

# Class Reimagined? Intersectionality and Industrial Action – the British Airways Dispute of 2009–2011

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## Abstract

This article explores the inter-relationship of gender, sexuality, race and class among cabin crew, members of trade union BASSA, in the British Airways dispute of 2009–2011. It evaluates the utility of intersectional analysis in the context of industrial action, investigating the ways crew mobilised intersectional identities and class interests. In their narratives, crew evoked the 1984–1985 miners' strike, but rejected a version of class and militancy based on a perceived historical legacy of class as white, heterosexual and male. Engaging with debates in *Sociology* on class, the article restores work as the key site of class formation and identifies BASSA as providing the organisational and ideological resources to legitimate an inclusive worker interest that transcended sectional identities and generated a reimagined and reconfigured class identity.

## Keywords

British Airways, cabin crew, class, gender, industrial conflict, intersectionality, strikes

## Introduction

This article utilises intersectionality in an analysis of the 2009–2011 conflict between British Airways (BA) and the union representing its cabin crew, British Airways Stewards and Stewardesses Association (BASSA). It investigates how striking cabin crew constructed an inclusive class identity in part through a disavowal of the 1984–1985 miners' strike. Intersectionality conceptualises how class, race, gender and sexuality interact to produce distinct experiences that cannot be captured by examining one or more categories

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in isolation (Mooney, 2016; Roth and Dashper, 2016). Yet work and employment as fields of study have not generally used an intersectional approach (McBride et al., 2015). Milkman (2017: 4) observes that class is disregarded in intersectional analysis and that ‘the relationship of women workers to labor unions, is peripheral to the intersectionality literature’. If trade unions mobilise some form of *interest*, rooted in workers’ material stake in the employment relationship, few contemporary accounts conceptualise *interest* in terms of the inter-relationship of gender, race, sexuality and class *identities* in the specific context of industrial action. One exception is Anitha and Pearson’s (2018) exemplary account of South Asian women’s leadership at Grunwick between 1976 and 1978 and at Gate Gourmet in 2005. They explore how gender, ethnicity and class intersected ‘to catalyse industrial action’ in both workplaces (Anitha and Pearson, 2018: 409).

This article responds to Bottero’s (2004: 996) call for empirical investigation of the reasons why ‘explicit class identities, class solidarities and demarcated class boundaries emerge at some times and places and not others’. Accordingly, it engages with debates on class in *Sociology* (Bottero, 2004; Bradley, 2014; Jarness et al., 2019; Reay, 2005; Savage et al., 2013). The 2009–2011 BA–BASSA dispute offers a propitious case for empirical study. Twenty-two strike days were precipitated by BA’s decision to impose a new cabin crew fleet on inferior terms and conditions, to terminate the longstanding collective agreement that protected existing cabin crew and to threaten BASSA’s effectiveness if not existence (Taylor and Moore, 2019). While trade union activism assumes some implicit class identity (Hyman, 2001), BA cabin crew, diverse in gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity and nationality, can be characterised also by intersectional identities. Their reflections on participation in the dispute might reveal the manner in which they mobilised different aspects of their identities (Nash, 2008), displayed an intersectional consciousness (Terriquez, 2015) and articulated and/or sublimated class, gender, sexuality or race/ethnicity consciousness. The organisational and ideological resources provided by BASSA may have legitimated and prioritised an inclusive or an exclusive *worker* interest.

A key research question concerns the assertion of class interest as distinct from intersectional identity. Closely related to a general retreat from class politics (Wood, 1986), a dominant theme in subsequent sociological literature has been to reduce class to one social identity among others with social identity and class consciousness potentially counterposed (Moore, 2011). To what extent, did crew affirm or disavow class individually or collectively prior to and following their experiences of the dispute?

A second related research question concerns the meanings crew attached to their activity. To what extent might cabin crew’s awareness of their diversity as a workforce contribute to the way they situated themselves contemporaneously and historically? While social identities form the basis of social movements (Roth, 2008), informing this article is an exploration of how gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity and class intersect and manifest themselves in the dynamics of industrial action. Since two-thirds of cabin crew were women, the article focuses particularly on the interplay of gender and class and the articulation of gender consciousness and its political manifestation, feminism. Milkman (2017) proposes such interactions are reflected materially through gendered labour markets and allocations of domestic labour, but also ideologically. Answering both research questions requires explication of the role of BASSA and amplification of older debates concerning the distinction between trade union and class identities.

The article begins with a critique of the utility of intersectional theory for analysing women's involvement in industrial action, drawing on historical and contemporary studies of gender, race and class consciousness and literature on identity formation in social movements. Subsequently, it outlines the dispute and details the research methods, data collection and analytical approach. Intersectionality is employed as methodology. Analysis of cabin crew narratives identifies salient recurring themes that lend structure to the findings. The frequent evocation of the 1984–1985 miners' strike suggests engagement with a recent retrospective literature, including Nettleingham's (2017) proposition on the narrative productions of historical generations and the formation of collective political identity. However, in this 'canonical generation' BASSA activists located their identities in a very different construction of class, the articulation of which constitutes this article's distinctive contribution.

