Trade union involvement in broad-based community organising
a comparative study of London, Sydney and Seattle

Dr Jane Holgate
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NOTES
¹ The project was later expanded to include a USA comparative element to the research so a further case study was conducted in Seattle and funding for this element was provided by the Leeds University Business School in 2012.
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Section one

Introduction

This is a comparative study of trade union engagement in broad-based community alliances. It looks at trade union interest and involvement in community-based organising in three cities (London, Sydney and Seattle). The aim was to develop a deep understanding of collaborative working between trade unions and community coalitions to see if their different cultures and methods of organising could be harnessed such that there were mutual benefits – but more importantly, whether collaboration with non-union organisations meant that unions were able to harness greater strength and power to challenge injustice. The research asked to what extent are unions thinking more seriously about community-based organising as a way to become more relevant to the majority of workers who are not in trade union membership.

This research began as a result of an interest in the way that trade unions were responding to decline in power and influence. Following a decade of research into the theory and practice of union ‘revitalisation’ there was recognition that the ‘organising model’ was not resulting in the sort of wins or increase in union membership that was necessary to restore past fortunes (Simms, Holgate, Heery, 2012). It also stemmed from a reading of industrial relations academic literature that seemed to focus primarily on case studies of particular unions or workplaces without a great deal of consideration of the wider social and economic influences on how workers lived their lives in this era of neo-liberalism and globalisation.

It seems that if union renewal is going to be possible, then it requires a much broader engagement with theoretical understandings of the relationship that workers have with each other and the broader economic environment, but also the social and cultural communities of which they are part. To separate work (and unionisation) from wider concerns that people have in civic society seems to be missing an important factor. While work is very important to peoples’ lives (even for those without it), work identity is less so today than it once was. People transition in and out of work/jobs/careers to a much greater extent than was the case in the past, such that many workers do not have a work identity that ties them to a particular job or location – breaking those strong ties that helped cement industrial/occupational unionism in years gone by. Work and workplaces are now much more diverse as a result of greater internal and external migration and patterns of work have changed considerably. Today part-time working (for men as well as women) has meant that workers may have two or more jobs (a portfolio, as some describe these work patterns) – again breaking those past habits where workers joined unions when they started work and remained members until they left at the end of their working lives.

Further, as a result of the decline in collective power, workers are much more vulnerable to exploitation by employers – particularly those workers who are part of sub-contracting chains and agencies that are one, or more, steps removed from the ‘true’ employer. Recent research (Greenwald 2012) estimates that nearly a third of all US workers work contingently – i.e. they are forced to work as ‘self-employed’, as contractors, temps, consultants or ‘project’ workers – taking any risk away from the employer and handing it to the ‘employee’. 
This form of employment, where there is often no fixed or guaranteed hours, blurs the lines between the world of work and the social world. As Greenwald (2012: 116) so eloquently put it:

‘This sense that they are the business [emphasis added] and the need to hustle is at odds with their ability to see themselves as exploited. There is a well-established industry of seminar and workshop leaders, authors, and other gurus who claim to have the magic bullet for freelancers. This has led many of them to internalise their economic insecurity. Rather than blame any economic system that is structured against them, many blame themselves. If only they worked harder, faster, smarter, they would have more security. This mind-set keeps them from organising.’

Although originally conceived of in terms of white collar workers, this ‘freelance’ from of working is no longer the sole preserve of professional workers – today it is just as likely to be blue collar workers in cleaning, catering, hospitality and security type work. As a consequence, unions have found it extremely difficult to organise workers in these circumstances and we see whole sections of the labour market that are without any form of collective bargaining or worker representation. Indeed, in the USA union density in 2013 is just 11.3 per cent – the lowest it has been since the Great Depression in the 1930s. In the UK and Australia the figures are higher (26% and 18% respectively) but nevertheless all the figures show that the vast majority of workers are no longer union members.

A consequence of these factors leads us to question whether it is possible to rebuild union membership up to the levels when the majority of workers were in unions and even more benefited from the gains made by collective bargaining. If it is, given the relative modest success of workplace/industry focus of some organising approaches over the last 10-20 years, it becomes more important than ever to consider union approaches to organising that understand the way that workers’ lives intersect with that of their wider lived experiences.

**Community unionism: why the ‘community turn’?**

Practitioners and academics alike have been grappling with the problems faced by organised and disorganised labour and the increasing disengagement of people from civil society. Robert Putnam’s (2000) book Bowling Alone, which catalogued the collapse and revival of community engagement and the decline in ‘social capital’, is perhaps one the most well-known writings in this area. It has been argued that there has been a tendency over the last decades to rely on the state to make ‘good’ judgement about what is best for society resulting in a lack of independent civic engagement by citizens themselves – although there has been a rapid move away from this perspective in many countries as a neoliberal hegemony has asserted itself and we have seen a significant roll back from state involvement in social care and support.

Yet despite this pessimism about individuals engaging actively over concerns in their communities, we have seen a growing number of community organisations being established in recent years that have mobilised active citizens in their localities to campaign around issues of social and economic justice (Fine 2005b; Gordon 2005; Holgate 2013; Krinsky and Reese 2006; Luce 2004; McAllister 2006; McBride and Greenwood 2009; Reynolds 2006; Rose 2000; Tattersall 2010; Warren 2009; Wills 2004; Wills 2012) – although this should not be overstated as much of this is very small scale activity. Further, the idea of community organising gained an additional boost during Barak Obama’s campaign for the
USA presidency in 2008 as people learned of Obama’s background working as an organiser for a community project that was formed to have an impact on the massive lay-offs and manufacturing plant closings in Southeast Chicago in the 1970s and 1980s. This created a public debate about community organising in the USA and elsewhere as people sought to understand how communities might benefit from organising citizens in their localities.

For some time earlier, academics and scholars had been making arguments that for labour to withstand the attacks brought about by capital flight, contingent work and privatisation a rethinking of the structure and geography of trade unions is required (Herod 2001; Wills 2002). Particularly, it has been argued that a re-scaling of union organising is needed, requiring a shift from the sole focus of the workplace as the place to organise. It has been asserted that there needs to be much broader geographical union/community organising, involving both lived and worked space (Tattersall 2005; 2006; Wills 2001).

To some extent unions have begun to recognise that community has been a neglected space for labour for some time. For example, in the US, Jobs with Justice has been active since 1987 with the ‘vision of lifting up workers’ rights struggles as part of a larger campaign for economic and social justice’. In Australia, the Australian Council of Trade Unions, has talked about a new language of union change around community based organising since 2003 and instigated the highly successful Your Rights@Work campaign in 2005 and, more recently, in 2009 the TUC launched an ‘Active Unions, Active Communities’ initiative in the UK in an attempt to explore joint working initiatives between unions and community organisations.

While trade unions are often accused of rhetoric, there does appear to be a growing commitment to looking at ways of engaging workers in different spaces and a looking to the past for ‘new’ ways of working – yet there has been little analysis of this approach, or that of organisations outside of the union movement – and that was the aim of this research.

This range of factors and circumstances has led to a growing interest in the concept of ‘community unionism’ as a union response to these changing contours of global capitalism and as a way of (re)building citizen involvement in civil society (Banks 1992; Cornfield et al. 1998; Craft 1990; Fine 2005a; Tufts 1998; Wills 2002). Community unionism is, however, an ill-defined concept, although a number of academics have recently been reflecting on what it means in different industrial relations contexts (see for example, McBride and Greenwood 2009). Writers have taken a different theoretical approach to the subject of community unionism, for example, Banks and Tufts (ibid) are concerned with an industrial relations union strategy, Wills (ibid) with a distinctively geographic focus, concerned with how unions are able (or not) to better engage workers in specific localities and across different spaces of organisation, and Fine (ibid) uses issues of identity and social location to think through how workers collectivise. All of these provide extremely interesting insights and one of the aims of this particular research was to try to see how these different theoretical approaches intersect so as to provide a more integrated or nuanced understanding of the way that community organising is played out in different arenas.

As a general concept, community unionism appears to be a relatively simple idea – trade unions and ‘communities’ coming together to organise around issues in common, but the reality is much more complex. Certainly, the idea is not new. Dan Clawson argues that what we have seen in recent years is in fact a ‘new, old form of unionism’ that would have been familiar to activists 50, 100 or 150 years ago (Clawson 2003). Others concur, pointing out that, in the early period of trade union formation, UK unions were very much grounded in local communities where factories and heavy industry were geographically rooted (Holgate...
Trade union involvement in broad-based community organising

2013; Wills and Simms 2004) and this was also the case in the USA (Clawson 2003) and Australia (Taksa 2000). It is the way unions originally organised and continued to do so well into the second half of the twentieth century. This synergy was not broken until shifting geographies of employment destroyed the once stable communities around the docks, mines, mills and areas of heavy industry where union traditions were entrenched in place and where trades union/labor councils played a significant role in their localities.

Yet this simple model whereby trade unions and ‘communities’ come together to organise around issues in common has in the more recent period, in some instances, been fraught with difficulty, particularly when there is a lack of understanding of each other’s aims, objectives and methods.

In part, this is not helped by a lack of theoretical clarity about notion of community unionism, or what unions actually expect from involvement in community-based organising. Recently a collection of scholars have opened up a long-awaited discussion on community unionism as a concept in an attempt to give greater understanding to the growing number of published empirical examples of community organising, but also to provide a theoretical framework for analysis (see McBride and Greenwood 2009 for a collection of scholars writing on this topic). These authors grapple with the multitude of meanings attached to ‘community’ and how unions might use these meanings to reconceptualise how unions view their members and prospective members. A reframing of ‘community’ such that it widens the scope to include those who share a set of common interests and identities, based on an expanded social justice agenda, may reach outside of the workplace and into areas that are not currently touched by ‘traditional’ trade unionism.

Similarly work on ‘coalition unionism’ – where diverse groups from communities and unions come together to engage on joint campaigns develops this theoretical approach to community organising in more detail (Tattersall 2010). Coalition unionism is a different process from that whereby unions ‘reach out’ to work with local community organisations (or vice versa). Coalition unionism is more specific. The organisational and structural relationships in coalitions tend to more complex and require more negotiation, sharing and consensus building across and within organisations. Tattersall suggests a useful analytical triangular framework that encompasses three inter-related concepts (organisation, common interest/identity and place) that more clearly represents the ways in which community is structured – community as organisation, community as common interest or identity and community as place. She argues that this framework enables researchers to question and analyse how communities of organisations, identities and places are constructed and contested and how and why the use of power may vary at different axis – the very questions that are asked in this research project.

As already noted, while trade union community-based organising activity is on the whole fairly small scale, there is evidence of the growth of a number of union/community organisations being established in recent years (in the UK, USA and Australia) where unions have worked in coalitions or collaborations with community organisations (Frege et al. 2004; Rose 2000; Tattersall 2010; Turner and Cornfield 2007) and there are lessons that can be learnt from these initiatives. More recently, the rapid development of the worldwide Occupy movement and the mobilisation in Wisconsin to unseat Governor Scott Walker, who had announced his intention to remove collective bargaining rights for most state employees and cut state aid to education, caught the imagination of organisers around the world.
These campaigns mobilised the grassroots in local communities to take action in ways many had never done before. For many, moral rather than personal issues were at the heart of what caused them to stand up and take action. These were not just ‘bread and butter’ industrial relations issues but were a reconfiguring of the social justice compass and a blatant attack on people, as citizens, not just as workers. This re-framing of industrial relations issues has also caused unions to rethink not only the messages they utilise, but also how the wider public that is not in union membership perceives them. The notion that ‘discourse’ or ‘story’ can have a significant impact on union organising approaches is something to which unions are giving greater consideration as they work with and alongside community organisation. This is a topic to which this research returns as interviewees from the three case studies explain the impact discourse and language has had on the way they do business when working at a community level.

It is for all these reasons that it was considered useful to undertake an international comparative study as most previous academic work on community/union organising has either taken a single case study approach or looked at just one country (an exception is Tattersall 2010 which looked a community coalition-building in Australia and north America). Industrial relations scholars have challenged researchers to engage in more comparative work in order to get to the heart of how and why ‘critical variables such as culture and ideology and the degree of centralization of collective bargaining institutions restrict the responses of individual actors to similar changes in their external environments’ (Locke et al. 1995: 139). The case study research into trade union engagement in community coalitions in London (London Citizens), Sydney (Sydney Alliance) and Seattle (Sound Alliance) provided the perfect opportunity to look at these variables and to ask, as Locke et al advised; what are the dominant determinants of change and patterns of practice observed in different settings? The choice of the case studies made this much easier as the three coalitions in each of the three countries were all part of the same international organisation – the Industrial Areas Foundation – allowing for a strong element of control. Further rationale for the case studies and the methods and approach adopted are considered in the next section.

Finally, it is useful to note that the research builds upon work already undertaken by the author on London Citizens since 2001 (Holgate 2009; 2013; Holgate and Wills 2007). Previous research has included interviews with and participant observation of trade unionists in London exploring relationships and views of this type of community-based organising. This previous research has primarily focused on the conflict in the Living Wage campaigns and different approaches of trade unions and London Citizens. The difference between this research and past work is not only its comparative nature but that it goes beyond the specifics of a particular campaign to assess whether there are more fundamental elements within industrial relations systems that are either conducive to coalition-building or that create barriers for possible joint working.
Trade union involvement in broad-based community organising

Saul Alinsky who developed a model of community organising the essence of which has continued until today
Section two

Research approach and methods

This research is a comparative study of different union and community forms of civil engagement in the UK, the USA and Australia and it mainly focuses on three organisations in London, Seattle and Sydney. The three organisations (London Citizens, the Sound Alliance and the Sydney Alliance) are part of the same family – the Industrial Areas Foundation – allowing for a useful comparison.

Background to the Industrial Areas Foundation

In the 1930s, Saul Alinsky developed a model of community organising the essence of which, while constantly refined, has continued until today (Alinsky 1972; Fink 1983). The Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) grew out of Alinsky’s work among largely immigrant communities in Chicago where community leaders were taught about power, relationships, and the importance of organisations and action for social change. From the 1950s onwards, a key to the IAF’s success was its intensive training programme for local leaders to educate them about so-called universals of organising that would enable them to take up their own issues in their communities. Its ‘Iron Rule’ was, and still is, ‘never do for others what they can do for themselves’. Central to the IAF approach to community organising and coalition-building is ‘relational organising’ whereby the emphasis is on individuals building relationships with others in the coalition, prior to any issue-based organising. A central tenet of IAF philosophy, relational meetings – one-to-ones with other members of the group – are the very essence of a form of community organising that differs from that of trade union approaches where the focus is much more on issues first (Chambers 2009; Gecan 2002).

In the 1960s, IAF established an Institute in Chicago where training was provided to leaders of the emerging Civil Right Movement (Byrd 1996) and training of community leaders has remained at the heart of IAF philosophy. Many organisations have since adopted the approach of the Industrial Areas Foundation that Alinsky established in the stockyards of Chicago, such that the organisation has grown to 60 IAF affiliates organising mainly in the US, but also in Canada, Germany, the UK and more recently, Australia, and nearly all are organising in predominantly poor, black and migrant communities. Since the 1960s there has been a growth in networks similar to the IAF including the Pacific Institute for Community Organization (PICO), National People’s Action (NPA), Gamaliel and the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN) – all of who adopt a community organising approach that grew out of the Alinsky model. Some of these are predominantly faith-based organisations, whereas others have a much broader civil society base.
Union involvement in IAF organisations: the three case studies

Yet despite the success of this type of community organising or coalition building, trade unions (less so in the US), but particularly the UK, have not had significant involvement in these community-organising networks – even when campaigns have centred on what might be termed ‘employment issues’. There are of course a few exceptions and ACORN has probably had more involvement than the others, but these are sporadic and localised exceptions. Similarly, some IAF groups in the US have had varying degrees of union involvement, particularly around living wage campaigns, but these are more the exception than the rule (see for example Walsh 2000) – and in a sense it is these exceptions which are the focus of the research – why did/do unions get involved – what was/is the purpose and what did/do they hope to achieve?

The three case studies were chosen because of trade union involvement in this form of community organising. The aim was to explore in more detail what unions were learning or benefiting from broadening their base in their local communities. The first case study is that of London Citizens. London Citizens (formally the East London Communities Organisation – Telco) has been running a living wage campaign in London since 2001 and has had considerable success (Holgate and Wills 2007; Wills 2004). It has worked with a small number of local trade union branches that have become members of the organisation and London Citizens has received significant funding from one national union (Unison). However, overall trade union involvement or engagement with London Citizens has been limited and many trade unions and members are distinctly hostile to any form of joint working (see Holgate 2009 for detailed discussion on this). In practice the two types of organisations (labour and community) have found it difficult to work together as a result of different ideological (or non-ideological) approaches to issues such as power, politics, democracy, self-organisation. Notions of public and private space have also been areas of contestation leading to a questioning of ‘ownership’ of workplace and community spaces in terms of organising practice.

In contrast, the Sydney Alliance, also part of the Industrial Areas Foundation, has a different genesis from that of London Citizens. Its foundation and early organising stage had the support and backing of a number of trade unions. Indeed, the canvassing stage of the project was undertaken as a consequence of financial support and political endorsement from Unions New South Wales (Unions NSW)², which allowed community organisers to meet with organisations to gauge the level of support likely for a community organising coalition. Further, the establishment of the Australian Congress of Trade Unions’ ‘Your Rights at Work’ national campaign in 2005, which succeeded in mobilising hundreds of thousands of workers and citizens to challenge the attacks by the Howard government on workers’ rights, meant that the value in organising outside the workplace had already been recognised by many unions. As a newly developing organisation (it began its organising in June 2007 and did not publicly launch until September 2011) it is useful to analyse the growth of Sydney Alliance to explore how organisations new to community organising respond to this form of broad-based coalition-building. This different genesis from that of London Citizens provides a unique opportunity to understand how labour organisations might spread their influence in wider civil society.

The third IAF case study – that of the Sound Alliance in Seattle – adds further interesting dimensions. It differs from both London and Sydney in the dominance of trade unions in the coalition. While London has very little trade union engagement and Sydney began striving for a balance between labour/NGOs/faith, Seattle had two-thirds of its organisations
in membership from unions and the remaining from faith organisations in 2012 at the time the research took place.

A more detailed discussion of each of these organisations and their relationship with unions will follow.

**Community unionism in UK unions**

In addition to the three international case studies mentioned above there is another element to the research, which focuses on what is taking place in UK unions with regards to community organising although this is not a primary focus of this report. The UK’s Trade union Congress (TUC) has, for some time, been considering how to (re)engage with communities. Indeed, a conference titled ‘community unionism’ was held at the TUC in January 2003 with a wide range of participants from NGOs and third-sector organisations and since then there have been numerous discussions and roundtables discussing the ideas, but there had been limited practical activity until, in 2009, the TUC decided to run a number of funded pilot projects under the title of ‘Active unions, active communities’ (AUAC). The first part of the TUC’s AUAC project was to fund a number of small-scale local projects and to evaluate what type of community/union organising activity was taking places across the UK with an aim of encouraging unions to engage with communities and community organisations.

A survey prior to its launch showed that ‘by comparison to the general populace, considerable amounts of time and effort are expended by union reps in extra-workplace campaigns’ (Gall 2009). A report on the pilot projects concluded: ‘the time is ripe for greater engagement between British trade unions and community organisations. Shared interests and strategies can build social cohesion, encourage active citizenship and forge alliances with the broader public that will assist union campaigning against cuts in public services’ (Wright 2010: 58). Since then, the TUC moved forward with this agenda and recruited four community organisers in early 2012 to spearhead local community organising projects and to test new ideas and innovative approaches – unfortunately, despite initial success, the project met an early demise after 12 months when TUC affiliates decided to direct scarce resources elsewhere.

At the same time, a number of unions (Unison, Unite and the TSSA) have started to develop community organising projects and have recruited community organisers tasked with this specific responsibility. These new developments provide an opportunity to look internally at what these three unions are bringing to community-based work and/or community coalition-building and to unpack underlying differences and similarities. Interviews have taken place with organisers and key informants in each of these unions and the TUC and this research is still on-going. As such, this part of the research will not be reported here but further details can be found at the research tab at http://business.leeds.ac.uk/about-us/faculty-staff/member/profile/jane-holgate/

**A multi-method approach**

While one of the aims of this project was to contribute to the academic literature on unions and their place in this era of globalisation and neo-liberalism, the research was also conceived in such a way that it should also be of use to those beyond the academic community. Its aim is that the findings should be distributed to participants, public bodies, community organisations, trade unions and related stakeholders such that they are able to make evidence-based policy decisions about how to address vulnerable and marginalised workers who do not yet have the benefits of union membership, and to stimulate a wider discussion about developing strategies so that they might have the opportunity to become more active citizens
within their communities: that is therefore the main purpose of this report.

A multi-method qualitative approach was adopted mainly using one-on-one interviews and participant observation and there has been considerable dissemination of research findings to practitioner bodies (see the end of the report for details).

