers). Instead, we decided to run UVW by an executive committee (EC) and less frequent general meetings. Any member could become an EC member, providing that they were committed – meaning showing up to meetings – but with the aim of ensuring the EC represented the composition of the union as a whole; in other words that the majority of the people on the EC were low paid migrant workers. However, as UVW grew in size and was evicted from its office space in Elephant and Castle this participatory democracy style with large membership meetings became less feasible. A membership consultation through a survey in 2020 showed that the members did not actually want this type of flat hierarchy and preferred an official general secretary. Hence elections were held in 2020 and Petros Elia became again the general secretary of the UVW.

While the structures of these unions are still developing and the more representative democracy style of the IWGB and the mix of participatory and representative style of UVW have their advantages and disadvantages, they point to the importance of challenging bureaucratisation and the reproduction of power hierarchies. As one UVW member put it:

> *'I hope, going forward as a union, builds confidence, builds resources, that it doesn't become or morph into one of these big established trade unions with huge ……offices, because I just think, just looking at it from my perspective, these unions become more removed from the community in general. You look at some of the more senior general secretaries of some of these established unions where they have huge severance packages. They have as part of their payment packages property and all sorts. And you just think my god, this is a trade union that's supposed to be representing ordinary members of the public. And I'm just hoping then as we build momentum as a union that we stay rooted to our community.' (cleaner, member of UVW)*

And indeed, another important institutional feature of both independent unions is their flat pay scale for staff employed: every staff member in UVW and the IWGB earns the same, regardless of the position they hold, their experience or length of service. They earn just a little bit above the London Living Wage rather than the larger salaries of general secretaries, officers and staff of established unions.

Discussion and reflection

On power structures

Influenced by the thinking of Standing, and his conception of the precariat as an emergent class in the making, I held the view that independent unions are for any group of workers that do not feel represented by the established equivalents. I remember boldly claiming that the independent unions show that the "unorganisable" do not exist, that any group of workers could be organised if the will of the workers, union support and the strategy is there. However, with the success and growth of independent unions Cleaver's warning about the reproduction of power structures has become prescient. As the independent trade unions became popular, even 'cool' on the left, with 'precarious' workers from more privileged backgrounds joining the unions (paralegal workers, yoga teachers, architects, charity workers), power discrepancies arose. So there is a danger that the ECs (in both unions) become dominated by white graduates (like myself) who are more likely to be able to attend

the meetings regularly and influence agendas. In the IWGB I noticed that structures of representative democracy can be exclusionary; as they give advantage for EC members with more privileged educational background and more confidence, energy and time for participation. In contrast, cleaners and security guards, many of them also highly educated in their home countries, may still lack the confidence and the time due to long working hours. Also, evening meetings make it harder for those with child-care responsibilities (usually women) to contribute to decision-making organs, although the wide-spread introduction of Zoom meetings may widen access. In the UVW it became clear that abolishing positions does not negate power and leadership and a clear critique has emerged. Susana Benavides, a UVW leader and organiser and former cleaner, wrote in the Morning Star about the tensions that she identified as 'some sort of class or culture divide':

> *'UVW meetings were always long and animated, but are now often tedious and fractious. The focus has increasingly shifted from the tactics and strategies of practical organising and movement building, to circular discussions about various left-wing concepts or "radical" ideas and initiatives with all the alienating jargon that goes with that. Issues are approached and discussed in an academic or abstract manner and to be honest, my colleagues and I are sometimes patronised, made to feel stupid or just plain ignored even in relation to matters that directly affect us more or where we have the most experience…. The fun and energy has gone out of meetings and assemblies.'*

In line with Cleaver's thinking she calls for solidarity, but rooted in the self-organisation and leadership of lower paid, migrant and BME, workers:

> *'What makes UVW so special is that it was an organic creation of highly exploited working-class migrant people in which we devised our own organising culture, structure and methodology to empower ourselves. We fight for a dignified job and to be able to live in dignity. This is not a scene or a subculture for us. This is our home, our community, our family. We have too much to lose. So we have a request and it is a simple one: when you see us marching, march alongside us — not in front of us'.*

Yet it is not simply a case of discrepancies arising between BME, migrant and white, British born workers that reproduce power dynamics. The reality is more complicated. Migrant workers are not one homogenous group and racial as well as class and gender divides can undermine solidarity between different groups of workers in the union (Lee and Tapia 2021). As such, for any trade union to be an equitable organization of social justice requires constant attention and political will to counter relations of domination.

On scale and sustainability

Critics and sympathisers of independent unions in the UK have often raised the question of their scalability. The underlying assumption here is that big is more powerful that unity can and needs to be institutionalised. The recent history of union mergers pays tribute to such thinking. Yet, is big necessarily more powerful?

The power of the independent trade union lies in their ability to fight, to be agile and flexible, to respond quickly to target the employer where it hurts. It is a workers-led, class struggle trade unionism rooted in community and backed by inter-racial and inter-class solidarity that emphasises the struggle rather than formal recognition and collective bargaining procedures and an overburdensome and top-down bureaucracy. However, there are growing pains with rapid membership growth seemingly requiring structures to ensure the organisation remains worker led as well as a functioning organisation. This raises the question, is rapid growth desirable? Rather than aiming to create a union of the "precariat", mixing precarious groups of workers in one or two independent unions, workers power may be increased through coalition building across multiple and parallel institutions of independent and larger, established unions, sustained by a culture of solidarity rather than being trapped by territorialism.

Conclusion

The article suggests that understanding why low paid migrant workers have organised separately offers important lessons for trade union revitalisation with resonance for Ness's proposition on new syndicalism. Independent unions have reinvigorated worker-led militancy, moving away from the emphasis on recognition and collective bargaining. Their success, evident in a myriad of disputes, has been their challenge to the bureaucratic and risk averse behaviour of traditional organisations and their emphasis on recruitment, recognition and partnership models. Moving beyond trade union territorialism they have actively created communities of resistance that amplify the struggles of low paid, migrant workers.

This is not to suggest that separate organising is the only model or that low paid, BME or migrant workers cannot organise within established unions – indeed examples are cited above. In 2019, there were about two million workers earning the National Living Wage (so the minimum wage in the UK) or below, around 7 per cent of all UK workers,[iv] with one in seven working households subject to in-work poverty (Hardy 2021). The hard truth is that most of these workers are neither represented by established or the independent unions, leaving a significant representation gap.

Drawing on Cleaver and Sivanandan the article has shown how power discrepancies between different groups of workers get reproduced and led to the creation of independent, self-organised unions. Yet, these unions themselves are not immune to the problem of hierarchies. As they grow bigger tensions based on class, race and gender surface. Both independent trade unions have made it their mission to be actively worker-led and to break down barriers of exclusion. Yet, amplifying the voices of less powerful workers' demands a constant political effort and may mean structures need to be reviewed and re-imagined.

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[ii] https://www.lse.ac.uk/News/Latest-news-from-LSE/2020/L-December/Outsourcing-low-paid-work-disguises-true-extent-of-growing-inequality-within-companies

[iii]

[iv] https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-7735/