## **Intersectionality and Industrial Action**

### *Utilising Intersectionality*

McCall (2005) distinguishes between inter-, intra- and anti-categorical approaches to intersectionality. An 'anti-categorical' approach does not operationalise one particular social category, while an inter-categorical perspective adopted in statistical analysis necessarily uses existing social categories, to capture variation. An anti-categorical approach may deconstruct (modernist) analytical categories, resonating with post-modern and post-structuralist theories of the complexity of social relations (McCall, 2005). A literature on identity and consciousness focuses on the fluidity, multiplicity and incoherence of social identity in self-presentations or 'performances' (Cover, 2012; Walker and Lynn, 2013). Commensurately, in the context of the gender politics of the contemporary airline industry, Duffy et al. (2017: 261) downplay 'collective experiences of discrimination and disadvantage' and, in presenting cabin crew as organisationally idealised gendered subjects, assert that gendered subjectivities are mobilised 'to affirm managerially desired meaning'. This article is critical of the cultural politics and organisational implications of post-feminism that reduce agency to subjectivity.

An intra-categorical, post-positivist approach lies somewhere between the anti-categorical and inter-categorical, recognising the social reality of categorisation, but critically interrogating existing categories. Its focus is typically on social groups at 'neglected points of intersection' (McCall, 2005: 1780) whose experience is overlooked by single category analysis. For McCall (2005: 1783) the point is not to deny material and discursive categories, but 'to focus upon the process by which they are produced, experienced, reproduced and resisted'. Intersectionality is a crucial methodological tool in qualitative research, since individual narratives may not neatly differentiate between or disentangle class, gender, age, race, ethnicity or sexuality. While methodologically this might indicate or even require an anti-categorical approach, it does not extend to analysis which necessarily deploys social categories. A respondent's silence on one or more categories does not preclude structural disadvantage (Bowleg, 2008).

## *Locating Class and Class Consciousness in Intersectionality*

Class is difficult to operationalise in intersectional research since it is unlike other social relations of inequality (Walby et al., 2012). Mooney (2016: 715) urges 'viewing class as embedded in organisational processes rather than a descriptor'. Such approaches challenge sociological conceptualisations of class defined by the location of individuals in social and cultural hierarchies abstracted from identity and consciousness (Bottero, 2004) and operationalised through 'empirical schema' underpinned by markers of cultural capital and social networks, rather than economic relationships (Bradley, 2014: 433). Class is then embedded in struggles between labour and capital and this definition informs debates about the class location of particular occupations, including (as discussed below) by cabin crew in their online forum. In this perspective, class is not merely another category of intersection, but the context in which inequality is made manifest. Accordingly, Anitha and Pearson's (2018: 17) application of intersectional analysis to the mobilisation of distinct groups of South Asian women in the Grunwick and Gate Gourmet disputes emphasises that workers' actions are influenced by 'social axes of identities . . . reproduced in migrant labour markets' and by imperial, political and industrial legacies of countries of origin. They challenge the 'cultural turn' in which identity and culture dominate and material issues of work are marginalised. Agency is rooted in classed, racialised and gendered contexts, in response to reconfigured labour processes and to discrimination and indignity at work shaped by women's need to combine productive and reproductive work.

If class is not just another intersectional identity, mobilisations rooted in the employment relationship are distinct from social movements based on social identity. In older debates on class consciousness some argued that, since trade unions are class-based organisations, trade unionists will have a class identity, although one not synonymous with politicised class consciousness. In defending livelihoods and working conditions, workers do not necessarily consciously challenge the class basis of capitalist society (Hyman, 2001). Recent literature on class is premised on the apparent absence of class struggle and consciousness, and a 'new sociology' of class privileges cultural, affective, psycho-social, moral and other 'lived' dimensions (Reay, 2005). Rejecting an individualised hierarchy of class where identifications are implicit or 'disavowed', Bottero (2004) argued that the definition of class should be reserved for the expression of explicit collectivity. Cabin crew testimonies reflect the salience of such subjective and objective identifications with class and gender and permit theorising on their interaction in the context of industrial action.

## *Gender and the Labour Movement*

Milkman's (2017) analysis of the relationship of gender to organised labour also prioritises the material and structural basis of labour market segregation, reproduced by capital, but rarely challenged by organised labour. The cultural and ideological dimensions of gendered divisions of labour and how these shape, or are shaped by, trade union responses cannot be discounted. While for Anitha and Pearson (2018) Grunwick and Gate Gourmet represent the mobilisation of workforces segregated by gender and race, this is not strictly applicable to BA cabin crew where one-third were male. A distinctive characteristic of the dispute is the mobilisation of not only women alongside men, but also of

lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) and Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) workers. Here the politics of solidarity was not necessarily constrained by an established and sometimes ethnically or racially bound set of interests in ways that have characterised trade union strategies and action (Martinez-Lucio and Perrett, 2009). Milkman (2017) proposes that typologies of unions formed in different historical periods have different relationships with women workers. Occupational unions, such as BASSA, are considered most receptive to female membership and ‘women’s issues’. In contrast, general unions operating over wide occupational and industrial jurisdictions, may reproduce labour market segmentations.