The majority of the research was undertaken from February 2011 to July 2012 – although as already noted, research on London Citizens has been on going since 2001 and the research is continuing as further developments occur. Data referred to in this report on the methodology largely refers to that undertaken in 2011 and 2012. To date (July 2013) 141 interviews have been undertaken with 117 individuals (some were interviewed on two or more occasions over the period of the research). Data from interviews was recorded and transcribed and interviews included face-to-face interviews and electronic face-to-face video interviews via Skype. Interviewees included staff working for London Citizens (4), Sydney Alliance (4) and Sound Alliance in Seattle (3) as well as the TUC and affiliated unions (28). It also included lay leaders and members of each of the organisations and Table 1 shows the breakdown of these in terms of the organisations from which they were recruited for interview. Given the main focus of the research was trade union engagement in these community organisations, trade unionists formed the greater number of interviewees (104 out of 117) – and this was the route by which most were contacted for interview (81). This does not however mean that these interviewees only identified as trade unionists – many were involved in community organisations and faith groups – indeed 40 of the 117 interviewees reported that they were members of a faith community. Sixty-nine of the interviewees are male and 48 female.

Table 1: number of interviewees

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<th>London Citizens</th>
<th>Sydney Alliance</th>
<th>Sound Alliance</th>
<th>TUC and unions</th>
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<td>36</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>28</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total number of interviews</td>
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<td>48</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>141</td>
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<tr>
<td>– contact via faith org</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>9</td>
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<tr>
<td>– contact via union</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– contact via community org</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>29</td>
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Participant observation was used to note the interactions between members of the different groups – an essential method in this case because ‘relational action’ was central to the IAF’s philosophy, but this concept was often quite alien to trade unions. It was also important to get a feel for the way the organisations did business – their cultures, their democracy and the involvement of the different parties and how they related to each other. Participant observation involved three weeks in Sydney working from the Sydney Alliance office and two weeks in Seattle working from the Sound Alliance office.

As well as observation of day-to-day activity, I also attended meetings and training sessions and one-to-one meetings with members of the community coalitions. I was fortunate to be in Sydney in the run up to (and the week after) the Sydney Alliance’s founding assembly of over 2000 people from member organisations. In London, I have attended many of London Citizens events, including meetings, the coalition’s assemblies and actions, as well as workshops and events of individual trade unions and the TUC. Data from participant observation (thoughts, observations and photographs) were recorded in a diary and entered into qualitative software (NVIVO) for analysis along a number of key themes – these will be discussed later in the report.
Section two: Research approach and methods

Data analysis

An iterative process was used for analysis and a close reading of transcripts and diaries was undertaken in an attempt to answer the research questions. A coding system was developed from the following research questions.

Research questions:

1. Why have union movements in the UK, USA and Australia taken different approaches in their attempts to work with local communities? To what extent is this affected by different legal/industrial relations systems, union culture, different perspectives of power and control and historical legacies?

2. Does the fact that the Sydney Alliance, for example, was instigated from within the trade union movement make a difference to the level of trade union involvement and the degree of commitment to community based organising? Does it make a difference to the campaigns that are chosen and the way they are mobilised?

3. Does the balance of particular types of communities (member organisations) affect the way broad-based community-coalitions are perceived and thus attract or deter unions from joining? Are there issues of hegemony or dominant discourses within alliances, which make it more or less easy for unions to engage in joint working?

4. Is there a danger that trade unions may try to determine that the agenda of community coalitions is more focused on work, industrial or economic issues at the expense of more ‘community-focus’ concerns? How do interest groups ‘negotiate’ over these priorities? What strategies/practices are used to create balance between the organisations and which ones are most successful?

5. If the campaigns of the community coalitions are not specifically ‘union-focused’ (i.e. those that are seen to have specific material benefit it terms of the employment relationship) will union members stay committed to community-based organising? Will the concept of an agenda for the common good have sufficiently wide appeal to trade unionists to maintain their involvement? If so will this lead to a renewal of trade unions’ social justice agenda at work (i.e. around equalities, work experience, training, development etc.) as opposed to ‘mere’ wages and hours? Or, how and to what extent does an agenda for the common good operate to benefit the direct interests of member organisations?

Established strategies were used to analyse data: coding, memoing and integrative sessions. Thoughts and ideas were memoed as they evolved throughout the study – an open process that was later refined to focus on emerging core concepts. Integrative sessions were used to share ideas with research participants via follow up interviews to increase insight. Comparison (similarities and differences) between the organisations were explored to understand and identify meanings and interpretations expressed by individuals or groups within the coalitions as to their reasons for belonging to and building of the coalitions. This form of qualitative data analysis aims to aid theory-building through facilitating comparison, categorisation and integration of categories. This approach is data led – an interpretive process – looking at how interview partners construct their own understandings of social justice, citizenship, and trade union organising activity.

NOTES

2 Unions NSW is the Labor Council (federation of unions) with over 67 Affiliated unions representing over 800,000 workers in New South Wales, Australia.
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Section three

Background to the three case study organisations

This section will take a brief look at the history and formation of the three case study organisation to provide some context to how they are operating today. We will begin with London Citizens as the longest established organisation, followed by the Sound Alliance and concluding with the Sydney Alliance, which was only formally launched in September 2011.

Firstly it is useful to look at the Industrial Areas Foundation’s organising approach as this is shared by the three case study organisations. For those interested in the history of the IAF’s formation in 1940, there is much written on the topic (Alinsky 1972; Chambers 2009; Fink 1983; Horwitt 1989; Horwitt 2007), but that is not the focus of this research. Instead the focus here is on its activity today and the extent to which trade unions are engaged in these coalitions and the effect it has on them as organisations.

Although each of the IAF chapters in each country is run independently, they each follow a distinct methodology. While there are now many divergent approaches to community organising – most have their roots in the work of the IAF – and as keen followers of IAF activity have noted, ‘the IAF’s methods have been more frequently copied or adapted than any other approach’ (Robinson and Hanna 1994: 64). The IAF has a series of straplines, statements or phrases that it constantly uses to reinforce its message and cultivate a particular image and culture. One of these sets out where it stands politically – ‘The IAF is non-ideological and strictly non-partisan, but proudly, publicly, and persistently political’ (IAF 2012). This message reinforces that they do not admit political parties as member organisations, nor do they endorse politicians, or align themselves with political parties. Instead they aim for a public engagement with politicians, business leaders and holders of power in order to hold them to account over issues of social and economic justice. In a sense the underlying philosophy and ideology is very much related to pragmatism and compromise – recognising that what they can achieve is very much dependent upon the power the community organisation can wield at any particular time.

IAF organising concepts revolve around three main elements – power, self-interest and public relationships. IAF chapters aim to develop an understanding within organisations in the coalition that relationships of power either allows or prevents change – power itself is neither good, not bad, but can be misused. Power is conceptualised in terms of organised people and organised money – and the former often needs to challenge the latter. The IAF recognises that self-interest, rather than altruism, is what often motivates most people, particularly people from poor or marginalised communities, to act and they have no problem with this (indeed this particular conceptualisation of mobilisation theory relates directly to their golden rule of not doing for others what they can do for themselves). Thirdly the building of public relationships within and between member organisations helps to establish a strong base from which to build power for the community and to challenge those with power over the community.
Training of community leaders is central to what the IAF does – to teach the art of politics so that they are able to cultivate and deepen the art of public relationships – ‘the IAF has a radical belief in the potential of the vast majority of people to grow and develop as leaders, to be full members of the body politic, to speak and act with others on their own behalf’ (IAF 2012). It does this through its method of ‘relational organising’, which it contrasts with union organising which is primarily based around issues. As one commentator (O’Halloran 2006) puts it; ‘in relational organising, building and maintaining an organisation capable of wielding sufficient power to resolve collective issues, is seen as the end in itself rather than simply the means to an end’ and this is a big difference between union and community organising approaches. The purpose of the training and the development of leaders are influenced by Alinsky’s golden rule of ‘never do for others what they can do for themselves’. There is however a false dichotomy between relational and issue-based organising as both involve elements of each, but what it does highlight is the relatively balance or importance given to one form of organising over the other. For the IAF, the relationship building comes first (power before programme) and for trade unions it is usually the issue that is driving the activity.

Another methodological approach is that the IAF is organised via institutions rather than through individual membership. The organisations that are targeted for membership are largely faith-based (congregations) but also include schools, unions, non-profits and neighbourhood and civic organisations that are rooted in traditions of faith and democracy and share concerns whereby they want to act on the root causes of inequality and injustice in their neighbourhoods. Member organisations pay annual dues depending on the size of
Section three: Background to the three case study organisations

the organisation, which often is a significant amount of money, and this is usually done at a public assembly where member organisations annually renew their pledge to work together in coalition for the common good.

There is a fairly high degree of internal discipline within the IAF as member organisations are expected to demonstrate their accountability to their members and the coalition by turning out people to take part in activities and assemblies – again presentation in the public sphere is important in demonstrating power and support from member organisations across civil society.

One final point, but one worth noting as it has been at the heart of tensions between the IAF and other organisations, is the way IAF groups do not take public stances on controversial issues of sexism, homophobia, racism, etc. That is not to say that these are not challenged in personal interactions – but they are not specific issues around which the IAF would organise. Their rationale for this approach is that the focus is on breaking down barriers through personal interaction and people recognising each other as humans worthy of respect through working together instead of starting from a fixed position or an ‘abstract debate’ about pre-existing prejudice. In a sense, it is an argument for developing people’s understanding of these issues from praxis rather than ‘preaching’ and getting people to ‘sign up’ to an agreed position on issue of racism, sexism, homophobia etc. before they can be part of the organisation. This neutrality is considered essential for organising around issues for the ‘common good’ – issues that are seen to be divisive or likely to fracture the working together of groups with diverse political and cultural viewpoints are ‘left at the door’.
Case study one: London Citizens

London was not the first choice of city for establishing the first IAF group in the UK. There had been an attempt to set up a group called Communities Organising for a Greater Bristol (COGB) many years before the establishment of the East London Communities Organisation (Telco) – the first chapter of London Citizens. The London Citizens Director, Neil Jameson, lived in Bristol at the time and while spending six weeks in the USA he came across broad-based community alliances and decided he would like to establish one in the city on his return. COGB lasted a few years but after Jameson left the organisation it ran out of money and ‘fizzled out’ and it was after that he was invited to London by a group of religious leaders who were interested in establishing a similar organisation in east London. But during this early period there were also attempts to establish IAF groups in Sheffield, Liverpool, North Wales and the Black Country – all of which never fully established themselves for any length of time.

Jameson came to London in 1994 and began the preliminary organising to get Telco off the ground. Telco was launched in 1996 with 45 institutions in membership and although unions had been approached to get involved, Jameson reported that they were not interested because ‘we had no programme, we had no agenda’ and without that it was difficult to create any interest. It was not until five years later that there was a breakthrough with the unions and this was around the living wage campaign that was launched in 2001. Foundation funding of around 2 million pounds in Telco’s first 10 years allowed the organisation to take on a big issue like the living wage campaign and they were fortunate to receive the support of the largest public sector union, Unison, with whom they had developed a relationship through a national officer.

Typically IAF organisations spend the first few years building the organisation and developing leaders through training programmes in relational organising and it is not before there are a substantial number of institutions in membership that the organisation is formed and then starts to think about what it is they will organise around. This is generally done through listening campaigns in each institution to find out what people feel most strongly about and even more importantly what they are prepared to act upon. As Jameson explained ‘after four years we judged people would then be ready to organise.’

The decision to approach faith organisations in the first instance was described as a pragmatic rather than a ideological decision: ‘we started with where people want to organise and where people gather and the trade unions don’t have a tradition of gathering any more…it’s just they haven’t got the glue in Britain that you need for the permanent fight which involves turnout.’ Nevertheless, a number of Unison’s branches in east London did join Telco after they were approached to get involved in the living wage campaign.

The living wage campaign was focused around a number of east London hospitals and staff and union members at these locations joined in the campaign. Telco was supportive of the unions when they decided to take strike action in pursuit of their pay claim in 2003. While they did not achieve the demand for a living wage (until 2006) they did receive immediate pay increases up to 13 per cent and improved terms and conditions including sick pay in 2003 (see Wills 2004 for details of this campaign).
Since 2001, the notion of a living wage has caught the imagination of the general public and more importantly politicians. It was estimated that by 2011 that 10,000 workers had been uplifted from the minimum wage (£6.08 in 2011 – now £6.31 in 2013) to the living wage (£8.30 in 2011 – now £8.55 in 2013) amounting to almost 100 million paid in increased wages.

Employers agreeing to pay the London living wage include: universities (e.g. University of London colleges: SOAS, LSE, Goldsmiths, Birkbeck, Queen Mary, LSHTM), major banks (e.g. Barclays, HSBC, Deutsche Bank, Morgan Stanley, Lehman Bros, Linklaters), local councils, Transport for London and a whole host of other organisations. London Citizens is proud that it was able to negotiate living wage contracts with the Olympic Delivery Authority such that the ODA claims that 82 per cent of employment was compliant with living wage, which one observer estimates to be equivalent to around 500 jobs (Wills 2011).

But since 2001 the notion of the living wage being a benchmark below which workers’ wages should not fall has also spread beyond London, such that there are now 205 employers who have been accredited as living wage employers – 12 of which are local authorities. In addition, 20 more local authorities have also committed themselves to pay the living wage but have not yet gained accreditation.

Despite these successes trade union involvement with London Citizens has remained marginal with only a few local union branches in membership at any one time and only around 10 overall since the first few Unison branches joined in the early 2000s. As of June 2013 London Citizens had 229 member organisations with only 3 of these trade union branches (one Unison, one Unite, one PCS) – and these were unable to turn out more than a handful of members to events and actions. The early difficulties and tensions unions and London Citizens have had in their relationship have been documented elsewhere (Holgate 2009; Holgate 2013) and of course this will be investigated in greater depth later in this report.

There have a number of other campaigns besides the Living Wage campaign, these have included ‘Strangers into Citizens’, which was calling for an amnesty of undocumented migrant workers; a City Safe campaign largely led by school children to get local businesses and organisations to offer their premises as CitySafe Havens for any young person in danger as well as lots of campaigning around the Olympics and the Olympic legacy to create jobs for local people.

The structure of London Citizens is that is the umbrella group of five chapters based around the geography of the local authority boroughs in London – The East London Communities Organisation (Telco, the first IAF group in London), South London Citizens, West London Citizens, North London Citizens and Shoreditch Citizens.

NOTES

3 This is not an unusual occurrence – community organisations often flounder one or more times before they final get to establish themselves.
Case study two: Sound Alliance

The Sound Alliance is based in the city of Seattle on the north west coast in the state of Washington USA, but covers the Seattle metropolitan district that stretches over a long linear stretch of land between the Puget Sound and Lake Washington (an area that takes several hours to drive across). The geography of this area provides a considerable challenge to the building of a community coalition with common purpose, as it can be hard for people to participate in meetings when they have to travel such long distances. Further, community organising is best carried out in people’s own lived and worked spaces, so it can be difficult to create a cohesiveness with communities that are, geographically, miles apart.

Nevertheless the organisation was founded in 2008 and had 750 people at its first assembly and it has continued to sustain itself and campaign around issue of the ‘common good’. It was the second IAF group in the state, the other being the Spokane Alliance, which was founded a few years earlier 232 miles east of Seattle. The founder of both groups was Joe Chrastil who is now the lead organiser for the North West region of the IAF – covering Seattle, Spokane, Oregon, Alberta in Canada and Sydney in Australia.

The Sound Alliance, the focus of this research, began as most IAF organisations do, with a 3-year organising process prior to the founding assembly. During this time patient coalition-building works takes place, working to get member institutions signed up and to undergo training of community leaders. This included getting unions on board at the start – as well as faith organisations and other community groups. The director explained that they engaged with unions, not primarily on the basis of issues, but in the context of doing organisational and leadership development, as they were doing with the churches. This was done in the context of union decline and a fall in the participation of union members within their organisations and seemed an attractive way to appeal to the self-interest of unions in trying to rebuild their organisations. Because of the work done earlier in Spokane, where they had run a number of campaigns around funding for public transit and creating jobs by doing energy efficiency retrofits, there was a ‘track record’ of success that facilitated unions’ interest in joining the Sound Alliance.

The Sound Alliance is fairly unusual in the IAF in the extent of its union involvement in the organisation as 20 of the 32 member institutions were (at the time of the research) union locals (branches) and the remainder (bar one–a migrant worker centre) made up of faith institutions. Usually, faith groups and NGOs predominate and unions are either not in membership, or like London Citizens, union involvement is minimal. The Sound Alliance did approach a number of unions who were not interested in getting involved or dropped out prior to the founding assembly as these had tended to approach the coalition as a way of advancing a ‘predetermined agenda’ and had a fairly narrow focus around which they wanted to act. As of July 2013 the balance of organisations had changed slightly: there are now 29 member institutions, 18 of which are trade unions.

The unions that have shown the most interest in coalition-building in Seattle have been the building trades unions: the plumbers and pipefitters, the electrical workers,
Section three: Background to the three case study organisations

Sheet metal workers, laborers, the insulators, engineers and painters and allied trades. But the union representing teachers and support staff, the Education Association has six locals (branches) in membership and there is representation from the federation of teachers and the amalgamated transit union. Interestingly, the unions most associated with the 'organising model' – the Teamsters, Service Employees International Union, United Food and Commercial Workers and the Farm Workers of America – are not part of the Sound Alliance. Although the Teamsters and the UFCW did join in the early days, they dropped out of membership, partly through a change of leadership (union buy-in from senior leadership appears to be crucial to involvement) and partly because they did not really involve their membership in Alliance activity or invest time and resources in training to fully understand what they might get out of participation.

Like other IAF groups, membership dues are of particular significance within the organisation, not merely as a way of funding the organisation – although of course that is very important for sustainability – but also to cement the relationship of the membership institutions within the coalition. It demonstrates a significant commitment from the organisation to being involved and playing a role to build the coalition. So annual dues in the Sound Alliance range from $1,000 to $15,000 and out of this, the salaries of two full-time staff are paid as well as funding for campaigns and leadership training. The dues make up around 50 per cent of the Alliance's income, the rest coming from charitable foundations.

In terms of activity and campaigns, the most notable work done by the Sound Alliance has been around 'green jobs'. Their sister organisation – the Spokane Alliance – through public campaigning, convinced Spokane Public Schools to adopt policies for tying sustainable environmental building requirements with apprenticeships so as to create pathways for students into green construction jobs. This then evolved into a much larger campaign/project called SustainableWorks and the Sound Alliance worked with their member institutions to lobby the state legislature to raise funds for neighbourhood based retrofit projects (upgrading thermal efficiency of existing homes). They were successful in 2009 in convincing the state Governor to put $14.5 million of Obama stimulus money into a community energy efficiency pilot programme 'to create living wage jobs and the pathways to them, provide social and economic benefits for families, and improve the environment by upgrading the existing building stock'.

Since that time and by February 2013, SustainableWorks claims to have completed $7 million in home retrofits business, performed 2,000 audits and 740 whole-house retrofits and employed 230 people full-time equivalents (directly and though sub-contractors) into union jobs. Another more recent victory for the coalition is the work
Trade union involvement in broad-based community organising

done in 2012 with the Spokane Alliance to deliver key swing votes for a $1.1 billion statewide jobs bill that is creating 20,000 jobs over the next three years in the hard hit construction industry.

Given that levels of unemployment in the buildings trades in Seattle are as high as 30 per cent, the motivation for union involvement in the Sound Alliance for union locals covering this sector seems obvious. There are clearly demonstrable, instrumental and tangible benefits for union members in this form of community organising. Similarly another effective campaign was the way in which the Sound Alliance conducted a campaign around preventing foreclosure where member
Section three: Background to the three case study organisations

Institutions came together to train more than 100 of their members to be more effective advocates for themselves. In doing so, the coalition pressed Bank of America to open their first customer service centre in Washington State in 2011 to deliver in-person loan servicing support for distressed borrowers trying to save their homes.

The question posed at the start of this research was about why are some of these community organising coalitions successful in engaging trade unions and others are not? Why is it that some unions choose to get involved and others do not? We will be looking at some of the answers to these questions later in the report.
Case study three: Sydney Alliance

The Sydney Alliance is the newest of the three case studies in this research and although it operates using the same methodology (as do all IAF groups), it does have some differences to London Citizens and the Sound Alliance. The first of these is that its genesis and leadership is a little different. The founder and current director of the Alliance, Amanda Tattersall, came from the trade union movement. Although she has a background in working as a professional community organiser, in an NGO, she was, prior to establishing the Sydney Alliance, working as a union organiser and was elected to the position of Deputy Assistant Secretary with Unions NSW, the central labor council in Sydney representing 800,000 trade union members.

This direct link with the union movement made it possible to convince Unions NSW and a number of unions to come on board with the coalition at the start. Unions NSW provided the seed money necessary to establish the coalition and talked to their affiliates about why they should play a role in developing a city-wide community organising strategy that would benefit the union movement. So right from the start there was a degree of trust in what the Sydney Alliance were doing, as Amanda, the coalition’s director, was perceived to be ‘one of us’ by the unions involved.

A second difference, but related to the above point, is the way that the Sydney Alliance targeted ‘peak’ bodies or institutions for membership at the start of their organising phase. Usually, IAF groups start at the grass roots in a neighbourhood (like London Citizens did in the east end of London), talking to individual institutions like a local church or school or community group. The philosophy is based around local institutions that can organise local people to challenge organised money to do the right thing. Instead, the Sydney Alliance differed in its approach. Its plan was to create a buy-in and interest from these peak or regional institutions, recognising that they have considerable power and influence over their local institutions. It was felt that if they were able to draw in these bodies into membership at the start, then it would make the task of bringing in local groups much easier at a later stage.