Prior to intersectional theory and its necessary focus on race, historians attempted to unpick the ways in which women’s involvement in the emergent labour movement ‘related to their experience and consciousness of themselves as women, as members not only of an exploited class, but also of an oppressed sex’ (Taylor, 1983: 89). Yeo (1999) observed that women in less powerful social groups, including racial and ethnic as well as class groups tended to prioritise social solidarity over gender solidarity. Women could act alongside men in defence of family, community and class, often in an extension of their domestic role (Humphries, 1977), evidenced arguably by the Miners’ Wives Support Groups in 1984–1985 (Sutcliffe-Braithwaite and Tomlinson, 2018). In the contemporary UK labour market women are formally engaged to an unprecedented degree and are more likely to be trade union members than men (Office for National Statistics, 2019) so that women’s collective action is more likely to be a manifestation of the realities of waged labour. Women may act to defend working patterns that underpin their capacity to combine paid work with domestic responsibilities and social reproductive roles. A recent case in the Essex Fire Service saw control staff strike against imposed 12-hour shifts incompatible with childcare arrangements, forcing some to leave full-time employment and reduce working hours (Hudson et al., 2019). Despite the assertion of gender interest, the articulation of gender consciousness that challenges extant gender relations and identifies with feminism may be as elusive as class consciousness in trade union disputes.

### *Legacies, Language and Identity Constructions*

Literature on social movements emphasises ‘identity work’, whereby activists construct a shared sense of identity drawing on both sameness and difference from those they oppose. For Ferree and Roth (1998) movements are never composed of individuals with unitary identities, but may be based either on inclusive solidarity built on intersections to foster coalitions where one identity is not privileged, or on exclusionary solidarity, where participants are required to accept the perspective of the dominant group. Grievances may be exclusively framed as labour issues or as women’s issues, repudiating intersectional identities and interests.

Feminist ideas may encourage or constrain women’s participation in unions through, for example, separate or self-organisation. Roth (2008) describes how women’s labour movement organisations can integrate feminist, racial, ethnic and class consciousness with variation in what members stress as most important for their identity. Yet, as Kirton (2005) stresses, gendered experiences may not be politicised or seen as issues for solidaristic action or subject to gender conscious discourses. There may be a reluctance to

self-identify as feminist despite the influence of feminist beliefs and values. For Yeo (1999: 210), working-class women may utilise a number of ‘contradictory languages/discourses’ promoting solidarity, but which also ‘operate to cement hierarchy and inequality of power’, such as languages of motherhood. In the Essex dispute women’s promotion of their cause on ‘Mother’s Day’ reflected existing gender relations, but simultaneously advocated full-time work. Such narratives confirm that union women use some, but not all, aspects of feminist ideology to legitimise the assertion of workplace rights (Hartman Strom, 1983). Accordingly, studies have identified ‘spillover’, whereby social movements ‘organising around a common identity have effects far beyond their explicitly articulated goals’ in terms of ideas, organisation and participants, influencing subsequent terrains of collective struggle (Meyer and Whittier, 1994: 277).

The meanings that participants in disputes attribute to their actions are shaped by legacies and memories. In this regard, Nettleingham’s (2017) study of the narratives of contemporary socialist activists found that the 1984–1985 miners’ strike had totemic importance. The strike’s legacy has been captured as a ‘social haunting’, an unspoken affective or tacit context for younger generations that resonates with Raymond Williams’ ‘structures of feeling’ (Bright, 2016). For Traverso (2016) historic defeats like the miners’ underpin a left-wing melancholia signifying crisis in the social and political identity of the traditional Left that has impacted worker and class memory. For Bright (2016: 149, emphasis in original) though, the notion of social haunting as a ‘socio-political-psychological state’ goes beyond ‘stuck repetitions of melancholia’ and contains a ‘political imperative of future *action*’. In probing the miners’ strike’s legacy this article contributes to a longstanding sociological relationship with the coal industry and characterisation of miners as ‘exemplars of working-class traditionalists’ (Strangleman, 2018: 20) or residual proletarians (Arnold, 2018). A wider context is the strike’s association with national decline, a symbol of a Britain that is no more, articulated by New Labour as a class-based ‘outdated political orientation’ (Ebke, 2018: 124). In what ways did these potent legacies find expression in the meanings attributed by cabin crew to their actions and identities a quarter of a century after the miners’ strike??

## **Context: Cabin Crew Conflict**

During the decades of de-regulation and restructuring of civil aviation (Doganis, 2006), BA focused strategically on cost reduction, flexible and reduced crewing, enhanced service excellence and work intensification (Blyton and Turnbull, 2004). However, the 1995 Business Efficiency Programme signalled a step-change in its determination to dismantle the architecture of the joint (with BASSA) regulation of terms and conditions. Driven by the need to strengthen its bargaining power the union undertook a recruitment drive, following the latest acrimonious conflict in 1997, that increased union density to 73 per cent by 2001 (CAA, 2004) and 92 per cent by 2009, so that at the dispute’s commencement 13,000 of 14,000 crew were BASSA members. Women comprised two-thirds of both the workforce and BASSA membership.<sup>1</sup>

Cost reduction intensified following the post-9/11 collapse and, exacerbated by Low Cost Carrier competition, BA shed 18,000 jobs by 2006 (Bamber et al., 2009: 36). Project Columbus was the centrepiece of Willie Walsh’s (the new CEO) strategy for a decisive

settlement of accounts with BASSA. The unilateral introduction of a ‘mixed fleet’ on inferior terms and conditions was the principal issue underlying the 2009–2011 conflict, although the trigger was the imposition of reduced crew numbers that jeopardised BASSA’s role in collective bargaining and possibly its very existence. A 92 per cent vote for strike action on a 92 per cent turnout in November 2009 was blocked when the High Court upheld BA’s injunction on spurious technical grounds (Dukes, 2011). Facing additional adverse legal judgments, members voted three times for action; 80 per cent on an 80 per cent turnout in March 2010; 79 per cent on a 75 per cent turnout in January 2011; and 83 per cent on a 72 per cent turnout in May 2011.

Confronted with political enmity, intrusive media hostility and BA’s counter-mobilisation, that included ‘decapitating’ BASSA’s leaders and sacking or disciplining 93 activists on grounds that subsequently breached employment law (Ewing, 2010), members effectively resisted. They took 22 strike days, albeit intermittently, during 2010. Eventually, in May 2011, Unite and BA agreed *Working together – a joint settlement*, that preserved collective bargaining, sustained the union and guaranteed a two-year pay increase of 7.5 per cent and Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS) reviews for those disciplined. Nevertheless, BASSA conceded the mixed fleet. In June 2011, 92 per cent voted on a 72 per cent turnout for acceptance.

Cabin crew collectivism was rooted in a distinctive labour process (Taylor and Moore, 2015, 2019). Affective ties generated solidarity (Roth, 2005) and crew defined themselves as a ‘family’ or ‘community’, inhabiting a ‘global village’. Union organisation was underpinned by shared occupational experiences *at the workplace*, albeit transient, and composed of sequential and ephemeral relationships. Comprehensive union-negotiated agreements specified every aspect of working lives, with BASSA reps monitoring management adherence to details of working hours and crewing levels. Though reps may have been disproportionately male, several women held leading positions. BASSA exemplifies Milkman’s (2017) observation that occupational unions are most receptive to female membership, organising all BA crew regardless of grade. BASSA’s relative autonomy from its parent general union, Unite, and its democratic, accountable structures made it highly responsive to the demands of its diverse membership.

BASSA’s deep embeddedness in the totality of crew’s working lives provided a foundation for the ideological framework through which cabin crew as union members developed a critical understanding of BA’s actions. Their powerful collectivism was nourished through the dispute by communication and mass participation, the skilful use of social media, theatrical mass meetings, carnivalesque rallies at the strike’s headquarters at Bedfont football ground near Heathrow and inventive counter-cultural activity that built confidence and solidarity (Taylor and Moore, 2019: 98–114).

## Research Methods

Primary data deriving from a study of the dynamics of the BA–BASSA conflict consist of 48 semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with cabin crew who had taken strike action.<sup>2</sup> BASSA facilitated access. Researcher positionality is acknowledged consistent with literature on partisan scholarship (Brook and Darlington, 2013). A common interview schedule constructed around distinct themes included employment history, work routines,

work organisation, employment relations, union involvement and experiences of the dispute. Interviews occurred between September 2011 and November 2012 in union offices, hotels, restaurants and crew members' homes, typically lasted 90 minutes and required informed consent. Respondents included 23 men and 25 women, all but six aged over 40 and was diverse in terms of sexuality and ethnicity. The majority worked long-haul on WorldWide, a minority short-haul on Eurofleet and 29 were in senior roles as Cabin Service Directors or Pursers, while 19 were employed as main crew.