A third difference was the deliberate policy at the outset to try to create a relative balance between the types of institutions in membership. A careful process at the start of approaching organisations from faith, labour and community in equal numbers, as well as seeking to ensure a balance between organisations from each of these sectors, was a conscious attempt at creating the broadest base. The aim was not to exclude or put off organisations that might be at odds with institutions in their own area. For example, care was taken to ensure there was a balance of ‘left’ and ‘right’ unions to demonstrate the Alliance did not lean in a particular political direction. As IAF groups often stress, they are ‘non-ideological and strictly non-partisan, but proudly, publicly, and persistently political’ (IAF 2012).

Another advantage (in terms of union involvement) was that in 2005, the Australian Congress of Trade Unions, organised a national campaign that was focused in the community – Your Rights@Work’ – which succeeded in mobilising hundreds of thousands of workers and citizens to challenge the attacks by the Howard government
on workers’ rights. This meant that broad support for union/community organising already existed in many unions and this recent history led to significant resonance from unions to the idea of community organising.

The Sydney Alliance began organising in June 2007 and held its founding assembly in September 2011 with around 2100 people in attendance from 45 member institutions (10 unions, 18 faith, 17 community). It has, since then, been focusing on ‘going deep’ – establishing more locally based membership institutions in a series of districts across Sydney. Like Seattle, Sydney is a sprawling city covering an area of 650 square miles, and like Sound Alliance, Sydney Alliance is organising across the vast suburbs as well as the city – unlike London Citizens, which has a much more compact focus.

Less advanced than the other two case studies, nevertheless the Sydney Alliance has begun to make its presence felt as social justice coalition campaigning for the ‘common good’ of Sydney’s citizens. In late 2012, the Shop, Distributive and Allied Employees Association came to the Sydney Alliance to see if they could work together to defend public holidays.

Together, and despite the New South Wales government pushing a law that would have seen workers being forced to work on the Boxing Day public holiday, they held a successful campaign to keep the holiday public. Both sides knew that they could not do this alone, but together they realised that they had greater power: ‘We in the Alliance knew that many of our religious and community partners would be interested in the issue of public holidays too – and we thought that by working together, we could make a difference’. It is also working closely with the Rail, Tram and Bus Union, one of the Alliance’s member institutions in a community-based campaign around safety for passengers and staff on rail stations.

As of July 2013, Sydney Alliance has grown in membership to 51 institutions, 22 of these are community organisations, including a number of immigrant rights organisations, 19 faith-based groups and 8 trade unions (3 unions left and another one joined). Although unions are now in the minority, they are much bigger and powerful organisations than many of the others in membership. The three that left are the Public Services Association, the National Union of Workers and the NSW Teachers Federation. In part this was due to union responses to aggressive industrial relations reforms by the government, which meant that union focus was switched to defensive mode and the traditional industrial relations response of demonstrations and mass rallies. It was also a response from union leaders who were either cynical about community organising, believing they could carry on organising as before, or were concerned about building relationships in the coalition that included others outside the Labor Party.
Section four

Research findings

This section will take a look at issues that arose from the discussion with trade unionists and people involved in each of the community coalitions, in an attempt to unpack the reasons why people and organisations do and don’t get involved in this type of community organising. It will look at a whole host of issues from motivation, union and community leadership, structural and cultural differences between different organisations, the tensions involved in different ways of working, the ideology and politics of coalition building, language and discourse of community organising, education and training and finally, the prospects for union renewal.

The interviews unearthed a vast amount of information on all these issues and over 500,000 words of interviewees have been transcribed. While it would be wonderful to be able to present all of this information only a fragment can be included in a report of this size; further publications from the research are planned over the next couple of years. This report will, however, try to use as many as possible the actual words spoken by the participants in this research in order to accurately represent their views on the above topics.

This section will begin by taking a look at a few of the stories of those who have taken part in the research – their backgrounds and what motivated them to get involved in union and community organising. These biographical narratives are helpful in understanding who people are, and a bit about how their identities intersect. To assist analysis in research we often categorise and put people into boxes – in this case for example, trade unionist, non-unionist, community activist, faith background, non-faith background – but we know that life is much more complex than that. While categorisation can be helpful to code large quantities of data, a reading of the transcripts also reveals that many of us resist categorisation in this way – we have multiple identities and it is this rich tapestry of life that demonstrates the many things we have in common as well as the differences that sometimes divide us.

While this may seem an obvious observation to make, it is an understanding that is of central importance to any form of organising, whether in the community or in unions if the intention is to encourage people to work together on issues of collective concern. In organising we are searching for common ground that allows us to combine and work together despite our differences, and it is both our lived experiences and the environment that shapes us that affects the extent to which it is possible to create a collective identity to organise for the common good and for social justice.
Short biographies of interviewees

These short vignettes give an illustration of some of the interviewees from London Citizens, Sound Alliance and Sydney Alliance who took part in the research. It should be noted that all interviewees and quotations from them are anonymised throughout this report. Only the directors of the three case studies have been named in section one as it is obvious who they are and they have a central role in their organisations that is difficult to ignore.

‘I became involved with the Sound Alliance through my electrical union, 2-years ago. In the neighbourhoods where I grew up, they were doing a project and even though I didn’t live there any more, I still had a lot of contacts there. The Sound Alliance asked me to volunteer to go in there and be a team leader and so I did and I went through a bunch more of the IAF training.’ Seattle: Union organiser, IBEW local 46

‘I went to university and before and after I graduated, I got involved working with the labor movement in the United States. I was working briefly as a researcher and then I started working as an organiser with Service Employees International Union, SEIU. I started my work in Las Vegas, working with registered nurses, and I worked on the first nurse strike in Vegas. I worked as an organiser in two other states, but those were pretty significant experiences for me. Basically the thing that got me into the Labor movement was, I read an article about this thing called the Justice for Janitors campaign and what I read was, that the campaign was just done in a very strategic way instead of putting pressure on cleaning contractors who don’t necessarily have a big profit margin. But pressure on building owners and tenants, like big insurance companies. And I just, I thought it was very inspiring that there was that sort of sophisticated strategic analysis being used for social justice. And so that’s what kind of got me in, and that was my background before working for the IAF.

Seattle: Sound Alliance Project worker

I grew up in the 1960s in an Australia that was very white and very homogenous and I lived in the western suburbs, again pretty disadvantaged area. And I guess my story is my parents are immigrants, so mixed race…Many people were silent because they didn’t speak English and they weren’t engaged with the mainstream…I was the one in the family who would help the relatives fill in the forms. And it was in a very rough area where we lived…and there were lots of examples of the police and racists and Dad driving down to the magistrates on Monday morning taking out civil action because of the police. So I grew up in a kind of environment where I’ve seen people disempowered and blind to change. And I think it was that experience… [that] led me into the type of work that I wanted to.

Sydney: Metro Migrant Resource centre worker

I used to be a union official. I was the national official for Actors Equity, which I presume the equivalent sort is in the UK…I am part of the New South Wales Jewish Board of Deputies. Just by way of context, the Jewish community numbers something in the order of 45,000 in New South Wales and of those 40,000 probably two thirds live in one postcode and one third lives in another postcode. So geographically it’s highly concentrated.

Sydney: Jewish Board of Deputies member
Section four: Research findings

I work at Western Sydney community forum. We’re a peak body for community organisations across the city. Western Sydney is a very large area that contains most of the low income, culturally diverse populations of Sydney. And I’ve been a community worker for 30 odd years, and I’ve got a big interest and passion in community involvement, community engagement and people being given the opportunity to be active in their own communities. Sydney: Western Sydney Community Forum worker

I’ve worked for unions now for 27 years in Australia. I started in my craft union, I’m a baker by trade and so I started with the Bakers Union, became state secretary at the age of about 26 or something. Then we amalgamated with another union that was in the industry and then from there, we amalgamated with what was the Liquor, Hospital and Miscellaneous Union, now United Voice. So I’ve been there since 1995. Sydney: United Voice official

I’m an elected union delegate with the rail tram and bus union. I hold the position of union representative for a bus depot within the bus and tram division, which has 445 members. It’s a Sydney bus depot. I also hold the position of national councillor. I have been elected now for, this is my ninth year. Sydney: union representative, Rail, Tram and Bus Union

I’ve worked for the CFMEU, the construction and forestry mining energy union for about 15 years. My father, he’s passed away now, has been gone for about 14 years, but he was an atheist. My mother was a lapsed Baptist. I had no religious upbringing whatsoever, but I married a Catholic…became a Catholic, became actively involved. My wife and I would run the baptismal classes along with our parish priest. So I guess because of, which is quite unusual in the union that I’m involved in, which had never really encouraged ties with faith or religious groups, they thought that was a nice fit because of the Catholic Church being a partner of the Sydney Alliance. So that’s how our union got involved. Sydney: Construction Forestry Mining Energy Union

I was working with a church when Sydney Alliance started, I was with the Uniting Church as a mission consultant and it’s actually a similar position to a union organiser position within the church if you can imagine that. My work with the church had been to, I guess, renovate it from the inside and when Amanda Tattersall approached me, she was speaking my language so I got involved immediately. And basically recruited the Uniting Church into the Sydney Alliance. So for a couple of years I was a leader in this denomination and I’d been working with the church at the state level. Sydney: Sydney Alliance organiser

I suppose the background to my involvement [in London Citizens] is that I’d done an industrial relations Masters at LSE so I wanted to do something about labour markets. But for whatever reasons ended up actually going to work for a think-tank as my first job. But during that period became first involved in Telco as a local community leader through a Catholic parish. And then about a while into my initial involvement, I met [an IAF organiser] who was over visiting and who had got the Living Wage stuff started in Baltimore. And who, unusually for IAF organisers, had come out of the union movement.
and had been specially recruited in to work on the development of a new campaign on labour issues. So I heard about what he described and I just immediately, totally, wanted to work on that. \textit{London: ex London Citizens organiser}

I got involved in London Citizens in around the year 2000. I was involved in work against City of London Corporation and property developments that they were developing near my university, London Metropolitan University. What I noticed with this engagement with London Citizens were local faith communities engaging in politics for the common good. So my initial self interest in fact was to think about how I could engage the students with teaching citizenship, so taking a break from Plato, Aristotle, Machiavelli, Hobbs, pure political thought. \textit{London: London Metropolitan University}

I’ve worked as a regional organiser with Unison since 1998, full-time union organiser since 1981 and also preceding that, been involved in community law sectors and other community organisations since approximately 1972. So that would be my background and in relation to this particular project, I did work with London Citizens through Unison between the years 2002, maybe up to 2005, but I also was involved in Telco to a limited extent where I live, which is in Walthamstow through my local Catholic parish. \textit{London: Unison official}

I became an organiser because I’d done 20 years as a social worker and a sort of community worker and did community development. And it was a natural consequence of that really…so that conclusion meant I was looking for something, which would both give people money and give people power. I had read Alinsky when I had studied for social work, because it was one of the set books, which was quite interesting. I went to the States in 1979 for six weeks on the Churchill Fellowship and came across these broad-based alliances – not all by the Industrial Areas Foundation – but most cities had an alliance of institutions that were doing very radical stuff, particularly faith. \textit{London: London Citizens organiser}

Well came to London in 1970, a long time ago, to train to be a Roman Catholic priest and a member of a religious order… [I met] a couple of guys who were members of the same religious order and they had set up what they called an inner city mission in Liverpool 8 and they were heavily involved in the riots. Myself and another young guy at the time in London wanted to do the same in London, but whereas they were in Liverpool very much coming to involvement in a particular inner city area through community involvement, social involvement, we wanted our involvement to be through the world of work [through the worker priest movement]. So we were living in Islington at the time and he got a job as a road sweeper and became a steward of the local Unison branch at the time. And I after a few low paid jobs, I got a job at the old Hackney Hospital. I did a part time course in industrial relations at Brunel and I then got a job in the catering department as a kitchen porter and stayed in the catering department. \textit{London: ex Branch Secretary Homerton Unison}
Well I grew up in the home of a union organiser, my father who just died a little over a year ago was a great man, gave me good values and I'm the oldest of ten children. Around our dinner table in Southern California, we talked about union issues, worker issues...I grew up with that and with a good sense of social justice...So I had good social justice connections growing up and went on, and we were very poor because my dad was a union organiser and my parents had ten kids because they were Catholics and the Pope told them to keep having kids and didn't tell them how to support the kids. Seattle: union official

I’m retired, a teacher. So that is the reason, and just to give a short history of how I got involved with Sound Alliance, I was still teaching on the social justice committee of our Catholic church. And did that for several years and then our deacon and our pastor and family minister joined our parish as one of the founding institutions of Sound Alliance. And that’s when our deacon said well Lynne, it’s not going to be a social justice committee any more, it’s going to be Sound Alliance. Seattle: Catholic parish

“Citizens UK is a powerful alliance of local Community Organising groups in London, Milton Keynes, Nottingham & Birmingham. We bring together churches, mosques and synagogues; schools, colleges and universities; unions, think-tanks and housing associations; GP surgeries, charities and migrant groups to work together for the common good.”

London Citizen website
Understandings of community organising

It has been noted elsewhere that the motivation of unions to involve themselves in community-based organising is largely being driven by declining union membership and the failure to reverse this over the last few decades, along with the current economic climate that is causing large scale job losses and deteriorating terms and conditions of employment (Fine and Holgate 2013; Givan 2007; Holgate forthcoming; Tattersall 2005).

There is, in general, recognition that unions are, today, politically and economically weak and have lost much of their power to challenge exploitation at the point of production, through strikes and other forms of industrial action. As such, a growing number of unions have accepted that they cannot rebuild or revitalise on their own and this has led to an interest in exploring the possibilities of working with other actors and allies beyond the workplace. But there is on-going discussion and debate about what actually constitutes community unionism, or even community organising, for that matter.

As many writers have said, it appears to mean all things, to all people. However, recent debates have coalesced around a number of key points: for example trying to conceptualise what is meant by community unionism; the different types of union/community engagement and whether or not this is just another form of social movement unionism; the different factors influencing union engagement in community organising – e.g. ad hoc instrumentalism, supportive coalition, mutual support, or deep coalition-building (Tattersall 2010); the tensions and constraints on unions working outside the industrial arena, and the role of ‘new actors’ in the employment relationship. These debates are too complex to go into detail about here, but without some form of common understanding of what is meant by community organising it can lead to confusion if organisations from different cultures fail to come together with a common understanding of what they were trying to do.

Defining ‘community’

One important factor for consideration is the relative lack of focus unions have given to issues of community belonging and identity in union organising initiatives. This is partly due to a continuing industrial relations paradigm, particularly in the UK, that presumes the most significant social actions and mobilising approaches are defined by class relationships rooted in the processes of production. And, in doing, there is a conscious or unconscious assumption that, by and large, other social identities – for example, ‘race’, gender, religion, place, etc. – are secondary in constituting and mobilising collective actors. This more complex relationship has been explored by one writer on community organising initiatives who noted that ‘in community unionism, ethnic, racial, gender, geographic, and even religious ties of low-wage workers stand in for craft and industrial identities…although the workplace continues to be central, neighbourhood, church, and social networks are also very important’ (Fine 2005a: 160). The importance of this is that it highlights not only the intersections of workers’ lived experiences and the means by which they might collectivise, but also that is requires unions to rethink what community organising might look like in terms of different approaches and structural forms.

In order to get an understanding of what community organising or community unions meant all interviewees were asked a number of questions relating to this topic. Equally, to explore the extent to what people understood the organisation in which they were involved, each
Interviewee was asked to try to sum up either London Citizens, Sydney Alliance or Sound Alliance, in three words or phrases. This was generally done after lengthy discussions about their involvement in the organisation and was therefore an attempt to see how they might describe the organisation to someone who had little idea what the organisation was about.

**Questioning the meanings of community organising**

In a number of cases the responses mapped very closely to the straplines used by the organisations and, as there are a number of common phases that are used within the IAF family, it was unsurprising that these were repeated time and time again. These included, for example, ‘organising for the common good’, ‘building the strength of civil society’, ‘organising for social justice’, ‘building relationships to develop power’, and ‘political accountability’.

But there were some interesting differences in the responses to the questions. As might be expected, staff working for the organisations gave the clearest definitions of what the organisations stood for and these very much were related to the straplines used on publicity materials and websites which reflects the ideological basis of IAF groups. As the director of London Citizens said:

‘I’ll have to fall back on our straplines: first, weaving the fabric of society. Second, building power through powerful communities, teaching people about power that’s two and building a sustainable civil society alliance, sustainable, permanent and the training and development of the leaders in the organisation. Number one is the training and development of the leaders now, which it wasn’t at first, when we started, it was campaigns. But now we do all sorts of checks and balances on how many leaders we’ve got and who needs to be on training.’

But it was also acknowledged that sometimes it was not easy to explain what the organisation was about as it differed from many other community-based organisations. One staff leader said; ‘I think we are a difficult organisations to explain, it took me a while to explain what we are – we are unusual, we’re not a social service group, we are not a campaigning group and we’re not an advocacy group and we are not a trade union.’

This viewpoint was also expressed a number of other lay leaders:

It’s very difficult. The way I’ve explained it to our members is that it’s a coalition of community groups including churches and unions that are banding together simply to make Sydney a better place to work and live. It’s as simple as that. And I think I raised that terminology at a meeting and I was looked at with disdain because it wasn’t deep enough. (Trade union official, Sydney Alliance)

After five years I am still trying to articulate it! (Faith Leader Sydney Alliance)

The last sentence in the quotation above reflected some trade unionists’ views of this community-coalition being a little vague and ‘wishy-washy’ was something common to a number of trade union members. They reported how they could not see the point in sitting around talking and the endless meetings that just seemed to be about building the organisation with little talk about campaigns. There was frustration from a number of unions outside the Sydney Alliance for example about the fact that after three years of individuals and institutions getting to know each other there was still no decision about what issue the coalition was going to campaign around. This approach to organisation
building was quite alien to some unions and as such they decided not to get involved as it was considered not a good use of their time and resources – although as one trade unionist pointed out ‘the irony of trade unionists complaining about too many meetings with little or no practical outcome should not be lost’.

So the difficulty for some in trying to sum up the purpose of the organisation is the way in which IAF groups differ from many other NGO type groups (and trade unions). This is particularly the case in the years leading up to the founding of the group. IAF philosophy is summarised in the phrase ‘power before programme’, which means that building (and sustaining) the organisation predominates. It is easy, they argue, to launch straight into a campaign or action, but this seldom leaves time for relationship building such that the organisation is prone to collapse when the campaign comes to an end. The IAF therefore spends 2-3 years building a community coalition and developing strong relationships between member institutions before it is even formally launched, let alone decides to take action on an issue of ‘common concern’ to those groups involved. Its intention is that the coalition should have permanence, rather than being transitory or just around for the duration of a particular campaign.

During this slow and painstaking work, it is easy for organisations with very different cultures to question the purpose of their involvement. This has particularly been the case for trade unions that not only have a different organisational culture around issue-based campaigning, but also have to justify resources spent to their membership who are more likely to be looking for more immediate and tangible results from their involvement.

As, the director of London Citizens mentioned above, a key concern of the broad-based coalitions is the development of leaders to create active citizens who can mobilise their communities to act and the training they receive is central to achieving this goal. It was this issue of training and leadership that was at the heart of some of the varying responses to the question attempting to define what the three community coalitions were about.

In attempting to summarize all the responses, it was clear that interviewees in Sydney and Seattle had a much clearer understanding of the purpose of the Sydney Alliance and the Sound Alliance than their counterparts did of London Citizens and, in some ways, this was surprising. London Citizens has been around a lot longer than the other two groups and it has a much higher profile and has had huge success with the living wage campaign. Despite this, fewer people interviewed were able to articulate its aims and objectives and they tended to more generalised descriptions. So examples of common words and phrases were ‘helping people who are vulnerable’, ‘improving communities’, ‘commitment’ ‘proselytizing’ and ‘bringing people together’. It was particularly the trade union interviewees in London who were less fluent in providing a description of the organisation.

Clearly, this might be understood to be as a result of lack of involvement by unions in London Citizens such that they were less inculcated into the culture of the organisation, but a similar pattern did not apply to the non-members from unions interviewed in Seattle and Sydney. This better understanding could be as a result of any number of factors, not least that Sydney Alliance and Sound Alliance were much better at getting across a message of what the coalitions were about. It could also be that the IAF has a very long history in the USA and is one of the most well-known community-based organising groups, but what explanation can be put forward for the lack of detailed understanding in London? This is answered in the next section on community organising training.
Community organising training and union involvement

One explanation of the different levels of understanding of the three IAF groups perhaps lies in the fact that so few trade unionists in London have been through London Citizens’ training. As already mentioned, this is a key way of IAF groups providing an understanding of the philosophy and methodology of the organisation and is seen as essential in creating a particular type of internal culture. Very few trade unionists in London (estimated less than 20) have been through the 2-day training and less than five on the 6-day training over the last 13 years – and no one from a senior leadership position. In one case, even though a trade union branch secretary has had his union branch in membership for over 10 years, there is still no one from this branch who has undertaken the training.

In comparison, virtually all of the trade unionists interviewed in Sydney had been through some Sydney Alliance training – nearly all had done the 2-day training, but a significant number had done the intensive 6-day residential training – and this was over a period of 3-years. At the time the interviews with trade unionists were completed in Sydney (October 2011), an estimated 263 trade unionists had completed the 2-day training and 19 the 6-day. The latter also included some of the most senior of trade union staff including general and assistant secretaries. For these people to take such a long period of time out at a residential retreat away from their workplace to learn the philosophy and methodology of community organising was a considerable commitment. When this happened, it was usually the case that they then supported and encouraged other staff in their organisations also to undertake the training. This tended to create a much greater understanding of what the coalition was about – but more importantly created an understanding of the benefit it might have for the union as well – a matter that will be returned to later.

In Seattle, it was a little more difficult to get a detailed breakdown of figures but all the key leaders from the unions involved had been on the 2-day and 6-day training. The director of the Sound Alliance had listened to the concerns from some trade unionists that had undertaken the training, who were a little off put by the language and culture used by the coalition. For example, the talk about relational organising or relational meetings was unfamiliar and made some people uncomfortable. This was not the language with which they were familiar in union education and training and the practice of doing one-to-ones and sharing personal stories to build rapport also appeared a little strange – at least at first.

Also, given these responses, and that some unionists were working alongside people from faith communities for the first time, it was decided to subtly change the way the training was presented in order that it did not seem ‘too faith-orientated’. The Sound Alliance, unlike many other IAF groups – but like the Sydney Alliance later – wanted to try hard to bring unions into the coalition. As the director explained:

> We’ve really paid a lot of attention to the unions because of this challenge… so we’ve decided in order to be effective we need to have unions and so we’ve been very deliberate about doing that and shifting our culture so that it can accommodate unionists. So that [in the training] the language is different, the examples are different. (Sound Alliance, Director)

Another initiative was to also take the training into the unions themselves – to use it as a
means of developing cultural change within the organisation. So the Sound Alliance began first by getting union leaders through the standard 2-day and 6-day training, but then with this buy-in and understanding, created bespoke training for union members delivered within their unions. The aim was to create organisational change within the unions so they are more able to engage their members in activity – and to use the community organising approaches within their union:

We have a new initiative called ‘effective organisations through transformational leadership’. And we’re working with people to combine an understanding of how organising practices can be used to shift the culture in a way that’s meaningful and helpful to them. From a culture where workers become members as consumers and they expect the staff or volunteer leaders to carry out the mission on their behalf to one where it is a member-driven organisation and we are collectively responsible. And so we’ve developed a specific training for that and we’re using that and then combining it with adaptive leadership practices from a business and not-profit world that are about how do you manage transition, and cultural change inside an organisation. (Sound Alliance, Director)

The unions responded well to this approach and several of the unions involved invited the Sound Alliance in to run these bespoke community organising training sessions. In talking about motivation for involvement and the benefit to the union from being part of the Alliance one union leader said ‘it was the training’ – ‘well I think they [our members and reps] lacked the training, and there’s really nowhere else where they get the kind of training that they get through the Alliance’. He went on to explain how this had taught them how to make use of opportunities to get in front of decision-makers. Even the relational organising element and doing one-to-one – the bit that some trade unionists have expressed discomfort with – proved to be a positive benefit for unions:

I think that’s one of our strengths is the training and it’s just, well I’ve been to the training that the union provides and it’s not as…you’re always looking to connect with other people and hear their experiences and that’s where you learn a lot about how you might be able to work together in partnership. And you also learn about other issues and other successes and failures that other organisations have been through. And it’s just a more real connection and it’s easier to start partnering with them. You can go to the Labor Council meeting and you have people from all these different unions but they don’t really know each other or haven't worked together on anything and where the Alliance that training speeds up that process – it encourages that kind of interaction. (Union organiser, Sound Alliance)

As the director from the Sound Alliance explained, this approach to working with unions and their subsequent involvement in the coalition as fully paid up members worked best when the top leadership of unions had been through the training programmes. Then there was greater understanding and engagement in the Alliance’s activities.

All of our best experiences with the unions are in places where the primary leaders have gone through, ideally, the week-long training and they’ve taken time to really see, and think about how it’s different and how they can use it to best benefit their organisation. (Director, Sound Alliance)
Section four: Research findings

Personal experiences of community organising training

It was mentioned above that some people felt uncomfortable with the IAF-style community organising training, but the findings overall show that there was a great deal of different opinions and experiences – from those people who ‘loved it’ and others who said they ‘absolutely hated it’. It is useful to explore this a little bit more to unpack what is behind such divergent responses and to see if there is any pattern in the responses. Firstly it is important to outline some of the content and practice carried out in the training sessions – and as noted before, this is similar in each IAF group – an example is given below.

In terms of the 2-day training this begins – as do many IAF meetings with ‘the rounds’. This is where everyone introduces himself or herself and shares something about themselves with the rest of the group. People are restricted to speaking for no longer than 1 minute. The ‘rounds’ are a fundamental principle of LC organising are designed to help build relationships – a fundamental principle of IAF training and organising methodology whereby it is perceived necessary that in order to build or take action you need to build relationships first.

By sharing information about ourselves we get to know people on a different level and are thus more likely to be prepared to act with them and respond to requests for help. It also helps to identify what motivates people and what they are prepared to do for the organisation. It helps to recognise what relationships people have and how these can be built upon and most importantly it publicly shows the connections that people have between each other and how these might be useful for developing further relationships. Thus the theory of relational organising has a deeper base than other forms of organising that are primarily based on issues.

Then the session breaks and people are asked to have a conversation with someone they do not know. This continual reinforcement of the learning and methodology of community organising continues throughout the two days.

The next section may focus on a negotiating exercise where groups are expected to role play a community organising campaign by taking its concern to the people who hold the power and have the ability to effect change. The aim is to teach people about negotiating and to teach people the importance of planning before going into a negotiation. To establish what you want out of it – who are the people in the organisation with power to change things; how to run a meeting; how to take control of a meeting, and demonstrating what power you have as citizens and how you can use that to effect change.

The days continue with an analysis of self-interest, developing leaders, power, building for action and reflection on how the activity went. The essence is that in every action the intention is to create a reaction by those who hold power.

One of the more crucial elements is then the practice of building relationship and learning how to do effective one-to-ones – there is lots of practice at doing this. The aim is to ascertain the extent to which a person is thinking, how they tick, what are this issues of concern for them and others that are part of their community. Perhaps most essential is the question: do they have the ability to become a leader – defined as someone who can bring along followers to act on common issues of concern. In essence the one-to-one is really a simple conversation, but one with a specific intentional purpose.

The six-day training is similar, but more intense, and also draws upon readings to analyse and discuss, and this tends to be held as a residential course to encourage further relationship
Trade union involvement in broad-based community organising

building and is directed to those who have already shown leadership qualities that would be useful for strengthening the coalition and developing leaders in their own institution.

The remainder of the sessions are about the organisation itself, how it works, how it does democracy and lots of other practical issues. By the end, it should be clear what the philosophy of the IAF group is and how its methodology is carried out in practice.

So what was it that people liked and disliked about this type of training?

Firstly, and to take a very broad perspective on this, people from the faith communities were much more likely to say they enjoyed the training and felt comfortable with the approach of doing one-to-ones – although this was not universal. This was one response from a faith leader talking about his first experience of having a one-to-one:

She told me something about herself and gave me an opportunity to share why I was in my role. I think that was important. That probably partly reflects my personality because I know she also spoke to the general secretary of the synod and it did not appeal to him at all. He didn’t like someone coming in and talking to him about personal things, without knowing first what this was all about. I quite like the opportunity to make connection and talk about relational things so, I think to me, that was appealing, and that she spoke about the opportunity to be about building the civil society for the common good and the opportunity to have these relationships across organisations. For me, that was appealing… I could see from my perspective that here was an opportunity for me to engage with people that I would otherwise never engage with. (Faith leader, Sydney Alliance member institution)

It was this sharing of personal stories that seemed to create the greatest concern for some people, but it also seemed that this was related to organisational culture as well as individual personalities. People talked about how it was challenging to spend time getting to know people in this way, as this was something that was quite alien to many – it was something they might do with friends, but not a practice carried out in the public arena, and not something that happens much in the union movement.

I like the idea of one-to-ones and I like the idea that you get to know people and I’ve tried to advocate that within trade union branches as well because I don’t see any reason why trade unions can’t use that method. Because I think that’s one of the big issues within trade unions is that people don’t know each other. (Trade union member, London, not part of London Citizens)

This is a comment from a leader from a faith community in the Sydney Alliance talking about the different responses she experienced when running the two-day training:

I think different sectors have different points of resistance… I have found for trade unions, when I’ve been delivering training, that there’s sometimes resistance to the relational [part] – and sometimes, either from a point of view of ‘why are we doing this? This is a waste of time. It’s a bit touchy feely’, or ‘we’re already doing it and we’re having difficulty seeing the intentionality of the relational meeting’… The resistance is sometimes around public and private division… they’re resistant to sharing the story and see that as a pseudo-counselling thing. And then from a faith point of view, I’ve actually found less resistance to the actual methodology except [to say] that ‘we already do this’.
Although the issue of trade unions working in coalition with people from faith communities will be dealt with in a later section in this report, it is worth mentioning here how aspects of this impact in the training. While religion is not an element in the training programme, it is obvious that people from different backgrounds will draw upon different cultural references to explain their world-view and justification for campaigning for social justice and the common good. As trade unions, as institutions, are secular, it is rare in union circles to draw upon religious teachings to illustrate a point. In addition, if a trade unionist is not from a religious background herself then, then this language may be unfamiliar and for some it is perceived as a discourse of oppression (‘the opium of the people’) that they find objectionable. A trade union official from Unite the union, the largest UK’s private section union, explained how one of their branches had joined London Citizens and, as a consequence, two staff organisers had been sent along to the 2-day training. ‘They were not religious-minded’ he said, and ‘were turned off by it’. For a number of trade unionist, more so in the UK than elsewhere, this seemed to be central to any dislike of the training.

In Sydney, the interviews also revealed a similar un-comfortableness, yet not to the same extent. An organiser from the Alliance pointed out this tended to be more common in union staff than in union members themselves:

> I’ve had a couple unionists, I think two that I can think of, who are uncomfortable with the training, and they were both officials as opposed to members. I know an awful lot that have had an extremely positive response and it’s really resonated for them. (Sydney Alliance organiser)

And this also seemed to resonate in interviews with a number of senior trade union leaders. One, appeared horrified by the process, leaving after a matter of minutes and this was one of the most extreme responses the research uncovered:

> I was invited to what I would call a bonding session, what they call a training session that lasted two days. I got through the first seven minutes of introductions where people left me with a very clear indication this was AA on steroids! (Sydney, trade union official, non-member of the Sydney Alliance)

Although a senior trade union leader from Sydney said he also had some similar feedback from union leaders who ‘regard this as bullshit and [and say] ‘we don’t need it, what a bunch of woolly crap’ …but actually I think it does make a difference to find out what drives people’. A number of union leaders who were part of the Sydney Alliance and who were committed to seeing it succeed, tried to engage with their staff and members who were much more sceptical. One, from a union that had been part of the Alliance from the start tried to explore what was behind the concerns that some of their staff had to the training:

> I don’t understand why they freak out about it because, I’ve said to some of our organisers, who say ‘I was really uncomfortable when I went and did the two-day training’. And I said, ‘why?’ And they say ‘I found it hard talking to strangers’. And I said, ‘so you find it hard talking to strangers? You could go into a workplace any day of the week and talk to somebody you’ve never met before. They’re a stranger, but you talk to them’. ‘Oh yes’ [they say], ‘but that’s different!’ I said, ‘how is it different?’

The answer to this question of how it is different relates to the separation of ‘the personal’ and ‘the political’ or the private and the public. Trade unions have often come to see themselves as providing services to their members – defending them when they have
problems at work but in doing so, not only do they tend to breach the golden rule of organising, but they have tended to neglect the building or developing of sustainable relationships. For many union members there is little sense of being part of the union in any meaningful way. It has become a transactional relationship whereby members pay monthly dues, but seldom have anything to do with the union unless they find themselves in difficulty at work. But belonging to a broad-based community coalition like the IAF groups requires a much deeper commitment and personal involvement and the training is designed to explore what is involved and identify those that have the skills and personality to undertake this work.

It was evident from Sydney and Seattle that both organisations were sensitive to the cultural differences in their member institutions and had taken measures to adapt the training in certain regards, particularly in relation to the language that was used:

> My union people, the majority of union people go in there and go ‘what am I doing with these religious people?’…You can see their body language at first and I can imagine mine must have looked the same. So when you’re at the front of the room you really notice their body language. Same with a lot of discomfort with people in the faith sector, can be the same thing of what are we doing with these union thugs in the room? And so as a trainer now, and particularly I do the lead role quite often, it’s about, I think I’ve just learnt so much about modifying my language, modifying how I define my unionism, my feminism, to try and mitigate that stuff as much as possible. (Trade union official, Sydney Alliance member)

This did not mean deviating from the IAF’s methodological approach, but was recognition that change was needed if they were to attract the widest diversity of people and to ensure that one sector of civil society was not excluded from the organisation. In London, this was less so, and for a number of reasons. Firstly, there are few trade unionists involved in London Citizens and none involved in delivering the training. Secondly, the dominance of faith organisations in the coalition tends to reflect the culture of these member institutions. Thirdly, those few union members who have done the training tended to feel marginalised when there was no one else from a union background in attendance and this tended to reinforce a view that the organisation was not really interested in involving trade unions.

This section has explored why training is so important to the IAF approach to building strong permanent coalitions. It believes that it is not possible without first building strong relationships in and between members of the affiliated institutions. It was also important to highlight how the training is used to bind member institutions to the coalition – particularly through leadership buy-in and why, when this is missing, institutions like trade unions, are not able to develop a strong relationship with the coalition and thus remain peripheral to the organisation.
Exploring union motivation for involvement in community organising

This section explores in some detail the reasons given by various unions for their involvement in the three broad-based community organisations and their interest in community unionism more broadly. What did they perceive to be the benefits and to what extent were they able to measure these? Did unions approach coalition-building instrumentally, thinking about whether it could increase union membership or were they motivated by wider ideas about social justice and the re-framing of the trade union message? These ideas were explored with all the trade unionists interviewed for the research and although there were some common answers, different unions had different ideas and approaches to what they were hoping to achieve by joint working outside their normal arena.

To answer these questions this section will look in some detail at particular responses from four unions before exploring comments from others and drawing conclusions more broadly.

“The Sydney Alliance brings together diverse community organisations, unions and religious organisations to advance the common good and achieve a fair, just and sustainable city”

Sydney Alliance website
Case study one:
The Amalgamated Transit Union

The ATU in Seattle is a member institution of the Sound Alliance and joined just a couple of years ago. The union described itself as a traditional servicing union, spending ‘almost nothing on organising’ as it never saw the need to adopt an organising model approach as it had 100 per cent density – ‘we are a closed shop, so we don’t even think in terms of density, we never looked at expanding it out, it just wasn’t what we were about’ (Union official). Despite this, and following the election of a new leadership after 30 years of uncontested elections, and attacks on the public transport system, it was decided that they needed a greater public focus and to move the union towards an organising approach.

This was the impetus for joining the Sound Alliance and it took a couple of attempts to gain support for joining. The first motion to agree affiliation was defeated, but five years later, and with a new leadership in place, a motion was passed agreeing to join. As part of the process of moving towards an organising model union a key concern was to be more active in the community – to be able to create a public identity for the union and public messages about what the union was about. They wanted to project a message about why it was important for all workers, not just transit workers, that there should be concern about what was happening to public transit, and there was recognition that, to do this, the union needed to build alliances in the community:

‘…it’s those kind of alliances and democratic leadership we have here now in King County, about trying to politically pull all the Republicans and Democrats together, trying to get them to work together on transit related issues. And trying to convince the wealthy guy from Belle-Vue, Washington, where most of the wealthy people in this community live, that putting lots of people on buses means he can go faster in his BMW! So we tried to point out that there’s benefit to everyone. So alliance building is what we’ve been about – but only the last few years.’ (Union leader, ATU Seattle).

But in order to put this change in place it was necessary to win over union staff and members and this meant creating a cultural change within the union – and this, currently, is the major challenge. Although the senior leadership is on board and supportive of the Sound Alliance they have not, as yet, found time to get fully engaged. While a few staff have attended meetings, this has not extended to members, neither has there been attendance at training sessions. The relationship is still relatively new in IAF terms and with leadership support there remains the possibility of repeating what other unions have done, in terms of using their membership, to create a cultural change within the union. As one leader said:

[I think the Alliance can help with] cultural change…[but also]…pulling together the religious organisations, the churches and synagogues that are involved, everyone else who comes in, other labour unions, is of great value…Pulling all of these people together and trying to get everyone working on the same page. So that if we all get on the same bus heading down towards State Capitol, Olympia, to try and get legislation
passed, that we're all on the same page, that we're not fighting with each other...I see that as really valuable. And I think, my international president does as well, that labour's ability to survive in this state or in this country – I think we’re 12 per cent union here now and 6 per cent of that is public employees – and our survival depends on changing who we are and going about, organising much more. (Union leader, ATU, Seattle).

This notion of changing the perception of unions, particularly when operating from such low densities as seen in the USA, was also a driving force for other unions.
Case study two: United Association of Plumbers and Pipefitters

In Seattle six local unions come together under the umbrella of the Washington pipe trades representing some 7000 workers with seven full-time and six part-time staff. In certain market segments density is 90 to 100 per cent, but overall it is more like 30-35 per cent, which is, in US union terms, quite high. Eighteen years ago the union faced up to the challenges of lost market share and union density by establishing an organising department funded by all working members within the union. However, it was an issue around power structures within the community that made it consider more closely the need to build local alliances that could challenge these power structures.

A few years back the union had found itself in a dispute with a local hospital having building works done, but the locally elected board of commissioners were refusing to speak to the union about using unionised labour on the project. The union was frustrated that it was not treated as being part of the community, entitled to have a say in what was happening at the local hospital. For it, this was a major factor in getting involved in the Sound Alliance:

"And the other thing was to try and get our fingers into the community a bit more, to address problems like I expressed to you, we had with the hospital. Here is a taxpayer-financed hospital that was run by a private corporation internally, but answerable to a board of commissioners who were elected. And they treated us like, we weren't part of the community and we are and we want to get our fingers out and let people know."

(Official, Washington State Association of UA Plumbers and Pipefitters. Seattle)

It made the union realise that it could not have influence in the community without a broader focus in the community. So the union joined the Sound Alliance in 2005 to explore how to build the alliances they thought were needed to strengthen their political power in the locality. Members have got involved the coalition and as one leader said, ‘the members have taken the stuff to heart and have engaged – they have a core team and it’s active’. There was concern at the start about how union members would respond to the relational side of the IAF culture – one said he was unsure how these tough plumber guys, were going to react to this ‘warm and fuzzy stuff’, but a reframing of the training meant it was more culturally acceptable.

In conjunction with the Sound Alliance the union undertook a listening campaign with their union members – mainly their unemployed members. With over 30 per cent unemployment in the building trades, many were facing severe difficulties in making ends meet. Two meetings attracted 150 and 200 people respectively and one of the major issues that came up was that of foreclosure – people losing their homes because they could not keep up with their mortgage payments. Of course a major problem in itself, but the real difficulty was trying to sort out the issue with Bank of America, as there was no one to speak to face-to-face. Members came together with others in the Sound Alliance and planned a campaign to force the bank to work with people to find a better solution to their problems. As one Alliance member explained:
We had several different assemblies on it and brought together a lot of financial institutions that really weren’t helping people. They were just throwing people under the bus, people were getting frustrated, people were having to turn their applications in, five, six, seven times; they didn’t know that they had a pathway other than foreclosure and so we brought together…some of the bigger banks to actually represent and bring in councillors to work directly with our members. But they also…helped people look at other pathways before foreclosure, and stuff like that. So that was really a good deal and we’re still directing people back to a lot of the information and educational materials that we have gathered from there. Because we still have a lot of our members going through foreclosure, we still have 30 per cent unemployment in our membership. (Union rep, electricians union, Sound Alliance member, Seattle).

The ability to demonstrate positive outcomes like this from being part of the coalition makes it easier to keep people’s interest and to stay involved. The combined issues of self-interest, as well as the organising for the ‘common good’, also came together for the union in its involvement with the SustainableWorks initiative around green jobs that was mentioned earlier in the report.
Case study three: United Voice

United Voice is a large private sector union in Australia organising some of the lowest paid workers in society. United Voice NSW is based in Sydney and has more than 23,000 members across the state employed in early childhood education, in cleaning, security, homecare services, baking, paint and manufacturing. It was one of the founding institutions of the Sydney Alliance providing substantial financial support. In 2006 the union, in its previous incarnation as the Liquor Hospitality and Miscellaneous Union, began a ‘Clean Start: Fair Deal for Cleaners’ campaign. This was about bringing together the union, building owners, cleaning contractors and the community to talk about the crisis of low pay and dangerous workloads in the sector. It was this experience of working beyond the normal boundaries of industrial relations that allowed the union the space to think about how it might operate differently. But also, the branch secretary of United Voice NSW, had, prior to this, an interest and experience of how union/community organising worked and when approached with the initial idea of the Sydney Alliance was convinced of its value from the start:

I just had this conversation about, in many ways the legacy I wanted to leave behind in the union and the direction I wanted to take the union in and part of it was the normal industrial work that we do…but it was really about building something much more than that, and it was about working with our members in the community…it’s really the big picture stuff – how do we make Sydney a better place for our members to work in and improve their life?