The research was informed by the utility of intersectionality as methodology to capture the ways participants might privilege one identity over another, or switch between different social identities that become intertwined in the construction of self-narratives (Buitelaar, 2006). Intersectional methodologies (Nash, 2008) have engaged with the extent to which a categorical approach to inequality aids or hinders analysis. An 'anti-categorical' approach (McCall, 2005) means that researchers do not operationalise one particular social category in the course of *data collection*. Rather, respondents articulate their own identities, the method adopted in this study. However, *analytically*, as Ludvig (2006) suggests, it is difficult to avoid using categories altogether nor, as Walby et al. (2012) contend, is it practical or even desirable. Respondents, including men, were asked about women's involvement, political and social values; feminism, socialism and voting intention, their personal trajectories and transformations. Inductive evaluation of themes emerged from the narratives, with an analytic strategy based on a matrix of responses under appropriate headings and sub-headings (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

A supplementary data source is a pro-union (but BASSA-independent) online forum ('Crew Forum') established before the dispute which had 5000 registered members and threads pertinent to cabin crew work, but not all connected to the union. Administrators granted researchers access to postings and the article draws specifically on a thread centring on class identity.

Duffy et al. (2017: 264) conceive of organisationally idealised gendered subjects as realised through 'corporate aesthetics' and adhere essentially to 'a phenomenological understanding of gender as a performative ontology', and reluctantly abandon structural understandings of gender as organisationally imposed. Instead, this study reconciles phenomenology and historical materialism in so far as it restores a dialectical impulse to class as relationship. Thus, analysis of cabin crew experiences, meanings and identities are embedded in the asymmetrical nature of the employment relationship and, concretely, in the adversarial relations, which provide the distinctive social contexts in which respondents located themselves.

## **Intersectionality and Class: The Findings**

Consistent with Anitha and Pearson's (2018) conceptualisation, cabin crew agency is rooted in, but not defined by, classed, racialised and gendered contexts. However, in distancing themselves from the perceived class militancy of the 1984–1985 miners' strike, they implicitly asserted identities in terms of gender, sexuality and, to a lesser extent, race and ethnicity. Despite an obvious generational gap, the legacy of the miners' strike strongly resonated with all crew.



## *Class Disavowal?*

To what extent was cabin crew diversity in terms of gender, sexuality, race and ethnicity articulated, sublimated or transformed through struggle? Prior to industrial action, although after disclosure of Project Columbus, the Crew Forum hosted a thread on the class character of cabin crew. An online poll produced 108 responses with a clear majority seeing themselves as working class, around a quarter as middle class with two believing that society was classless. An additional 14 thought that class depends 'on your own beliefs/values'. Obviously, these results are merely suggestive and unrepresentative of the crew population. Nevertheless, the discussion resonates with Savage et al.'s (2013) emphasis on class being defined by occupation, background or consumption/lifestyle with a lively discussion of whether class is defined by where cabin crew shopped.

Turning to reflections on class in interviews conducted in the aftermath of the dispute, Richard concurred with the widely held stereotype of cabin crew as middle class seeing their actions as motivated by a quest for justice rather than adherence to class interest. He questioned the association of crews' voting intention and class identity with their motivations and actions (Jarness et al., 2019):

I think the cabin crew if anything tend to be middle class, middle-Englady sort of people with a sense of fairness about us and I think it was this sense of unfairness from our employer that really struck a chord with a lot of people that you would not normally associate with any militant actions. Oh yes, a lot of our members will be staunch Conservative and they might be married to pilots and bankers and this, that and the other. But it was the complete sense of unfairness and unjustification that led people to taking the action that they did.

In contrast, Elizabeth encapsulated the tension between sociological and political definitions of class, suggesting that class was based on crews' shared work experiences and essential collectivism:

You have got that underlying, common denominator, you are all cabin crew, you've all experienced the job. I work for a living therefore I am working class. People fall into this idea that they have become middle class but they haven't. You can be working class, but they try and put it negatively. And that's what impacts, so yes I am working class through and through even though my job title [implies] it might not be.

In Forum postings, both assertions of, and disassociations from, class, confirmed it as a salient identity. The discussion was infused with interrogation of 'middle class' as an appropriate descriptor for cabin crew. During the dispute one media commentator reiterated the caricature of cabin crew as 'the unthreatening faces of Middle Britain – sensible, orderly, down-to-earth people, as far removed from stropky left-wing militancy as you could imagine' (Phillips, 2010). This stereotype may have been internalised for, as Carrie remarked, cabin crew were 'just a bunch of girls or a bunch of gays'.

## *Gendered Relationships: Reproductive and Productive Roles*

As with work, industrial action reflects a gendered intersection of reproductive and productive roles (Anitha and Pearson, 2018). No respondent regretted striking, but the

dispute's 'utterly all-consuming' nature took its toll on physical and mental health and pressurised personal relationships and domestic roles and responsibilities. Savi's words are notable for their insistence that she was not a different person at work and at home, and that commitment to the strike transcended the duality of women's productive and domestic/reproductive roles. The dispute damaged her relationship:

My husband was completely against it, just did not want me to be part of this at all. I said, 'No, you can't tell me what to do, this is me and my dispute', but he said 'We're gonna get affected by it, we've got a mortgage, we've got children, but yeah, fair enough, we'll see what happens.' It did affect my relationship and still does even now. I said 'How can I go to work and not get involved with something so central to my life? How can I just disengage myself from something like this?' I couldn't. I'm not one person here and one person there, it's the same person. Oh, it put a huge strain on my marriage.

In contrast, a hostile media insisted on duality attacking women for neglecting their role as mothers as they acted to defend themselves as workers. Sana recounted her experiences of participating in picket lines and the Bedford rallies:

The *Daily Mail* put my youngest daughter on their website and I wasn't happy . . . she was in Bedford and walking along with me and looked as glum as anything. And they put a picture on there saying about mothers dragging their children too young to understand the picket line and said this little girl looks glum or doesn't look very happy. And a comment was 'Can we go home please Mummy?' I was so cross because it was like questioning my ability to be a mother. Like 'are these people really suitable to be parents if they think it's ok to bring a child to a picket line?'

Kat recalled tensions even when colleagues were supported by their partners:

It became almost obsessional for everybody. There were an awful lot of divorces because these sort of things were happening, where [partners would say] 'Can you get off it and make a cup of tea now, can you get off it and sort the kids out?' From the minute you woke up in the morning to going to bed, it was obsessional. [My husband] was very, very supportive, but it did put a strain on us. It's a busy household and Mum was needed but Mum was involved in a bitter dispute with her employer that took over everything unfortunately.

Cabin crew challenged imposed gendered roles. Shift working on short-haul and long-haul flights meant that they habitually constructed complex childcare routines to manage their work-life balance, particularly where both parents were cabin crew. Consequently, tensions between strike demands and domestic responsibilities were experienced by both men and women. A leading BASSA rep, Tom, who had been fully committed for the entire dispute, admitted that 'during that period I was an absent father . . . giving everything to the union'.

Materially and ideologically, gender and class relations and interests were implicit, but not explicitly articulated. As in wider social movements constructions of identity were internally and externally focused, cognisant of the potential reactions of external audiences (Einwohner et al., 2008).

## *Location and Canon: Distancing from the Miners' Strike*

Thematic analysis of narratives established that the 1984–1985 miners' strike was a key reference point for the construction of identity in the BA dispute. Picket lines at Heathrow and mass rallies at Bedfont were marked by humour, glamour, ebullience and a carnival atmosphere. As the quote below demonstrates, strikers mobilised subjectivity in terms of both sexuality and gender (Duffy et al., 2017), while collectively rejecting comparisons between themselves and the miners in respect, first, of social identities and, second, perceptions of 'militancy'. Their testimonies suggest they used the miners as a cipher for working-class men, implicitly white and heterosexual. For Rhys:

Bearing in mind we are people people and live off our emotions, so we're not the miners, ours are not hard-core macho environments. Our demographic, our girls and gay guys mostly, are not probably the most militant of people . . . We used it [the miners' strike] as an analogy, as probably the last dispute that probably would come anywhere [near us] and you could draw comparisons as it was purely about breaking the union . . . but then we didn't want to go down that route of the image of the aggression and the fighting element with the riots and the police and all that sort of thing. One newspaper titled it as one of the most glamorous picket lines they'd ever seen . . . [on] one of the London phone-ins this guy rang in and said, 'There's no foundation to this, there's no foundation to that picket line.' And one of our girls rang up and said 'I do have to correct you on that. There is more foundation on that picket line than you would get in Debenhams and that's just the men.' And the reporter just fell about laughing. I remember standing there once and this steward walked past in bright pink wellies, waving his flag, and you think, 'What picket line is like this?'

Such distancing from a historical stereotype of trade unionists reflects, in part, the decline of heavy industry and manufacturing, the growth in service activity and record levels of female labour market participation. Simultaneously, it involved a repudiation of a conception of militancy:

There were quotes about, 'We're getting back to the 70s and all cloth caps and whippets. All out, brothers and down the working man's club.' And we were not like that anymore, the human race has evolved and these are gentle people . . . we're not militant, no, we are not militant. We're not militant, we're not radical, we're pragmatic and we're people that want fairness and recognition for what we do. And that is not being a militant. (Stephen)

Kat similarly emphasised what might be defined as gendered performance on picket lines, as a means of differentiation:

We weren't the miners, we were not the typical stereotype. On the picket lines you would see all these glamorous girls and people would comment: 'Oh you don't look the usual militant lot' . . . people have stereotypes, so [when] they think of strikers in this country they go back to the miners' strike, and think of you as that.

Several emphasised a reluctance to describe their actions as militant, perceiving militancy to be gendered and inapplicable to them in terms of age or sexuality. Laurent reflected:

I wouldn't say militant, I think it was my colleague who said that if you've got the majority as either middle-aged women or guys who are homosexual then it's the most opposite of militant you would ever find. I don't want to use the word but I think it's quite laughable. Ok, if they were all like me, short haircut and big bloke, you could understand. But the people we represent, it couldn't be further from the truth. They were very solid.