In addition to substantial annual funding the union has committed other resources to working with the Sydney Alliance. All of the paid staff have undertaken the 2-day training and the union’s lead organisers have done the 6-day course. As well as these staff, union members, particularly those in the clean start campaign, have also done the 2-day training and the union has conducted Alliance-style training in-house with its members. In 2012 the union decided to hire a member of staff whose remit is community organising. This is a first for the union and this underlines the commitment to expanding its organising practice in this area. A numbers of United Voice staff, including the branch secretary, have also undertaken key roles within the Alliance, from chairing meetings to being involved in organising actions and events.
Section four: Research findings
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Case study four: Unison Tower Hamlets branch east London

Unison is the UK’s largest public sector union and its membership is divided up into sectors (local government, health, education and utilities). Its structure is such that relative autonomy is delegated to local branches in each of the sectors and in each of the regions of the UK. For example in Unison’s local government branches they tend to follow the structure of local government administrative areas, so in London, which has 32 London boroughs there are 32 local government Unison branches and a similar pattern applies geographically across the UK. As such even though many of Unison’s local government branches can be comprised of several thousand members, they are much smaller entities than the US or Australian branches. One Unison branch in east London, Tower Hamlets, which has 2000 members, joined London Citizens after the start of the Living Wage campaign in 2001. It was one of the early branches to join the coalition – although not one of the ones that had members who were directly affected by the campaign (these were the Unison health branches in east London).

A senior member of the Tower Hamlets Unison branch was part of the union’s national executive and was in contact with the national Unison office, which had been working with London Citizens in devising the living wage campaign. It was through this connection that a London Citizen’s organiser approached the branch to get involved and join as a member institution. The motivation for the union branch in this case can be seen more in terms of solidarity with its sister branches in the health sector who were heavily involved in fighting for the living wage for its members and in advocating for the living wage more generally. Despite, over a decade of continuous membership of London Citizens, the union branch is not a major player in the coalition. It has managed to maintain a minimum involvement but, in general, the union has found it difficult, even from the start, to fully engage its members in any coalition activity:

We tend to go to the borough planning meetings, but if I’m completely honest, it’s quite hard to get people really involved on an on-going basis. So it tends to be that we maintain the relationship, probably with a few key people and keep our contact going. And then when there are other more significant things, we try and get a bit of mobilisation…

[Why is it difficult to maintain the relationship? - interviewer]

…I think it’s partly that people have a different relationship with different types of organisations. So for example, although there’s a number of us who give our time voluntary to the union, I think the average member of the union doesn’t probably perceive the branch in that way. Whereas people do perceive their church or their community organisation as something that they give a lot of time to. So I think that’s maybe an element of it. But also we have a lot of other issues going on all the time. (Unison branch secretary, London)

Nevertheless, the branch sees value in building a long-term relationship with London Citizens to be part of a bigger presence in the community. However, London Citizens,
unlike its counterparts in Sydney and Seattle, has not been involved in attempting to work with the union branch to help transform its culture and practice so that its members become more involved in the coalition and identify new leaders who can take on different roles in the organisation. It is also notable that very few Unison members from the branch have been on London Citizens training, indeed it was difficult to identify any, and none of the current leadership of the branch has done any training in their eleven years of membership.
What each of these three case studies show is that there are multiple reasons for unions wanting to broaden their reach, but the need to change the way unions ‘do business’ appears to be one of the main motivating factors. Union involvement and relationship building with different member institutions has challenged unions to think about their internal union culture and external perceptions, and to explore different ways of engaging their own membership in union activity. The training, in particular, has provided opportunities to change the culture of meetings and events and to move away from the traditional formalities of union practice.

While three of these unions were able to clearly articulate the benefits of being part of the community coalitions, others, like the Unison branch, were less able to identify tangible benefits from their involvement. This branch appeared to lack the ‘self-interest’ necessary to sustain active involvement from its members. The IAF model of community activism requires a number of factors to sustain itself: in particular an understanding that people are motivated primarily by self-interest, but this also requires translating self-interest into common interest. There also needs to be a belief in and understanding that change is possible from collective action – that people combined have the ability to challenge the power that is preventing change, and, that by building allies it is possible to create greater strength and stronger communities that are then able to make their voices heard and hold those with power to account.

Without a leadership articulating and reinforcing these messages through training and meetings and general union activity then it is perhaps difficult for members to understand the purpose of involvement in a coalition that expands beyond the branch or the wider union. As a Unison representative from this branch said, the union’s primary focus is on dealing with the day-to-day problems of servicing its members and dealing with attacks on members’ terms and conditions of employment. The branch is led by volunteers, many of whom have full-time jobs on top of their union activity. Thus finding the time to be active in London Citizens can be difficult on top of these other responsibilities. The other issue is that many union members have very little engagement with their union, even in their own union branch. Over time, and particularly since the 1980s, unions have come to be viewed by their members as distant organisations whereby people pay a monthly fee and receive a service when and if necessary – more like paying a premium to an insurance company than an organisation of which you are part and have the ability to shape and play a role in. Few unions want this type of transactional relationship and many have sought to change it, but it has been with varying degrees of success.

What are the benefits to unions from community organising?

When asked to consider their involvement in the three broad-based community coalitions from an instrumental perspective i.e. what self-interest it served the organisation, discussions with trade unionists coalesced around a number of themes; membership growth, union renewal, internal organisational change, public image and the ability to get in front of decision-makers. In terms of the broad issues – membership growth and union renewal – these did not appear to be main motivating factors for unions in getting involved with the coalitions, although that is not to say that these are not the major issues facing unions today. While these were a consideration and perhaps a long-term consideration, there was, in general, a view that this was possibly a benefit that might come later – but as a side benefit (for example, from internal organisational change) rather than a direct benefit arising from the coalition’s activities. So one union leader in Sydney talked about how the union might
learn from the Sydney Alliance model of organising to change the way it organised among its own members:

Yes, absolutely [it could be a model for union growth]. In fact, I think if we really got serious about what we’re trying to achieve in terms of making a real change – so not in terms of just growth and not in terms of just income or political sway – I think that the essential principle that says we need a lot more people involved in our unions, we need genuine union community, and genuine solidarity. (Union leader, finance union, Sydney)

Internal change

The idea of developing a community organising approach to contribute to organisational change within unions was prevalent in both Sydney and Seattle, but not a consideration in the UK. The examples above provide some example of this, but Union Voice, in Sydney, was one union that had used this to the greatest effect. Not only had they put all their staff through the community organising training, they had also undertaken a considerable ‘listening campaign’ among their members to find out about what issues they had greatest concern. They held 20 meetings across the city with school cleaners where they talked to over 400 members. As one organiser said;

‘…our experience of doing it was that we hadn’t really talked to people in a union way about what was happening in their community…when I started in the school cleaning team and working with our members, the usual way of doing things would be union official at the front imparting information and then asking questions…This time we had people in little groups and some of our more organised areas, we had our members who had already gone through a prep session with their organiser facilitating that discussion. And that was just exciting, that was really exciting.’ (United Voice, Organiser, Sydney)

A consequence of this was that it involved the members much more and they began to get more involved and increasingly played a leadership role. This was not just in these meetings but they also went out into the community and into other districts to support fellow leaders. This helped to build relationships among cleaners from different areas of the city who prior to this did not know each other. Union officials were also surprised about the issues raised in the listening campaigns and the things that members wanted to talk about and organise around. So as well as the usual and expected workplace issues, a concern about free education, childcare and safety on the streets emerged from the listening campaign. As a United Voice organiser explained, prior to this listening campaign:

We never gave those people an opportunity to say those things and get involved. [In one meeting]…they were talking about travel, transport and safety. So, not feeling safe enough to be able to go and use the streets, and just having a debate amongst themselves around something within their local community to me was really powerful. And it was like ‘oh, there’s actually something here, these people are more than just cleaners’…because we interact with them as just union members doing this particular job…but many of them were talking about childcare – but it wasn’t their own kids – it was their grandchildren. So they’re struggling to try and give their own kids a better life by stepping into the breach on the caring stuff. So a lot of issues came through around age care and childcare and it just started to paint this picture of a much broader group. That was exciting.’ (Organiser, United Voice, Sydney)
A representative from the Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) told a similar story. This union has felt under siege for many years, although membership is high, particularly in the construction sector, the union and its members has been under attack from the Australian Building and Construction Commission (now called Fair Work Building & Construction). The ABCC’s powers to take action against individuals and organisations that it alleged were engaged in unlawful industrial action were particularly draconian. So much so, that in 2007 the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) submitted a complaint to the International Labour Organisation (ILO) on the particularly harsh measures contained in the Building and Construction Industry Improvement Act against construction workers and their unions in continuing deterioration of compliance with ILO Conventions 87 and 98 which provide Freedom of Association and the Right to Organise and Bargain Collectively. One example of these measures is that if you’re a building worker and you are approached by the ABCC, and you refuse to give information to them, you can be prosecuted and sentenced to up to six months in jail.

While the union had been campaigning against the ABCC for years the union had not managed to get its message out to the general public about the way its members were treated. Also the public image of the union was not good, it was perceived as a self-interested and militant union, as this was the way in which it was portrayed in media. As such the union wanted to be able to counter this negative stereotyping:

‘Our union has a stigma attached to it that we’re a male dominated, very blokey union. That we are bother boys and we’re bullies, and that’s completely untrue. It’s a tough industry, the building industry, and sometimes requires a tough stance. But there’s a lot of propaganda that gets put out there and I think that simply by our involvement with the softer touch I guess with the faith groups and the community groups and the Sydney Alliance, I think that’s a better outcome for us.’ (Union official CFMEU, Sydney)
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So this was part of the union’s self-interest for joining the Alliance but it also undertook a listening campaign amongst its members as part of the activity that was taking place across all the Sydney Alliance member institutions. They used the listening campaign with their officials using the relational organising techniques they had learned from the training. This helped to strengthen their internal organisation and get the leaders to understand more about how to focus the goals of the union. One concrete example of how they used their role in the Alliance was to talk to coalition partners about a problem they were having with an employer – a major construction contractor – who went bankrupt and was refusing to pay 500 workers (union members). In fighting for the rights of their members the union was savagely attacked by the local paper – again accusing the union of ‘bully-boy’ tactics. The CFMEU asked Sydney Alliance members to contribute comments about the unfairness of the situation and the right of workers to be paid for the work that they have done. A consequence, one union official explained, was ‘we totally turned the whole argument around, which was great.’

In Seattle, the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers union (IBEW) and the teachers’ union, the Education Association had both begun to think how they could take what they had learnt from their involvement with the Sound Alliance back into their union to begin to organise in a different way. The IBEW explained how it had helped them ‘think outside the box’ and develop a different approach to how they relate to their members – again creating internal change within the union. Their involvement in the SustainableWorks project had demonstrated to the union the usefulness of a community organising approach in creating jobs for their members. As a consequence they had started to door-knock their own members to find out what links they have in the local community and the organisations of which they are part. As one organiser explained:

I think the biggest thing we’ve got from it, [involvement in the Sound Alliance] is tying our membership back to the community – because we know all of our members are already tied into the community. What we don’t know is how we can tie ourselves back into what they’re tied into. So that’s been bringing everything full circle. And then, and we’re actually still working on this – this has been for us internally has helped us to think outside the box. Right now we’re working on a campaign where we actually door knock our own members, and we’re calling it internal organising. (Organiser, IBEW local 46, Seattle)

By undertaking a membership survey of community involvement in civil society organisations, they were building a picture of where individual members were active in their local communities. The purpose of this was not just related to the above issue of tying the union back into the community but it also provided useful information in relation to possible building work in localities that could be undertaken by their members.

…the reason we want to know is that equates to jobs for us. If that church is building a new building, we want to know how to get our contractors in there. And if we can tell them that hey, we’ve got 16 members that go to your church, they should be doing this work for you, we want to keep the money local.

(Organiser, IBEW local 46, Seattle)

The keeping of jobs local was also important for another reason; local jobs paid to local people helps to keep tax dollars local as well. For example, instead of out of state contractors bringing out of state workers into the city to do retrofit work and then taking the capital budget money out of state, wages are paid to local workers which then means that money tends to get spent locally, thus keeping tax dollars in the state.
Similarly, the teaching union talked about their involvement in the Sound Alliance helping towards a cultural shift within the union. Before embarking on an organising drive with members they accepted that they needed organisational change to help them develop a relationship between schools, the community and parents. As in Sydney with the Building union, teachers unions in the USA also have a bad public image, so paying more attention to working with groups outside of the workplace could help to break down some of the barriers and hostility to the union that currently exists.

Our current governance is really interested in both internal organising, which has always been a driver, but also – given the current pressure we’re under about closing the achievement gap – I think we all believe that’s not possible if we don’t break down the silo between the schools and the community and parents.

(Union official, Education Association, Seattle)

Membership and leadership development

The internal cultural change mentioned above is very much related to how unions engage with their members and how they might involve them more in their unions. Most union members never have much contact with their union unless they have a problem at work and fewer are actually active in union campaigns. This lack of participation is problematic for unions wanting to expand as it is very difficult to achieve the growth necessary by relying on paid organising staff. Therefore if a union is able to find a way of drawing in its membership into greater activity, then this opens the door for new leaders and activists to emerge who are then able to recruit and organise in their own workplaces. An example of a union approaching their involvement in a broad-based community coalition in this way is the New South Wales Nurses Association (NSWNA).

The New South Wales Nurses Association has had a long history of working with community groups, particularly around age care and the challenges of convincing federal governments about adequate funding of this sector. It had set up its own alliance called the quality age care action group comprised of consumers and workers and interested people around age care, so when the Sydney Alliance was established they saw the benefit of being part of this much wider grouping:

‘we saw the greatest opportunity to have some influence because of course, we’d been battling around age care and understanding very clearly that federal governments are not going to shift unless they’re approached on a multi-pronged situation. (Secretary of NSWNA, Sydney)

The union saw being part of the Sydney Alliance had the potential to provide new opportunities for engaging nurses in the union. While it had a number of staff who had been through Sydney Alliance training and who were interested in being more involved, it had not at the stage the research was undertaken, managed to get many delegates or branch officials on board, but there was hope for the wider membership – particularly those who might not be particularly union focused, but who might want to be involved in Sydney Alliance campaigns. For example, a NSWNA official had come across a nurse who was a union member at an Alliance meeting, but who was not in attendance through the union but was there through her Muslim women’s association that had also joined the Alliance. It was the opportunity to make these links and connections that gave the union the hope that they could draw in different constituencies within the union to become active as members saw the wider role that the union was playing in civil society.
This was echoed by a union leader in London – and while this union, the Public and Commercial Services union (PCS) was not in membership of London Citizens it had worked with the coalition on a living wage campaign in a government department. It recognised the potential of working in coalition with community-based organisation and that this should not be for purely instrumental reasons, but for thinking more broadly about unions in society:

And I don't think they [union leaders] are thinking about the broader benefits that unions in general can get and from social engagement with communities. But they might learn something along the way [from getting involved]…But there's now I think quite a lot of examples of where people are engaging much more with communities, service users, whatever you like to call them but having a broader based approach to the way they think about things. My hope is that people will learn a bit out of doing that and start to realise that actually, there's longer-term gains for communities and for unions to work together. (Union official, PCS, London).

The issue of leadership is an important factor in whether or not unions decide to work with and alongside community organisations. The greater the understanding, at leadership level, of community organising and its potential benefits is crucial to engagement and sustainability of joint working. But another issue relating to leadership was identified from the interviews with trade unionists – that of leadership development. Part of the iAF training is to be able to talent spot leaders during the one-to-ones using the relational organising techniques. Organisers within the IAF groups are constantly looking to identify people who have the leadership skills to organise their fellow citizens and unionists who had been through this training were taking the method back into their union and applying the same method. An organiser from the United Association of Plumbers and Pipefitters (UAPP) in Seattle, considered this to be one of the factors that led to the union's involvement in the Sound Alliance:

So there were two things: number one was…that we really didn't have a good way of mining our members for future leaders. We really were fortunate that people step up but also sometimes people step up with the wrong skills set and for the wrong reasons…And so we didn't really have any way of actually putting some of the rank and file members [to work on projects] and seeing how they worked out…moving people up in that kind of a way. And the other thing was to try and get our fingers in the community a bit more. (Union organiser, UAPP, Seattle)

Increase in political power – opportunities to get in front of decision-makers

The final benefit discussed here for union working in coalitions is the issue of increased political power a union might derive from working with a wider range of civil society organisations. It has already been discussed earlier in this report that the perception of unions in some quarters is that they are self-serving, self-interested organisations, only concerned with improving their own members terms and conditions. While this might be expected – it is after all main purpose a trade union – it is an image that has been promoted negatively by anti-union organisations and it is perhaps a view that is accepted by sections of society. This perception has perhaps also increased since the decline in union membership and now that only a minority of workers enjoy the benefits of collective bargaining and representation should they have a problem at work. The media, is particularly quick to
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attack trade unionists undertaking industrial action, trying to create division among workers by pointing to the fact that unionised workers are better off that those who are not – and that unionised workers should be grateful that they actually have a job at all. So we have already heard from trade unions that countering these negative stereotypes by being part of a wider coalition is seen as a significant benefit, but another and related factor is that involvement provides greater opportunities to increase the political power of unions and for union leaders to get in front of decision-makers who have the power to effect change.

The ability to appear alongside influential community leaders, presenting a united front of civil society organisations, can have a powerful effect. It is relatively easy for an employer or political figure to dismiss demands for change from a single body – particular if they can depict this as self-interest – but it is much more difficult to do so when a wider range of voices are speaking. When Unite the union was working with London Citizens on the living wage campaign, a senior union official explained the effect this had on their ability to negotiate with employers on behalf of their members:

The moral authority that London Citizens has given to the London living wage has been extraordinary…this should not be underestimated…we would not have been able to do what we have done without this leadership…the moral authority of London Citizens has been devastating in its impact. (Senior union official, Unite, London)

The appearance of faith leaders and other community leaders on actions around the living wage has attracted considerable interest from the media and other commentators. The combination of the moral arguments about the inhumanity of forcing workers to live below the breadline – of not having sufficient wages to feed and clothe their children – combined with strong economic arguments and research evidence about how the living wage was of benefit to employers in terms of reduced turnover of staff and the government in reduced welfare payments, made a compelling case.

The invitation of business leaders and politicians to London Citizens’ assemblies, where two thousand people were gathered from a myriad of different community organisations, made it difficult for these people to ignore the messages presented to them. Workers struggling to make ends meet told their stories to the audience and these testimonies were often very moving – low wage workers were no longer just statistics, but were visible to all as they presented their lived experience – not being able to provide for their families, despite working two or three jobs. Community leaders would then ask employers and politicians, in front of this audience, to commit to do something to change this situation, to work with London Citizens to introduce the living wage within their organisation. This forcing of a public commitment (filmed and attended by the media) made it difficult to say no, or to renege on the agreement at a later date.

The success of this particular campaign – which has captured a political and media consensus has meant that the concept (if not the practice) of the living wage is now widely accepted in the UK. Since 2001, when the campaign began, over 100 employers have been persuaded to pay the living wage to their staff. Leading organisations like KPMG and Barclays, the Olympic Delivery Authority and the Greater London Authority have become living wage employers and become influential advocates of its implementation. Jane Wills, long time researcher into the living wage, has calculated that the campaign has won over £70 million in London, lifting over 10,000 families out of working poverty (Wills 2011). In addition, more than 20 per cent of the 174 principal local authorities in England and Wales
now pay staff a minimum of the living wage and many more have committed to do so in the near future.

This ability to ‘get in front of decision-makers’ also appealed very strongly to unions involved in the Sound Alliance in Seattle and its sister organisation the Spokane Alliance. In talking about an assembly similar to the one mentioned above, a representative from the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW), explained how it gave his union a different way of looking at ways of harnessing the power of communities:

…they had folks tell their story, had three of them and then they dragged one of those commissioners up there. They asked him three questions, and they told him you can say, yes or, no and, of course, it was all scripted, but getting him on the record like that and then at the end of the thing, he got 30 seconds to address the group and so, that was fascinating to me. I had never seen anything like it and that was the hook. We’ve had our founding assemblies since then and we’ve had multiple assemblies, one of which over foreclosure I co-chaired. So it’s just been a great learning experience and a different way of approaching some of these problems that I’ve really appreciated. (Organiser, UFCW, Spokane)

This was also evident in the coming together of different sections of society to put pressure on the Washington state legislature to sign a Jobs Bill worth almost $1 billion dollars. This was signed in April 2012 and intended to provide 18,000 construction jobs across the state to kick-start the economy as well as money for energy efficient grants for higher education. While no-one claims that this was just the result of lobbying and community organising by the Sound and Spokane Alliances, the coalition had a significant input into lobbying for the green jobs aspect and the Bill allocated $15 million dollars to continue the work of community energy efficiency programmes, such as SustainableWorks – a key priority of the Sound and Spokane Alliances.
I experienced first-hand the benefit of the community alliance over the last four or five months; we had educators, we had faith community and we had construction unions all involved in this effort around the Jobs Bill. It made it much more effective for us because while we were able to speak to legislators in terms of the high unemployment amongst our membership, [and] we had faith community there able to speak to the impact of this economic situation in families, and the impact they were seeing. At the same time, we had – because of the budget cuts there is some competition for what funds exist…The Alliance was incredible in bridging those differences and getting everybody to the point where we were looking for the common good, not just for our own, but for the common good… So I think the Alliance bridged those differences and just opened up lines of communication where we could understand each other's positions better. (Organiser, Sheet Metal Workers Union, Seattle)

In the UK and Australia both union movements had once been able to rely on support from the labour parties of which they were part, but the steady decline over the last few decades in their political influence as the parties have become less accommodating to labour, and workers in general, has forced unions to think about where else to they can access to levers of power:

I think this organisation needs to be part of the Sydney Alliance is because as we’ve entered the 21st century and gone into a new phase within Australian global capitalism we actually don’t have a guaranteed place inside the labour movement, which means we have to fight for that, and that means we have to go beyond our current institutional power and actually build power through reconstructing a civil society. (Union official, UNSW, Sydney).

That these alliances were able to provide access to those who hold political and economic influence and power was a strong motivation for those unions who had lost their traditional access to levers of power through their political connections with political parties.

“We listen to the stories of thousands of people in our communities to understand the world as it is - the painful stories of people being whipsawed by powerful forces that undermine their well-being and the hopeful stories filled with their passion for a better world. Our listening campaigns dig deep to find untapped leaders and surface the issues most impacting everyday people.”

Sound Alliance website
Reasons for union non-involvement in community coalitions

The last section looked at the reasons trade unionists gave for involvement in the community coalitions, but the research also found that there were a host of reasons why unions decided not to involve themselves in these broad-based community groups. These ranged from opposition to the particular form of organising espoused by the IAF – especially their culture and methodology – particularly concerns over relational organising and working in coalition with faith organisations, but also factors, such as an ideological commitment to an industrial form of organising; an inability to get membership backing to commit time and resources to community organising; and being too caught up in dealing with the many pressing issues that unions have to contend with, especially in this current period of economic crisis.

This section will, therefore, explore some of these reasons, both from those unions that have joined – because they have stories to tell on the issues they faced in getting agreement to become part of the coalitions – but also from those unions that made a decision not to join, either because they wanted to continue to operate within their current spheres of organisation, or that they wanted to look to develop their own community-based organising approaches, or that had ideological reasons not to get involved. The voices of those other than trade unionists will be brought in here as it is important to get a different perspective on some of the negative views held by some trade unionists about working at a community level with the different member organisations in the coalitions.
Different cultures: different approaches

The most striking difference between the way trade unions and the community coalitions operate is their very different cultures and approach to organising. The IAF’s relational culture of one-to-ones has already been mentioned, but this was an issue that was disliked by a number of trade unionists outside of the three coalitions – alongside that of the ‘stage-managed’ public assemblies. Speaking to trade unionists about, and at, the assemblies, has tended to invoke one of two responses. The first is amazement at the ability of each of the affiliated institutions to turn out their members to these events:

…they’re very impressive events aren’t they? All these people trouping on to this stage and the ladies in their hats and everything and pledging, but the most extraordinary thing is the way they nail, government ministers and leaders of commerce and everything, and stick them on that stage, and then just force them to commit themselves. I would have loved to have some of the NUT [National Union of Teachers] people with me to see that, because there’s a lesson there in negotiating. (National official, NUT, London)

The witnessing of such a diverse audience in terms of age, gender and ethnicity alongside the powerful testimonies of their members, has impressed many trade unionists who could only dream of that degree of diversity and membership involvement and turnout in their unions. The second response is to recoil at the tightly scripted and timed agenda where attendees are encouraged to cheer and clap at appropriate times throughout the event. To some unionists, the assemblies felt like a ‘revivalist meeting’, appearing ‘evangelical’ and too ‘happy clappy’:

I’m not religious at all so I found that sort of quite…I found it a bit evangelical
Then I went to the one in May in Central London this year, I suppose I was used to it by then. I think, generally, I came away, although I was reserved,
I was just generally impressed with the amount of people there on a cold November evening. (Union organiser, Public and Commercial Services Union, London)

This issue was more prevalent in the UK where there is a fairly militant secularism within much of the officer and lay leadership of trade unions. It was interesting to hear the extent to which critics of London Citizens invoked religious discourse to describe their dislike of the organisation and its events – the issue of working with people of faith seemed to be most problematic for a number of critics. As one trade union organiser said when talking about working with London Citizens:

The reaction you get from a lot of reps is just ‘no! we’re not having anything to do with the churches, at all’…there’s a real anti-religious movement within the unions and I think most reps would find that really difficult. (Union organiser, TUC, London)

London Citizens was very much aware of this issue among some trade unionists, particularly from those that were in leadership positions and thus able to influence their unions on whether or not to join the coalition. It was also recognised by London Citizens that because its founding groups were from the faith community, this was perhaps off-putting to some of the unions, who took the view that this was not a ‘broad-based’ organisation, but was, in fact, an ecumenical faith grouping – making it more difficult to persuade unions it was something of which they should also be part.
So having started with a predominantly faith alliance, that probably meant that some union folk looked at us and said ‘this is a church operation, they’re spooky and we’re not going to do it’…And they regularly, when we’ve tried to recruit union branches that feedback comes back, that they don’t like churches, they’re suspicious of what faith’s about. There’s nothing good come out of faith and therefore, they’re not going to join. (Lead organiser, London Citizens, London)

It is useful to contrast these views with those who have a positive response to the organisational culture within the IAF groups and the differing responses to the one-to-one relational meetings and the assemblies just talked about. Here is a response from a member of a migrant support organisation that is in membership of the Sydney Alliance, to a question about what she thought about the first assembly she attended:

I took my husband, my kids along, 17-year old boy and a 14-year old girl. And they were saying ‘oh we’re spending our Sunday doing this? What’s going to happen?’ But they were so enthused and motivated, they loved the part when people got up and spoke about their issues…[they thought] this organisation is listening to their members and this is what we want. It was very powerful and very moving…to be part of this, in a room full of people. You felt like you could change the world. It was really beautiful. (Worker, Metro Migrant Resource Sector, Sydney)

It is to be expected that different people will have differing responses to any particular form of organisation or organising practice, but there was a general pattern to how these differences played out in the three countries and between the three sectors of membership – the unions, the faith groups and the NGOs. Overall, trade unionists in London fell mainly in the negative camp, although this was not a universal perspective. In Sydney, there were some negative views from a number of the trade unions interviewed and these tended to be based on scepticism, rather than hostility or ideological difference. As one union leader said, ‘we’re certainly not hostile to the Sydney Alliance stuff at all. We’ve sort of been preoccupied with this enormous organisational process that we’ve gone through. So we’re watching with interest the Sydney Alliance stuff, we’ll be at the launch’. The view of this trade union leader was the union would watch the development of the coalition carefully before making a decision on whether or not to get involved. It was an initiative that the union thought was important and it was good that it was being supported by the peak body, Unions New South Wales. But, hesitation was expressed in terms of the cultural gap between union practice and the way the Sydney Alliance was trying to structure the relationships between non-government organisations and the unions. The union felt this was a bit of a ‘leap of culture’ that some in the union movement were struggling with. There was nervousness about the different cultural practices of the Alliance and concern that union members would not respond well to this. In addition, but related, was the issue of resources – both time and money, and this was making the union hesitant:

Resources are very tight and there’s a real competition about what we do and I think we’ve done the right thing for us to focus on our rebuilding [the union], but also just making our union a different, more progressive, sort of outfit. So we will see how the Sydney Alliance stuff works out. (Union official, Private sector union 1, Sydney)

There was, however, direct opposition from one union to getting involved in the Sydney
Trade union involvement in broad-based community organising

Alliance and this was, in part, due to concern about working alongside some of the faith groups who were also employers. So initially this appeared not to be based on opposition to faith, but to the fact that some of the faith groups involved were also employers with whom the union negotiated on behalf of their members – they felt, therefore, that this could potentially lead to a conflict of interest in representing their members’ interests. But when the reasons for opposition were explored in more detail, it emerged that there was concern about faith groups and the possibility of building sustainable relationships with ‘conservative religious leaders’. More fundamentally, though, the concern from a senior figure in this particular union was the underlying purpose of trade unions and what their central purpose should be. While it was acknowledged that there is an obvious role for unions in broader social justice campaigns, central to the purpose of trade unionism must remain the building of worker power. Thus, having followed the Alliance over the three years of its development there was bafflement from one trade union leader that the coalition did not yet have an ‘issue’ to organise around – nor that it did not have one at the outset. The idea of spending three years in formation and building the strength of the institutions appeared to ‘make no sense’:

I think that if you’re going to bring a group of people together it has to be for a purpose, not simply for the sake of making some judgement about these are all good people and they should all like each other and work out something that we can all work together, it should be for a purpose and actually obviously from our perspective, from my perspective, it should be about building working power in some way. (Union official, Private sector union 2, Sydney)

In comparison to trade unionists in London and to a much lesser extent in Sydney, unionists in Seattle seemed much less concerned or troubled by the organisational culture of the IAF. Nor was there much of an issue in working alongside faith organisations. As one IAF organiser reported:

I don’t think that’s as much of an issue here because in general the level of religious attachment in the United States remains relatively high. So that the unions have within them people that are embedded in faith communities.

(Lead organiser, IAF, USA)

Faith in the US performs a much greater role in civil society and political life, than in the UK or Australia. For example, for a majority of Americans religion plays a very important role in their lives, with a fairly high level of religious adherence with around 76 per cent identifying as Christians – a much higher proportion that in other comparable developed countries. Other examples include the way in which faith-based groups participate in the delivery of federally funded social services – receiving money from the government to provide social welfare and the way in which US politicians frequently discuss religion in their campaigns, and many churches and religious figures are highly politically active.

An interesting issue that arose in Seattle, though not in London or Sydney, was a concern from some people within faith organisations to working with trade unions. As mentioned earlier in this report, unions have a poor image in the US, where anti-union organisations and the media continually make highly vocal contributions to anti-union discourse and this seeps into the general public’s consciousness. An organiser from the Sound Alliance reported that people from some of the faith communities affiliated were worried about working with unions where there was a fear that union would come in with a ‘heavy-handed’ approach to pursue their own political agenda. A religious leader who was part of the Sound Alliance
described the response from some of his congregants to their church’s decision to affiliate:

We have some congregants who are captains of industry for whom those [trade unions] are dirty words because they have had difficulties with labor in their own businesses and they said; ‘what are you getting in bed with?’ I don’t know to what extent this exists in the UK…the politicising of certain labor issues in this country, and the increasing partisanship in the national debate…[but it] will have you believe that labor is socialist and evil and is going to bring about the downfall of America! (Religious leader, Sound Alliance affiliate, Seattle)

Also due to the dominance of labour unions in the Sound Alliance it was interesting to explore the extent to which the issues taken up by the Alliance were those that might be seen as leaning more towards the concerns of labour and perhaps reinforcing this feeling that it was the unions in the Alliance that were dominating or setting the agenda. But because of the way that the Alliance (and other IAF groups) operate, the issues they act upon arise out of detailed listening campaigns among affiliated institutions and although the foreclosure campaign, the Jobs Bill and SustainableWorks could be interpreted as ‘labour issues’, these are the topics that arose in the listening campaigns and it was then decided that these would be the campaigns that all in institutions would act upon.

**Ideological commitment to a specific organising approach**

In some senses, the reasons for non-involvement in the coalitions are difficult to separate into categories as they are very much interrelated. So the issue of unions having a commitment to a specific organising approach can be ideological, but cultural at the same time. Unions tend to be highly structured and bureaucratic organisations and have developed an approach to organising that is rooted in their history, sector and local labour markets. A reading of the literature on trade unions shows how, over time, unions and different groups of workers have been categorised as either militant, or passive, as organising, and/or servicing – each developing and adapting diverse approaches depending on circumstance. Some of these though become deeply entrenched in union cultures and are often based on an ideological commitment to specific organising approach. As we saw earlier in the report (last section) when one union talked about its commitment to ‘industrial organising’ its viewpoint was derived from an analysis that workers’ power is to be found at the point of production, and therefore the workplace is where the union’s organising focus should lie.

While few would doubt the greatest power that workers have is the ability to collectively withdraw their labour in order to force concessions from an employer, the reality in today’s labour markets shows that most workers are unwilling, unconfident, insufficiently organised, or unable to take such measures, thus weakening their ability to collectively bargain. Nevertheless, there are unions that feel that the workplace, rather than the ‘community’ should remain their primary foci, as this is where union renewal needs to take place if that traditional source of power is to be restored. This then explains why some unions may choose not to involve themselves in community-based organising or in community coalitions, but it would be useful to explore why other unions, with different perspectives also find it difficult to commit to thinking about new or alternative approaches to organising. Indeed, it would be interesting to explore whether those unions that involved themselves in community organising found they were subsequently better able to address the challenges of industrial organising, but that is for a later research project.
One of the first comments, from a trade unionist in Sydney about his union’s rejection of community-based organising, was the relative conservatism found in some unions and the lack of a vision of change. Because of the ‘time-served’ nature of leadership in unions, wherein leaders tend to have worked their way up through the ranks over many years, there is a tendency to have absorbed or been inculcated into the particular culture and structures of a union. Then, a concern with keeping an elected position leads to a propensity to keep things as they are and not ‘rock the boat’. This was another union leader from Sydney talking about the ‘push back’ from some of his members about the union’s involvement in the Sydney Alliance:

It worries me a little bit because our guys, they’re all blue collar workers and that just fits in with their cynicisms… Questions were asked about ‘why are you guys’ – meaning the leadership of the union – ‘why are you guys mixing with church groups?’ [I said]…because they’re part of the community, and it was a real response of ‘well, let’s stick to the core business’.

In these circumstances, sticking to ‘core-business’ rather than trying something new can thus seem like a safe or preferable way to operate.

Again, we see differences between the three countries in relation to the type of unions involved/not involved in the three IAF groups in this research. In the USA, the unions that were part of the Sound Alliance tended to be the smaller craft-based unions that did not have much of a history or tradition of organising. For example, the transport union in Seattle mentioned earlier, the Amalgamated Transit Union, described itself as a ‘service model union’ that had never needed to organise before because it had virtually 100 per cent density, but it had joined the Alliance in order to help transform itself into an organising union.

The unions that split from the US union federation the American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organisations (AFL-CIO) and who formed the Change to Win federation, due to concern about a perceived lack of commitment to an organising approach, were noticeably absent from the Sound Alliance. When questioned about this omission the reasons given, by an IAF organiser were that the larger unions that had made a commitment to organising had already structures and strategies in place to facilitate this and therefore probably did not see much benefit from involvement. Some of these unions, like the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) and UniteHere are recognised as being successful at organising and as the IAF organiser said ‘they think that they know how to do organising and they don’t feel like they need a lot of help’. A Sound Alliance organiser reiterated this point:

We actually kind of steer clear of the unions that are really – in some ways they are better organising unions, the ones that have more campaigns that are more likely to have a strong organising culture. We kind of stayed away from them initially for a couple of reasons. One is we knew that they would be impatient with the slower organising process when we were getting started. But also they’d come in and they would have certain expectations about what they wanted for relationships and it would be counter cultural to what we were trying to do inside. (Organiser, Sound Alliance, Seattle)

In London, it is only the unions Unite and Unison (and the Public and Commercial Services union to a much lesser extent) that have had any significant involvement and this has largely when there has been an alignment of interest – around the living wage campaign and the
organisation and recruitment of cleaners in the City. This has been a criticism expressed by members of London Citizens over the years where they say that unions tend to approach their involvement in a transactional way rather than relational or in terms of member involvement. Clearly if an organisation is putting money into a coalition it is perhaps an expectation that it will be looking for a return on its ‘investment’, but it is how this is conceived or evaluated that is important. As already noted, the IAF model is based upon the active involvement of the members of affiliating institutions, through the training, one-to-ones and turn out to events and assemblies and that these are the issues around involvement that unions, overall, have found difficult.

One IAF organiser talked of unions putting in large amounts of money, but that being in membership did not really work out because it was often only staff that were involved and they were unable to get their members to take part – in many cases because they do not have much of a relationship with their members. Unite, which has only ever had three branches involved (and now just one), also has a very specific organising approach that is based on a traditional industrial model of organising across sectors, which does not ‘fit’ with the operating style of London Citizens.

In Sydney the situation was different, here there was a cross section of unions involved, from different political perspectives and from those that are predominantly service-orientated to those like United Voice that has swung behind the organising model approach. As explained earlier, this is largely down to the leadership of the Sydney Alliance, which with the backing of the peak union body Unions New South Wales, has been able to draw in a cross-section of unions and ensure that it did not appear to be part of a faction or have sectarian tendencies. A lot of work was done to persuade an initial group of unions to come on board before intending to encourage the remainder to join at a later stage. So in Sydney, there are fewer ideological factors relating to a particular organising(servicing) model of operation that have tended to restrict unions joining these alliances, but that does not necessarily mean that some of the issues relating to active involvement have been overcome. Some unions are better able to get their members to play a part and have been able to reap the benefits, whereas others have not. Indeed three unions left the Sydney Alliance just after the founding assembly as they either were not able to identify the benefits of engagement, or could not find members to get involved.

Differing perspectives on union non-involvement: from IAF groups

When Saul Alinsky began his forerunner to the IAF he worked closely with labour unions, most notably the meatpackers in Chicago where he brought together the Catholic Church and the union to form his first community organisation, the Back of the Yards, which secured some significant victories in union organising (Horwitt 1989). But despite this early involvement with labour unions the IAF did not, in its first four decades of existence, spend much time organising with trade unions. Instead the focus was very much on faith communities, and other community-based organisations that were seen as being more rooted in their localities. This began to change when the IAF began to organise around the living wage in Baltimore in 1992 where was recognition that the local IAF group, Baltimoreans United in Leadership Development (BUILD), could not achieve the change it was seeking in Baltimore without working with the labour movement (Fine 2003). Since that time, union engagement has, overall, been limited, but the last couple of decades has
given the IAF time to reflect on the way in which its affiliates have experienced working with labour unions and some of these views will be explored here.

The critique from the IAF organisers in the three case studies and from some of the more senior IAF staff elsewhere is that trade unions do not have the ‘social glue’ that binds many in faith communities together. Unions, they argue, do not have the same ability to ‘turn-out’ their members and this has been the experience of many of the IAF organisations, and number of reasons are provided for this. Firstly, it is contended that the service orientation of trade unionism lends itself to the more transactional approach that was mentioned earlier. Many members do not have a relationship with their union unless they find themselves with a problem at work and then the expectation is for the union to provide a service – that someone will advocate on their behalf. Therefore, when unions join an IAF group many are unable to participate to the same extent as those of other member institutions. Secondly, there are the competing demands of representing members and undertaking collective bargaining against trying to find the space to get involved in wider social justice issues or broaden the concerns of the union. The greatest pressure will always be to deal with the most urgent and pressing issues (and those expected by the demands of members):

It’s very difficult for them [unions] to find the time or to think how can this thing, which I don’t quite understand, looks very unusual, has faith in it and I’m kind of quite suspicious of that…why would I spend my time on this, when my schedule’s already packed out? (Lead organiser, London Citizens, London)
Thirdly, IAF organisers talked about some of the practical difficulties in trying to work with unions, based on their very different structural and organisational cultures. Their experience of unions is that they are very bureaucratic and find it difficult to react and make decisions quickly, whereas they see themselves as being ‘quite ad hoc and nimble’. This appears to frustrate both sides, with IAF groups wanting the ability to act quickly to an event when necessary, whereas the unions often need to consult, and refer back to committees or members to secure agreement and this, at times, has created tensions on both sides.

A fourth, but related, factor is geographical mismatch. The structure of unions often tend to mirror industry or employer structures such that there is little relationship with the geographical communities in which IAF groups are based. While not insurmountable, it is often problematic for unions to work out how their internal structures map onto those of the local community coalition. But at the same time, IAF groups wonder how to incorporate unions who are not from the local community into their coalition. For example, in London, Unison’s branch structures are based around local government authorities as their members are working for local government (similarly with health workers around hospital trusts). London Citizens has based its structure similarly such that the organisation is made up of four chapters (north, south, east and west), which maps onto the 32 London boroughs. Thus in theory and in terms of a spatial fit, this works very well for both parties.

However, the Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS), which was at one time interested in exploring how they might work with London Citizens, has a very different branch structure. As it is representing members in government departments, it organises its branches along these lines and these spread across the country. Similarly with the Transport Salaried Staff Association – a union representing rail workers is based in London, but its members are organised across train operating companies throughout the UK. These different geographical constituencies lead to a number of practical complications one of which is in what way could unions affiliate if their structures do not ‘fit’ that of the coalition? London Citizens is based upon locally based institutions in the area of its four chapters. But as mentioned here unions are national institutions with perhaps very little member attachment to those areas – indeed their members may be spread out all over London and beyond. Perhaps most importantly, trade union organisation remains workplace-orientated, and today fewer people live near to their place of work. A local government branch may represent people who work for an authority, but members may live in another borough where, if they are involved in community activities their involvement is more likely to take place. Clearly these difficulties are not insurmountable if there was a willingness to work out a practical solution – yet London Citizens appeared very wedded to its particular geographical structure and method of operation that does not make it particularly easy for unions who might want to join.

In Seattle there was a much closer geographical match as the Sound Alliance was based in Seattle but operated across the sate of Washington, and that was also the geographical territory of the unions as well, so this was not much of a problem. Similarly, in Sydney, the Sydney Alliance although primarily based in the city, also operates across the state as a whole – the same spatial landscape as the unions. But Sydney also took a different geographical organising approach in its initial founding phase to that of London Citizens. In Sydney, the Alliance approached city or statewide institutions to sign up to be founding members. These included regional institutions like the NSW Jewish Board of Deputies, the Uniting Church Synod of NSW, the Catholic Arch diocese of Sydney (Catholic Care), United Muslim Women Association, as well as Unions NSW, United Voice, Public Service Association,
also covering the state of New South Wales. This is generally counter to the traditional IAF approach, and that adopted by London Citizens, which is to organise institutions at the micro level in a neighbourhood area – that way embedding the organisation in localised communities.