Others critiqued the term militancy as it implied a reckless rush into striking, which was quite contrary to BASSA's approach. Recalling a discussion prior to the first strike vote, Julianne had opposed a manager's use of this description. While disassociating their actions from those of the miners, she concluded by suggesting the term might nevertheless be appropriate or even appropriated:

What was quite interesting for me was speaking to a manager before we balloted. I said, 'You've got to realise that none of us want to strike.' He then said, 'We are going to sack the first 500 militants.' I said 'How dare you call us militants, but I will be on that [picket] line.' So that made me absolutely furious. I think that BA tried very much to try and make it look like we were the miners. Bill Francis [BA's Head of Inflight Customer Experience] said it reminded him of the miners' strike. Well how could it? We were laughing and joking with the police, they put on music for us to dance to. So we were not like that. I don't know what militancy is, I think it is standing up for what you believe is right.

Crew rejected a homogenised class identity and characterisations of 'militancy' associated with the miners' strike. This served to distance their action from connotations of defeat and the perceived obsolescence of the miners and related class politics. Rather they asserted an inclusive, unified trade union collectivity forged from divergent social identities.

### *Coalescence of Identity as Interest*

Kat celebrated women's role in the dispute but, equally, emphasised that gender, sexuality and race coalesced into an overriding trade union identity:

I think we did a fantastic job for women in Britain [and] showed them that you can go out and have beliefs. I think we changed a lot of people's views. You didn't see gay, white, black, anything, you just saw a trade union member or a non-trade union member – a belief in a sense of injustice.

The experience of conflict can strengthen group consciousness, shared values and identity with the union (Karsh, 1958). Felipe, an openly gay rep, stressed the impossibility of predicting an individual cabin crew member's involvement in the strike from their identity:

What you've got to remember is that our community is made up of so many different people from so many different backgrounds. If you look at the cabin crew population, we're all made up of foreigners and different cultures, different colours, but mainly you will find there is a middle-class white woman. I think the strikers and non-strikers came from all over the mixture, so you had gay men who did strike, gay men who didn't; you had middle-class women who did strike and middle-class women who didn't strike. You had black people who did strike and black people who didn't, because it's such a huge community.

Felipe reiterated the disassociation with the miners and militancy, but highlighted also the contribution of European crew members employed by BA,<sup>3</sup> who brought different histories, understandings of workers' rights and political orientations. Others suggested that an inclusive conception of trade union identity was underpinned by experiences gained by women and more particularly gay crew in struggles for civil and political rights. Asad commented:

Well, I think it is a lot less of a stereotypical workforce, because you have got a lot of people who are openly gay and a lot of women. But then, sometimes those type of people will surprise you in being more attuned to their rights. So if you're gay and you've gone through the whole of the 80s where you had no rights, you are now thinking well, no, I'm not going to go through that again. So it does make you stronger.

Asad's statement chimes with Meyer and Whittier's (1994) discussion of social movement spillover. Yet, while identities arising from gender and sexuality were asserted, female crew wanted to be seen as trade unionists, rather than as 'mothers' or 'women' on strike. Keira, when asked if she regarded herself as a feminist, replied:

Oh yeah, definitely, definitely. I don't know if there's that many feminists who fly. We're mainly made up of women and a lot of very strong women actually, amazingly strong women. I know it was mentioned quite a lot in the press that we were – well in fact the union tried to bring out that generally we're mothers – funnily enough that used to anger me. I didn't want to be thought of as just a mother, I didn't want it to be just because we're poor women that sort of thing, I didn't want it to be a gender-related strike really. To me, it didn't seem to be even though of course it was mainly women.

While explicit identification with feminism was limited, the central role of women was seen as a key strength. The testimonies are littered with observations which critique the dominant caricature of cabin crew in terms of class, sexuality and gender. Stephen, in concurring with the inclusive conception of cabin crew collectivity, offered an ironic take on diversity and identity, but also asserted class as a basis of the dispute:

I don't like to be stereotyped but people do that anyway. So the stereotypical cabin crew member would be middle class, gay and the woman would be married to a pilot. There won't be some hairy-arsed bloke from north-east London like me, but we have people like me. We are a myriad of different people. So we are multifaceted as far as class is concerned, but that is ignored because of stereotyping and identity.

Analysis of the crew's motivations reveals a trade union consciousness, expressed through a powerful sense of occupational community and commitment to BASSA. Respondents considered their most important achievement to be the successful defence of their union. A minority saw the dispute in wider political terms and many crew members reflected on the ways in which their ideas had changed in the course of the protracted dispute and resulting from their active engagement in the struggle. One legacy was widespread disillusionment with the legal and political system and with the Labour Party in particular as the party of government in the first phases of the dispute. Many

believed that the strike had ‘defined them’. They expressed pride in standing up for what was right and revealed an unshakable belief in the power of collectivism.