In Sydney, however, there was recognition at the start that this would not work in terms of getting the unions to take part as their branch structures do not operate at this spatial scale – they are based in the city and operate across the state. There is not the same local branch formation that is evident in the UK where local branches report to a regional level of the union – in Sydney, for most unions, the branch is at the state level which then is part of a national structure. The different scalar dimensions of Australian unions thus would have made it difficult for unions to engage if the Sydney Alliance had adopted the traditional approach. Similarly, a view was taken that if it was possible to get the regional bodies of faith institutions on board at the start it meant that it would be easier to move down a scale and get individual local churches, mosques and synagogues involved at a later stage if there was already approval by their ‘governing’ bodies. There was therefore a deliberate spatial strategy in Sydney which began by bringing on board the peak institutions of each of the sectors before ‘going deep’ into the districts to bringing in local institutions after the founding assembly. As someone from the Sydney Alliance said:

So, geographically, you’ve got to start at the centre because otherwise you’re just not going to get anywhere…union structures are the same, it’s all centralised here… because of the industrial relations system…[you] start from the centre and work outwards.

A final issue, also touched on earlier in this report is that of leadership. The IAF groups noticed that where there was not buy-in or involvement by a union’s leadership then a union was unlikely to invest much time or resource in active engagement, so even if a union did join then their membership was unlikely to be sustained. This was certainly the case with the few London branches that joined, but also evident in case of the Public Services Alliance, the Teachers Federation and the National Union of workers – in Sydney. In each of these cases there was not much support from the top and in each case these three unions left the Sydney Alliance after the first three years.

Differing perspectives on union non-involvement: from trade unions

The last section considered some of the reasons provided by the three community coalitions for the non-involvement of unions, but this section looks at the way this issue was perceived from the unions themselves. In a sense, the issues are much the same, but are, in some cases, understood and felt differently. As union non-involvement is more prominent in the case of London Citizens, the focus will mainly be in this area, although perspectives from unions in the other two case studies will also be included.

Picking up on the point of leadership support in the last section – this is most strongly demonstrated in London by the relationship with Unison’s regional body in London and London Citizens. In 2001 when the living wage campaign began, the regional secretary at that time was supportive of local branches getting involved in the coalition – as well as the General Secretary of the union at national level. The regional secretary assigned Unison organisers to work with the forerunner of London Citizens (Telco) to help build support
Section four: Research findings

for the campaign amongst workers at the east London hospitals. But following a change
in leadership, the London region of Unison, was no longer supportive of branches joining
the coalition. As such, and despite support from the national union including financial
help for branches to pay membership dues to London Citizens, it has been difficult for
Unison branches in London to join while this opposition from the regional office remains
– although a few have maintained their membership. A similar issue occurred in the union
Unite where the deputy general secretary and another senior figure in the union were very
supportive of London Citizens during the living wage campaign amongst cleaners in the
City and carried two branches into membership – but when they left the union, the support
waned and the relationship came to an end.

Unlike Sydney where the union regional body Unions New South Wales was in
membership of the Sydney Alliance and in Seattle where, although not a member of the
Sound Alliance, the local labor council was keen on what they are doing and support the
notion of community organising – the equivalent body in London, the Southern and
Eastern Regional TUC, has not had a particularly favourable relationship with London
Citizens. Some of the reasons behind this have been written about elsewhere (Holgate
2009) but in essence they relate to two main issues. One is of territory, where it is seen that
London Citizens is operating in a space that ‘belongs’ to that of trade unions. The living
wage (or more strictly pay and conditions) for example, is seen as an industrial relations
matter. As a TUC regional body that meets and negotiates at regional level with politicians
and other relevant regional bodies, London Citizens’ negotiations with these people was,
at times, seen to be interfering in the business of SERTUC. While at times there was
‘co-operation’ between the two – for example over the signing of an agreement in 2004
with the Mayor of London to provide opportunities for local employment, affordable
housing and training initiatives as part of the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic games – the
unions felt that London Citizens presented these achievements as theirs alone, ignoring the
contributions made by union bodies in making this happen.

While this could be interpreted as mere squabbling over who should be credited (most)
for a particular success, a number of unions (Unison, PCS, and Unite), all reported similar
instances where they had worked jointly with London Citizens on events, but found that
they were either marginalised or not included at all in reports of events or in campaign
letters to employers or government ministers, or even in press releases. Perhaps this was
an oversight, but unions rejected this as unlikely from a slick and super professional
organisation like London Citizens, who took its media strategy very seriously. Incidents like
these tended to permanently sour the relationship between some unions in London and
London Citizens as these stories spread throughout the region.

Despite this, other unions in London were keen to see if they could work out ways of
building a relationship and finding a way to work through some of the cultural and
structural difficulties mentioned earlier to find ways of joining, but felt that there overtures
were not taken seriously. Unlike Seattle, where there was discussion about how to bring
unions on board with the active involvement of their members, unions were not given
any assistance to explore how they might engage. In some sense, there was an assumption
by London Citizens that because trade unions, unlike faith groups, are organised, can
occasionally turn out their members for sporadic industrial action (although not on a regular
basis), can do political campaigning, that the coalition need not do the same in depth work
that it does with its other member institutions. This was recognised by on person active
within London Citizens:
I think we need to do exactly the same kind of work [as with other members], maybe with a slightly different end to it. But we need to do the one-to-ones, we need to do the engaging with the branches to see what their other affiliations are, we need to build their skills and their ability to participate.

But there was sense from talking to unions in London that London Citizens had ‘given up’ on trying to involve trade unions, that some of the relationships had been soured, that they were perceived as being more ‘difficult’ than faith groups and NGOs so there was no longer any effort to spend time trying to sort out some of the difficulties, like structural fit and turn out of members – it was easier to go after the ‘low hanging fruit’ that would take less organiser time⁶. This contrasts quite strongly with IAF organisers in Seattle who have recognised that if they want unions on board they need to address some of their peculiarities and difficulties, but that this is part of also helping to (re)build this part of civil society:

Honestly, the biggest factor is the overall organisational health of the unions. So some of them are relatively more healthy and some of them are relatively much more dysfunctional. So the ones that are less well organised participate, but don’t have the capacity to mobilise a significant percentage of their members. And more of the work of the Alliance is focused on helping them rebuild their internal culture so that they get strong and healthy again and that’s something that I am particularly passionate about. (Organiser, Sound Alliance, Seattle)

The challenge for unions in Sydney was somewhat different. As a newly forming organisation, a number of unions not involved (and even some that were) could not not fully understand what the organisation was about and were reluctant to commit to something they had yet to see producing any benefits. Non-involved unions had closely followed the experience of those unions who had joined and were baffled by the amount of time and hard work union organisers and members were committing to building an organisation that did not have any campaign issues. This ‘issue-based’ organising versus ‘relational’ organising has already been discussed earlier but it was an important issue in keeping some unions out of the Sydney Alliance and part of the reason some of the unions left:

I’ve talked to people in a similar role to myself in the Teachers Federation and the Public Services Association, with respect to the Sydney Alliance and it’s essentially the same thing, having a tangible [issue]. Unions are so action based and, without this, without seeing them [Sydney Alliance] actually having achieved something, I think that’s a huge thing and then the workload. It’s such a heavy workload on organisers…There are two things said; ‘I can’t get involved, I’ve got too much on my plate’ or ‘I’ll get involved when I can see that there’s actually something in it for my members’. (Union organiser, member of Sydney Alliance, Sydney)

This change in the way of doing business in unions, of thinking about relationships before action and permanent coalition-building at community level, requires an ideological shift and trust in the partners involved. The fact that the Sydney Alliance had support from the Sydney unions’ peak body, Unions New South Wales, and had people working for the coalition that had a union background was helpful in attracting the unions that had got involved, but this was not sufficient for a number who had not developed an ideological commitment to community-organising.

If you’ve spent your entire career thinking about unions and politics in a very specific way, and then a couple of upstarts come and tell you that actually we’re
going to turn the whole thing on its head, and actually get into your personal space and make you feel uncomfortable... One of the things about the Sydney Alliance is that it makes no apologies for doing that kind of thing and it does make people feel uncomfortable and some people have reacted against that.

(Union official, non-member of Sydney Alliance)

Unlike Sydney and Seattle, London Citizens has not generally recruited organisers or staff who have a union background. An ability to understand and relate to union structures and culture, and to be seen as an ‘insider’, might have helped to overcome some of the difficulties and mistrust that has occurred between the various parties over the last twelve years. It is interesting to note that London Citizen’s successful engagement with unions in the early days of the living wage campaign was largely down to an LC organiser who, although not a trade unionist, was committed to working with unions. She also had a mentor from the IAF who had, unusually for an IAF organiser, come out of the union movement and had been specifically recruited in to work on the development of a new campaign on labour issues. She managed to build up a lot of respect with the unions but this dissipated after she left the organisation and there has been no one with the similar skills and experience of working with unions.

NOTES
4 The UK is much more secular with religious adherence declining. 2012 Census figures show Christianity is the largest group at 59% a decline of 13% since 2001. Similarly the 2011 Census of Population and Housing data shows more Australians than ever are identifying as having no religious affiliation. Christianity remained the most commonly reported religion in Australia with 61.1 per cent of the population reporting affiliation with a Christian religion – a decline from 63.9 per cent in 2006.
5 The reasons for this are mired in complex internal union politics.
6 Despite this, a new IAF group, Nottingham Citizens, based in the north east of England and affiliated to Citizens UK, London Citizens’ parent body, recently had its founding assembly in June 2013 and it has been working closely with a number of unions – Unite, Unison, Royal College of Nursing – all of whom have branches in membership.
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Section five

Summary

The overarching question asked in this research was to what extent are unions thinking more seriously about a community-based organising approach as a way of demonstrating their relevance in society today? A comparative approach was undertaken in order to explore beyond the peculiarities of a single case study. This provided an opportunity to compare and contrast similarities and difference, particularly the influence of the different industrial relations context and the cultures, structures and dominant ideologies of various unions, and was made easier as a result of the common link between the three countries – the three community coalitions being part of the same family – the Industrial Areas Foundation. Although there was a constant – the three coalitions having the same ideological and methodological approach to community-based organising and coalition-building – there was also a need to adapt to the real life experiences happening around them. It was therefore interesting to witness how unions did or did not engage in this form of coalition-building and what could be learnt from the very varied experiences of the 31 unions or union bodies that were interviewed as part of this research. It should be noted that there is not an assumption that unions should adopt or adhere to this particular form of community organising, it is recognised that there are many different ways of organising at the community level, but that a lot of the methods and tactics of community organising are shared across the many varied approaches and it is for unions to decide which is best in any particular circumstance (if at all).

A turn to community organising: the determinants of change

What has emerged strongly from this research is the degree of consideration given by unions to the idea of community-based organising and/or coalition-building with groups outside the traditional industrial relations actors. In the early days of London Citizens, when they began the living wage campaign in 2001, there was little talk by trade unions in the UK of community organising. This was the initial period when the UK union movement was beginning its ’turn to organising’ following the establishment of the TUC’s organising academy in 1998 whereby there was an attempt to move unions from relatively passive service providers to more active servicing organisations – an approach learnt from the union movements of the US and Australia.

An early finding from the research is therefore that there has been a considerable increase in discussion and debate around community organising over the last twelve years – this is not to say that there were no voices calling for an analysis of what this could bring to trade unionism, but that they were not widely heard or contemplated until relatively recently. While it is important not to exaggerate the extent to which unions are discussing or engaging in community organising, it is, noteworthy that so many unions, including many interviewed for this research, are taking significant steps to broaden their base and engage with communities outside their normal spheres of operation – even if this is still, as yet,
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Theoretical rather than practical for a number of unions. It has been argued elsewhere that, the global economic crisis of 2008 and the subsequent cuts to jobs and workers’ terms and conditions of employment, as well as the increase in unemployment have been an important factor in helping to focus union minds in this direction (Holgate forthcoming).

This ‘community turn’ is, in part, recognition that organising beyond the workplace may provide greater opportunities to engage with different groups of workers who might otherwise remain outside of the reach of unions (Herod 2001; Rainnie et al. 2007). But also that, ‘new’ tactical approaches, which have wider appeal than a particular group of workers, provides unions with the opportunity to tap into social and moral concerns held by wider society – particularly in this period of economic crisis.

This is an important step forward and is, in part, recognition that despite the many organising initiatives over the last couple of decades unions have not ‘renewed’ and there is still a need to do more. As one interviewee said; ‘trade unionism is in a really bad state and you can kind of continue doing what you’ve always done before and just hope that somehow, magically, it becomes effective now, or you can just try organising in different ways, with different people and see what happens. And I suppose I’m at that point where I guess it’s slightly desperate’. It seems like many trade union leaders have reached that point of desperation – but perhaps more so in the US with its 11 per cent union density and in Sydney where it is a little higher at 18 per cent, but there is perhaps still a little more complacency is the UK with its slightly higher density of 26 per cent.

**Main motivating factors**

The main motivating factor is therefore the state of union membership and union density, which in all three countries has been on a downward trajectory for decades. A resulting concern is that this leads to a loss of industrial power where workers do not have the confidence to strike for increases in pay or better terms and conditions of employment. It also means that they hold less political power to make those in positions of authority and government take notice of their concerns. In the UK and Australia, where trade unions still have strong links with their respective labour parties, relationships have overtime been severely weakened as both political parties have moved to the centre ground and been keen to demonstrate that there will be no favours for their ‘industrial wings’.

Despite this, unions in both countries have continued to hang on to these relationships such that this is the arena where unions still tend to ‘do’ politics – there is still a heavy reliance on the respective labour parties to deliver concessions for workers rather than mobilising workers to organise for these themselves. Activity therefore has been at the top levels of the unions and the labour parties – it has been about helping to win elections with the hope that some concessions will be gained if the parties are elected into power, rather than mobilising the grass-roots. While there have been some very tangible benefits in this regard – not least the abandonment of WorkChoices in Australia following the defeat of the Howard government and the introduction of the minimum wage and the right to union recognition legislation in the UK, this has not improved the fortunes of trade unions themselves. The more ‘favourable’ climate of a labour party in power has not led to a revival of trade unionism.

In contrast, unions in the USA do not have a labour party to which they can turn, and have instead have had to think about doing politics in a different way. While it is the case that unions often mobilise their members to support the Democratic Party at election time, it is not
a workers party connected to the working class and it cannot be relied upon to support worker issues. So for unions in the US without the same sort of political links as those in the UK and Australia (however weak) it has meant campaigning at different scales. As such the local level of unions becomes more important as support has, in many cases, to be built from the bottom up. Unions in the US have been forced to think about organising at community level much more than unions in the UK or Australia where the reliance on the relationship with the labour parties has taken precedence over building strength at the local scale and developing connections with those in the community who share their concerns. But this is changing.

The labour/union relationships are weakening and fragmenting. In the UK the Labour Party is not in government and there is no certainty that it will be elected in 2015 and, if it is, even less certainty that it will support many demands emanating from the union movement. Similarly in Australia, there is acceptance, by unions, that if the Labor Party looses the election in September 2013 times are going to be hard for the labour movement. This means new alliances and access to political decision-makers will need to be created through different channels: ‘when we lose control and power next year, the union is going to be in a hard state. So for me, the self-interest of us being in the Sydney Alliance is that we can have access to political decision makers in that arena’ (Union organiser, Sydney). These factors help in some way to explain the keenness of unions in both Sydney and Seattle in exploring working with the Sydney and Sound Alliances. In London, it seems the unions are still hanging on in there and with union density still at 26 per cent maybe unions in the UK have not quite reach the point of desperation where they need to think about radical transformation in their organising approaches. As one leading Sydney trade unionist said ‘if we had 28 per cent density we probably wouldn’t be searching [for an alternative] either’.

Understanding identity: shifting culture and building a sense of community

A second question in the research was what did unions perceive to be the benefits of community organising and being part of community coalitions. Was this conceived of in a narrow instrumental way, or were they motivated by wider ideas about social justice and the re-framing of the trade union message? The findings showed there were elements of both. It would be naive to think that self-interest would not be a factor in the decision to join a coalition such as the ones discussed in this research – involvement in IAF groups requires serious commitment both in time and resources. And, as unions have specific legal and moral responsibilities to their members, this requires a cost-benefit analysis to ascertain whether involvement can be justified. It was unclear from most unions the extent to which they had done this, or indeed whether or not they had a method or matrix by which to undertake such an evaluation. When asked to reflect on the benefits of involvement some were able to point to things that were very tangible like the jobs acquired through the Sound Alliance’s SustainableWorks project, whereas others it was more about creating a new vision or culture and building a sense of community within their unions that had been missing prior to involvement.

A key finding therefore is that involvement in community-based organising had given some unions the opportunity to find out more about their members – their interests, their hopes, their aspirations and importantly, what they wanted their unions to do about these issues. It was through the listening campaigns and the relational organising – the many one-to-one conversations that took place in each of the coalitions – that union members (and leaders) understood more about each other and how their concerns were shared by other sections
of society. The realisation that people in the community, outside the union, were prepared to devote their time and energy in supporting union causes and that unions were prepared to do the same to campaign for wider social justice issues had a strong effect in building collective solidarities. In learning that people are multifaceted and that union members have all sorts of aspects to their lives outside of work could perhaps provide unions with a way of thinking differently about how they organise and how they build support for unionism outside the workplace.

In 2008 the TUC commissioned a survey of union representatives to ascertain the extent of their activity in their local communities. This survey (of 405 reps) found that they were heavily involved in campaigning and activity where their focus was not solely or even mainly their own workplace and that this tended, largely, to be around issues of racism, disability or health issues, environmental concerns or women's issues (Gall 2009). In comparing overall 'civil-engagement' of the general public with that of the union reps surveyed, the author concluded that union reps were nearly three times as active in terms of volunteering and more than eight times as active in terms of civic participation. The report indicates that there is perhaps a strong link between trade union consciousness and community consciousness, but that these are in some way separated and practiced in their respective arenas. This was certainly evident in the research with the three community coalitions. For example, trade unions in the Sydney Alliance came across some of their members at Alliance meetings where members had got involved through their faith community and, in one case a Muslim women's association, but who were not active in their respective unions and who had not considered that their issues were also those of their trade union. This suggests that there is scope for unions to build up this community involvement of their members by organising in a way that benefits both unions and the organisations in which their members are active, or that encourages union members to think with their 'union hats' on when they are active in community activities.

While there was a mixed response from trade unionist about the relational organising of the IAF – particularly the one-to-ones, the majority of trade unionists interviewed, particularly in Seattle and Sydney, recognised that this had helped them operate in a different way and was a great potential benefits to trade unions in assisting them to develop deeper relationships with their members. This union member, who had done London Citizens training, was trying to take the approach back into his union branch:

I like the idea of one-to-ones and I like the idea that you get to know people. I've tried to advocate that within trade union branches because I don't see any reason why trade unions can't use that method because I think that's one of the big issues within trade unions is that people don't know each other. They don't trust each other...so, I think there's loads of things that we could learn from community organising.

The question of what unions could learn from community organising and what community organising could learn from trade unionism was asked to all interviewees. The final section in this report will take a look at some of the responses to these two questions, but before that, a few words on the second part of the second research question mentioned above – how did unions think about community organising in the context of wider ideas about social justice and the re-framing of the trade union message?

Trade unions have always been concerned about social justice in a wider context beyond that of the workplace, but this as been diluted overtime. While there is some very important
work done by unions around health, the environment and working conditions beyond their borders in less developed countries, these messages and activity are not much recognised by the general public or even a union's own members. They are often abstracted and not related to people's daily lives. The reframing of union messages through involvement in the community coalitions provided the opportunity to challenge the critical voices that cast unions as self-interested organisations only concerned with protecting better off sections of the working class. We saw how this was most important for the construction union in Sydney where they had faced unprecedented attacks in the media, but also in the US where unions are subject to such intensive anti-union propaganda.

People from non-union institutions involved in the IAF groups were able to get a better understanding of trade unions as a result of working together in coalition, where they came to understand that unions were not just about self-interest but were also concerned with the plight of workers as a whole. Of course, this operated the other way round as well: trade unions learned that stereotyping people from faith communities missed the fact that social justice was often at the heart of peoples' religious beliefs and in many cases they were shown to be more radical than some of the trade unionists. Several different interviewees told the same story about an encounter between a minister of a faith community and a trade unionist when the Sound Alliance was listening to the general pressures and concerns of members, particularly around the foreclosure campaign. Immigration arose in a conversation and there was a heated exchange between the two, where the trade unionist was very opposed to undocumented immigrant workers who he perceived were stealing his fellow workers' jobs and where the minister did a lot of work with immigrant families and was upset about the views expressed about immigrant workers. As one of the interviewees explained, it was through encounters like these that people learned to work together and understood more about each other:

So I think that [the trade unionist] has seen the ways in which [the minister] who has, over a year and a half, spent his time and energy fighting for people like him who are at risk of losing their homes. So I think he sees [the trade unionist] – and similarly I think [the minister] sees that well he [the trade unionist] might be rough round the edges and he might have some political views that he doesn't agree with, but [the trade unionist] is a really hard worker and he really cares. I think that the way that it plays out is, there's a lot of fear and a lot of misunderstanding until people actually get in the same room together and talk.