## Discussion and Conclusion

This study of the BA–BASSA dispute restores work as the key site of class formation. The juxtaposition of the Crew Forum discussion on class with the experience of the cabin crew during the dispute suggests dissonance between sociologically based definitions of class as individual hierarchical differentiation and class as a social relationship integral to capitalism and with conflict and agency both implicit and explicit. In relocating class in relationships of conflict between capital and labour rooted in the workplace, the abstraction and limitations of sociological differentiations are exposed. During a period of historically low strike levels (Kelly, 2015), the BA dispute represents one of the UK’s most bitter recent labour conflicts. It affirmed the collective organisation of labour and strong trade union consciousness. Class identity was not fixed and was underpinned by conceptions of justice and fairness, rather than politicised assertions of class and gender. Cabin crew defied stereotypes of themselves in terms of gender, motherhood, sexuality and class. Yet, they simultaneously rejected a version of class and class militancy based on a perceived historical legacy of class as implicitly white, heterosexual and male. Nettleingham (2017: 853) identifies the retrospective appropriation of experience so that ‘the (re)production of a canonical generation’ informs the narrative construction of political identity. Rather than the miners’ strike being ‘a narrative tool forging necessary myths in an unpromising time’ (Nettleingham, 2017: 862), demarcation allowed a reimagining of class and a move away from the association of a strike with historical defeat and class obsolescence.

It is also important to recognise that the miners’ strike was not the imposition of a politically motivated leadership, but the outcome of longstanding workplace conflicts, attacks on joint regulation and the moral economy of coal communities (Phillips, 2012: 53) – characteristics that resonate with the BA–BASSA dispute. Furthermore, it is argued that Women Against Pit Closures sought to legitimise their political activities through a rhetorical strategy of ‘ordinariness’ (Sutcliffe-Braithwaite and Tomlinson, 2018), echoing crew members’ defence of their action as morally justified.

Evocation of the miners’ strike confirms its contested historic and symbolic importance (Strangleman, 2018), but demonstrates very different gender dynamics. Nettleingham (2017) proposes that the miners’ strike transcended gender, race and sexuality with regards to community and solidarity, and women were vital for sustaining the strike through their social and reproductive labour, the latter chiming with Humphries’ (1977) notion of the extension of domestic roles in defence of family, community and class. The BA–BASSA strike is closer to Grunwick and Gate Gourmet in that women’s mobilisation was firmly rooted in labour market activity, generating tensions between their participation in industrial action and domestic responsibilities although, again, the fact that cabin crew were less segregated in terms of gender meant that their action was comparably not so much a challenge to ‘patriarchal norms’ (Anitha and Pearson, 2018: 124–125).

Just as identities in industrial action are socially and politically constructed, so are evocations of ‘militancy’. If ‘militancy’ is associated with the confrontation with police that characterised picketing in the miners’ strike, then cabin crew were right that their

dispute was qualitatively different. The strikes took place in changed political and legal contexts where mass picketing and secondary action were illegal and the withdrawal of labour entailed increased sanctions. BASSA encountered different obstacles – legal challenges to the right to strike and wholesale victimisations. In periods *between* strike days hostilities between BA and BASSA, and between strikers and non-strikers did not cease. Strikers were subject to managerial discipline frequently in the face of provocation and were compelled to contain their emotions while working ‘normally’. These interludes were not temporary truces but a continuation of the conflict.

Testimonies reveal that intersectional identities coalesced as collective worker ‘interest’ expressed as trade union rather than class consciousness. Following Milkman, BASSA as an occupational union may have been better placed than a general union to build on the informal collectivity that underpinned work and regulated the labour process. Notable recent industrial action by junior doctors (2015–2017) and university staff, (2018 and 2019–2020) both reflect occupational communities and occupational unionism. The National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) was also characterised by strong occupational identity and community. Similarly, BASSA provided the organisational and ideological resources to legitimate *worker* interest, but in its case the union prioritised *inclusive* worker interest over sectional identities. The union did not, then, reduce worker interest to social identities that could be essentialised and marginalised as suggested by Anitha and Pearson (2018) for Grunwick and Gate Gourmet.

Returning to McCall’s (2005) conceptual framework, the research points to the efficacy of an anti-categorical methodological approach, but with analysis critically operationalising social categories. While intersectionality permits exploration of industrial action through the interaction of multiple categories of inequality and the distinct experiences they produce, the BA–BASSA dispute shows the importance of the material and structural basis of labour market segregation *and* the organisational and ideological resources unions can provide. Pearson et al. (2010) emphasise the contingency (time, place and context) of identity formation. The cabin crew narratives help to restore class as a social category to intersectionality, but a version of class that is constituted by and, more importantly, coalesces other social identities through the collective mobilisation that trade unions can provide – a reimagined and reconfigured class identity.

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## **Notes**

1. For extended analysis of adversarial industrial relations between BA and BASSA, see Taylor and Moore (2019).
2. Two interviews conducted with union officers.
3. BA merged with Iberia in January 2011 forming International Airlines Group, but their crew played no part in the dispute.

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