This bringing together people from different backgrounds to meet and discuss how they could work on issues relating to the ‘common good’ while leaving issues that they disagreed with ‘at the door’ was central to the organising approach of the three coalitions. Learning to work together in this way was seen as a way of building greater power than could be achieved by different groups working in their own silos. A Sound Alliance organiser revealed that she had never come across trade unionists before joining the Alliance; ‘before the Sound Alliance I’d only worked in a faith community, I thought wow this is neat and scary and interesting, I’ve never worked with unions, so what does this look like? It’s really only been through Sound Alliance that I’ve engaged with unions.’ These opportunities were really important in helping to break down barriers between different groups of people in society. While perhaps not easy to measure or evaluate, this can only be of benefit in a society where unions are demonised and desperately need to build alliances with as many people as possible and a strong sense of community within unions if they are to be seen to be concerned with issues beyond their sectional self-interest.
What can be learnt from community organising?

One of the purposes of this research was to give voice to the people who took part in this research and as such, this report will conclude with some brief comments from trade unionists and other members of the three coalitions on what they had learnt from their involvement and what they through community organising offer to trade unionism and vice versa.

Quotations from research participants

I think community organisations could learn from trade unionists’ past and where we have failed and where we have succeeded. One of our biggest problems, it’s because people are so involved in their own personal lives that it’s hard to agitate them enough to get them involved in their own organisation. I think [we can learn from community organisers] about diversifying our own thought process. Sometimes we get a little too focussed on one thing and not stepping back to see the full picture. And part of that, with Sound Alliance, is finding out how our members are plugged into the community. (Organisers, Electricians union, Sound Alliance, Seattle)

What Telco brought to the Homerton Hospital through the other organisations that were involved with it was in a sense a breath of fresh air. We had been knocking our heads, heads together about the plight of the privatisation and the wages discrepancies that were being implemented and we were getting nowhere. It took an outside organisation and community based groups to break that mould. (Unison rep, London Citizens, London)

I think one of the best things from a union perspective was the listening campaign and around changing organisers’ views about whether it was useful or not to do the Sydney Alliance thing was the process of listening and listing up a set of issues and then inviting members to demonstrate their commitment. (Organiser, United Voice, Sydney)

I think working alongside the unions is an opportunity to reframe some of our justice work around some of these concepts of what should people be able to expect out of work in this country. We forget that it was the labour movement that brought the entire concept of retirement into existence, the concept of the weekend. All of these things that we take for granted. And then I think the other is just the meeting of diverse meeting people you wouldn’t normally meet and finding out how much you have in common with them, which I think is individual growth but also opens up your sense of possibility for activism in the world. (Member of the University Unitarian Church in Seattle, Sound Alliance)

And in that sense we [trade unions] do come over as very narrow, essentially sort of terms and conditions based. We will do ourselves serious damage unless we accept that because a lot of the battles we’re now facing are classic issues to do with citizenship (Union member, not involved with LC, London)

I think unions learn the same things that all the other organisations learn which is that starting relationally, by actually treating people like human beings and relating to them as human beings provides better quality outcomes when you’re trying to organise. The idea that you organise people around what their interests are, not necessarily the narrow self-interests but actually get people doing what they want to do, works better. (Organiser, Sydney Alliance, Sydney)

They could learn to combine an understanding of how the [community] organising practices can be used to shift the culture in a way that’s meaningful and helpful to unions.
Section five: Summary

From a culture where people become members as consumers and they expect the staff to service and expect volunteer leaders to carry out the mission on their behalf, to one where it’s a member driven mission driven organization and we’re collectively responsible. (Lead organiser, Sound Alliance, Seattle)

As soon as I started getting involved, I kept getting this sense that this was real politics, this was the stuff that we weren’t doing. It was different, it was exciting, it was creative, it was effective, it got results, and I kind of, bit by bit got more and more involved in Citizens as opposed to just seeing it as an instrument for the trade union movement. (Unison official, London Citizens, London)
What we can learn is beyond the basics of having a **better understanding of minority groups, or the concerns that they have operating in the community**. I think what we can learn is that it's probably better for us instead of fighting just industrial battles, that we do have a broader approach in terms of making our membership's lifestyles a little bit more powerful. And having a look at how the issues of everyday life in Sydney, the frustrations and the problems impact just as immensely as industrial issues do. (Trade union official, National Union of Workers, Sydney)

I think that the **trade unions can learn a bit more of the human side, the relational side from folks like the IAF**. Because unfortunately, some of these folks think that the trade union is just a bureaucratic business – they collect dues and they administer contracts and that's what they are in the business of doing – and some of them unfortunately refer to themselves as businesses. (United Association of Plumbers and Pipefitters, Sound Alliance, Seattle)

Well I think we can learn from their organising techniques and focussing in on individuals' experience and let them speak for themselves. That's what moves people to action. (Unison, trade union official, London)

I think they could learn about the **question of power**. For too long, what's happened is that the trade union movement has relied on its political wing to do its politics and it's not armed itself with the means of power. It's kind of subcontracted that to the Labour Party. (University member, London Citizens, London)

[Unions could learn] **specific skills of individual meetings and building teams, developing leadership** and training people on how to be leaders. Things around strategy, around political strategy and picking off fights that you can win and making your opponent go on the defensive, rather than just following a formulaic campaign. (Organiser, London Citizens, London)

I guess the way we go about building relationships…if we had connections with the faith based organisations, they're actually not counterposed to the stuff we want to achieve. I also think we'll actually get a better understanding of each other, their members are often in a trade union and our members are often in faith based organisations and we really never understand that about our membership. (Union organiser, United Voice, Sydney)

I do think actually that they are much better than us at involving rank and file, at least at the level of mobilisation. Look we got half a million on the streets on Saturday that's the first time, people say it's the biggest trade union demonstration in decades, they're telling the truth. And so that was an exception. Groups like London Citizens regularly attend the rallies, go in thousands and thousands of people. **They're also not scared to take on some of the bigger political issues**. (Unison rep, member of London Citizens)

Unions need to give up autonomy, release some autonomy. **They need to be more generous in their relationships with other organisations**. We need to accept that we don't know it all, and I involve myself in all this criticism and that we've got to reach out and be much more creative. (Trade unionist, London)

I think what trade unions can learn from the community is learning how to **put into practice the values they hold so dear**. I think something that the community and the religious groups do very well is having these kind of core values and being able to infuse all their work with those values. (Union organiser, Rail, Tram, Busses Union, Sydney)

What can we learn? Well I guess one big thing I would say is about **really engaging with people**…Being able to identify issues which transcend your immediate constituency and on which you can relate to other people (Unison rep, member of London Citizens)
Reflections, future writings and research

The purpose of this report was to highlight some of the key findings from this research and it is hoped that this has been achieved. There is, however, much more to be analysed and written from the many hours of conversations that have taken place on this topic.

More detailed analysis is needed to uncover some of the nuances and specific experiences of particular unions and individuals concerned. The biographies of interviewees are very revealing about the reasons for their commitments to organising – be it in the union or in the wider community or both. The issue of identity and the role it plays in influencing the way people organise or relate to other people in or outside their own organisations was not able to be explored in this report due to lack of space, but is one that is worthy of much greater consideration. So too, the theory and practice of learning and education and the way that this travels through an organisation. While this was covered briefly here there the way in which learning takes place and affects an organisation’s praxis is in need of greater consideration.

Organisations tend to adopt a particular way of training or education, which becomes the accepted way of doing things, but as we have seen in this report, sometimes it is useful to ‘upset the apple-cart’ a little and encourage people to think and do in a different way. New approaches can provide the space for inclusion of people with different learning styles, but they can also be used in a more creative way to draw new people in to activity as was seen from some of the examples in the report.

A strong message from many of the trade unionists interviewed was that involvement in community-based organising had or could provide them with the opportunity to understand more about their members’ lives as workers and members of the community as well. Despite Robert Putnam’s (2000) findings from his book Bowling Alone that as individuals we sign fewer petitions, belong to fewer organisations that meet, know our neighbours less, meet with friends less frequently, and even socialise with our families less often, it is still the case that many of us are socially networked. A survey for the TUC of union activists showed that they are more likely to be active in their communities than the general public but that unions are largely unaware of these connections and how they might be utilised. A greater understanding of the intersection between home life and work life could help unions to build a stronger presence in our communities. It was instructive to learn from this research that union members were found to be active in community coalitions through their church, or NGO but not their union. Why was it that they had a greater connection to or identification with one institution but not the other? What was it that made them organise collectively in one place but not the other. What is it that unions can do to create a greater sense of identity with their organisations or the union movement more broadly? What this research does, is to talk to the wider theoretical and empirical studies of social networks and community engagement and how this can be applied to the study of trade unionism and community organising more generally. Again, it is hoped that there will be space to consider these issues and questions in future writings from this research, but also that more research could be undertaken in this area.

An aspect of the research that was not covered in the report was that which focused on UK unions that are beginning to explore different forms of community-based organising. While some of this material has been written elsewhere, this research is still continuing and further writing is likely to emerge from this in the near future.

It just remains, once again, to thank everyone who took part in this research and the time you generously gave to explore these ideas with me – for that I am very grateful.
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Dissemination and key outputs from the research

Articles and reports
Holgate, J. (under review) Trade unions and community organising in an international context: same model, different outcomes. *British Journal of Industrial Relations*.


Conference presentations


Are union/community coalitions a way to re-build the trade union movement? Paper presented at the International Labour Process Conference, Rutgers University, New Jersey, USA, 18-20 March 2013.


Unions working in community coalitions: the development of a more social justice agenda or pure instrumentalism? Presentation at 62nd BURIA conference, 28-30 June, University of Bradford.


Challenges to effective engagement of trade unions in broad-based community alliances: a comparative study of London and Sydney. 64th Labor and Employment Relations Association conference. January 6-8 Chicago, USA.


Communities and unions: barriers and bridges to co-operative working. 63rd Labor and Employment Relations Association conference. January 2011 7-9 Denver, Colorado, USA.

**Practitioner presentations and events**

Invited plenary speaker on ‘Linking elements of community, workplace and political power’ at TSSA political strategy launch. Saturday 8 June. London Metropolitan University.

Invited speaker on ‘What can unions learn from community organizing practice?’ at Trades Union Congress Black Workers Conference 13 April 2013 TUC, Congress House, London.

Invited speaker to present on ‘the future for community organising’ at TUC organized one-day conference on Austerity and outsourcing: civil society and the coalition government. TUC, London. 5 October 2012.

Inspire Hackney, one-day community organizing training session on unions and community organizing. Saturday 22 September 2012 1-5pm, City Edge community college, Hackney, London.

Ran 2-day series of workshops with Unite the Union on principles of community organizing and design of community organizing education materials. 4-5 September 2012. Unite conference centre, Eastbourne.

One-day presentation to senior staff at Unite the Union on community organizing. 1 September 2012 at Unite, Holborn, London

*Union approaches to community organising: a review.* Presentation at TUC Organising Academy training session for community organisers. 21 March 2012.

The Equality Deficit Conference, Trades Union Congress, 16 November 2011. Invited speaker on *Campaigning challenges facing trade unions and community activists.*


*Communities and unions: working together to build coalitions.* Presentation at TUC National Young Members Conference 2 April 2011.

*Communities and unions: barriers and bridges to co-operative working.* Presentation at TUC Organising Academy training session for senior lay reps. 25 March 2011.

**Other**

Design of community organising training materials for Unite the union (8 2xhour modules) including Powerpoint, workshop plans and trainer’s notes.
Appendix

List of member institutions July 2013

London Citizens: member institutions

1. The East London Communities Organisation (Telco)

HACKNEY
Catholic Association for Racial Justice
St. Thomas More RC Church
The Urswick School
St John at Hackney
St Thomas’ Church, Stamford Hill – North
East Hackney Anglican Group
St Michael and All Angels Church – North
East Hackney Anglican Group
St Joseph’s Hospice
Cardinal Pole RC School
Our Lady’s Convent High School
Skinners Academy
St Jude’s Catholic Church, Clapton
St Mary’s CoE Church, Stoke Newington
St James’ Church, Clapton

NEWHAM
Stratford & Canning Town Methodists
Eastside Young Leaders Academy
Landmark Training/ Skills for Growth
Parish of Divine Compassion, Forest Gate
St Antony’s R C Church, Forest Gate
St Bonaventure’s & St Angela’s Sixth Form
College
St Margaret’s R C Church, Canning Town
Woodgrange Baptist Church
St Stephen’s & St Nicholas’ Parish
Shpresa Programme
Catholic Parish of the Royal Docks
RCCG Trinity Chapel, Canning Town

E13 Learning Community
Trustees of St Francis RC Church, Stratford
Ursuline Convent, Forest Gate
Anchor House, Canning Town
University of East London – School of Law
and Social Sciences
Alif Academy, Forest Gate

REDBRIDGE
St Thomas of Canterbury
Trinity Catholic High School
CJSR – Brentwood Diocese
The Salvation Army, Ilford

TOWER HAMLETS
East London Mosque
St Cassimirs Lithuanian Church
New Testament Church of God Mile End
Our Lady of The Assumption RC Church
Bethnal Green
Queen Mary University Geography
Department
Salvation Army, Stepney Green and
Stratford
St Mary’s Church, Cable Street
St Paul’s Church, Shadwell
Stepney Green School
*Unison – Tower Hamlets
Jesuit Refugee Services
Central Foundation Girls School
Islamic Forum Europe
MuslimAAT UK
Langdon Park Secondary School
Poplar Harca Housing Association
Dawatul Islam UK & Eire
Ebrahim College
Tower Hamlets Catholic Deanery
Trade union involvement in broad-based community organising

WALTHAM FOREST
Norlington School for Boys
Our Lady & St George’s RC Parish
The Holy Family Technology College
Sir George Monoux College
St Barnabas Church
Parish of Walthamstow

2. Shoreditch
City Year London
Central Foundation Boys School
Alevi Cultural Centre, Hackney
Raine’s Foundation School
St Monica Hoxton Parish
St Mary Moorefield and St Joseph’s Church, Islington
Bethnal Green Academy
Thomas Buxton Primary School
City and Islington College
Osmani Trust
Randal Cremer Primary School
Burbage Primary School
Lawdale Junior School
St John’s the Baptist, Hoxton
Sebright Primary School
Swanlea Secondary School
St Monicas Catholic Primary School
St Luke’s Primary School
Cannon Barnett Primary School
Hackney Community College
Toynbee Hall
St Peter’s Bethnal Green
Save the Children, Clerkenwell
Bridge Academy
City University London Students’ Union

3. South London Citizens
CROYDON
St Andrew’s RC Church, Thornton Heath
St Mary’s, RC Church, Croydon
St. Jude’s CofE Church, Thornton Heath
Croydon College
Coulson College

GREENWICH
New Testament Church of God, Charlton
St Joseph’s RC Primary School, Greenwich
St Ursula’s Secondary School
Golden Arena Trust, Woolwich
Morden Mount Primary School
Colim Church, Woolwich

LAMBETH
Corpus Christi R.C. Church, Brixton
Elm Court School
Evelyn Grace Academy
Hill Mead Primary School
Sisters of the Holy Family of St Emilie
Hyde Southbank Homes
Hyderi Islamic Centre, Streatham
Lambeth Masjid & Progressive Community Centre
La Retraite Catholic School for Girls
Lilian Baylis Technology School
Loughborough Primary School
Moorlands Action Group
New Economics Foundation
Railton Road Methodist Church
South London Liberal Synagogue
St Anne’s RC Primary School
Saint Gabriel’s College
St Matthew’s C of E Church
St John the Divine, Kennington
St John’s Angell Town Primary School
St John’s Church, Angell Town
St John’s Church, Waterloo
*PCS Union

LEWISHAM
Grove Medical Centre
Our Lady of Lourdes RC Church, Lee
St Andrew’s United Reformed Church, Brockley
St William of York RC Church, Forest Hill
New Testament Church of God, Lee
Prendergast Ladywell Field College
Kelvin Grove Primary School
Congo Support Group
St Saviour RC Church, Lewisham
Rushey Green Primary
Appendix: List of member institutions July 2013

Lewisham Islamic Centre
Saint Swithin’s Church, Hither Green

SOUTHWARK
Surrey Square Junior School
Brandon Baptist Church, Camberwell
South London Mission/Robes
Notre Dame RC Secondary School
William Booth College, Denmark Hill
St John CoE Church, Dulwich
Fair Pensions
Copleston Centre Church

WANDSWORTH
Balham Community Church
St Mary’s Church, Battersea
St Peter’s C of E Church Battersea
Lifetimes, Wandsworth High Street
St Mary’s Debre Tzion EOCG
St Luke’s Church, Battersea
Redeemed Christian Church of God
parishes in Wandsworth
St Francis Xavier Sixth Form College
Greater Winstanley People’s Organisation
Surrey Lane People’s Organisation

4. North London Citizens
BARNET
Hendon School
NOAM & Marom
Citizens Group (New North London Synagogue)
Finchley Reform Synagogue
Ayesha Community, Hendon
Ella Foundation

BRENT
Crest Academy
Dar al Islam Foundation
ARK Academy
Al Khoei Foundation
New Testament Church of God, Willesden
London Intefaith Centre, Queens Park
Islamic Education Research Academy

CAMDEN
Maria Fidelis Convent School
La Sainte Union Catholic School
University of Connecticut in London (Uconn)
Parish of Old St Pancras, Euston
Hampstead Parish Church
North West London Quakers
St Dominic’s Parish, Camden
Kings Cross Church, Islington

HARINGEY
St Ignatius Church Stamford Hill
Alexandra Park School
Rainbow Church, Tottenham
Highgate Wood School Arts College
Highway of Holiness, Tottenham
St Ignatius College
North London Progressive Jewish Community, Stoke Newington
The Willow Primary School
St Anne’s Catholic High School
The Green Primary School
Holy Trinity Church, Tottenham
St John Vianney Church & St Vianney School
The College of Haringey, Enfield & N E London

ISLINGTON
St Mellitus Church, Finsbury Park
St Luke’s, Parochial, Islington
Mount Carmel RC Technology College, Archway
Congolese Catholic Chaplacy, Finsbury Park
Peniel French Church – Congolese, Finsbury Park
AL – Abrar Foundation
Muslim Welfare House, Finsbury Park
St Mary Magdalene Academy

5. West London Citizens
EALING
Our Lady and St Joseph’s Catholic Church
Southall Anglican Communities Holy Trinity Vicarage
St Anselm’s RC Church, Southall
St Peter and St Paul’s Catholic Church,
Norfields
Ealing CVS
HAMMERSMITH & FULHAM
Al Muntada Al Islami Trust, Parsons Green
Hammersmith & Fulham Methodist Circuit
Holy Cross Church, Parson Green
Holy Ghost and St Stephen’s, Shepherd’s Bush
St Luke’s Church, Shepherd’s Bush
St Paul’s Church, Hammersmith
St Thomas of Canterbury, Fulham
St Stephen’s Church
The London Oratory School

HOUNSLOW
St Mark’s RC School

KENSINGTON & CHELSEA
The Forum, Ladbroke Grove
Our Lady of Dolours Servite Parish, Chelsea
St Charles Catholic Sixth Form College
St Francis of Assisi Church, Holland Park
*Unite the Union Hotel Workers Branch, Earls Court
Heythrop College
St Thomas More Language College, Chelsea

WESTMINSTER
St James’s Piccadilly
Area Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers), London West
Sisters of Mercy, St John’s Wood
St Martins in the Field, Trafalgar Square
IPPR
Paddington Development Trust
Our Lady’s Church, St John’s Wood
St Edwards Primary School
Methodist Church North West London
Farm Street Church
The Grey Coat Hospital
Islamic Centre of England
City of Westminster College

Sound Alliance: member institutions
*Amalgamated Transit Union Local 587
CASA Latina
Diocese of Olympia - Episcopal Church in Western Washington
Health Equity Circle
*IBEW Local 46
*International Association of Heat & Frost Insulators & Allied Workers
*Kent Education Association
Northlake Unitarian Universalist Church
*Painters & Allied Trades District Council 5
Saltwater Church
*Seattle Community Colleges Federation of Teachers
*Seattle Education Association
*Sheet Metal Workers Local 66
*Society of Professional Engineering Employees in Aerospace (SPEEA)
St. Columba’s Episcopal Church
St. Vincent de Paul Catholic Church
*Summit UniServ Council
*Bethel Education Association
*Fife Education Association
*Franklin Pierce Education Association
*Puyallup Education Association
Tacoma Dominican Sisters and Associates
Temple De Hirsch Sinai
*UA Plumbers & Pipefitters Local 26
*UA Plumbers & Pipefitters Local 32
University Unitarian Church
Urban Grace Church
*Washington State Building & Construction Trades Council
*Washington Pipe Trades
Sydney Alliance: member institutions

Arab Council Australia
Asian Women at Work
Australian-Filipino Business & Workers Club Inc.
Baptist Churches NSW & ACT
Bankstown Uniting Church
Brighton-Kogarah Uniting Church
Cancer Council NSW
CatholicCare Sydney
Catholic Archdiocese of Sydney
Catholic Diocese of Parramatta
Catholic Diocese of Broken Bay
Climate Action Network Australia
*Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union
Dress for Success Sydney
Engadine Community Church
Forestville Uniting Church
Good Beginnings Australia
Glebe Cafe & Kaos Church
Imagine Sydney Baptists
Immigrant Women Speakout Association
Inner South-West Community Development Organisation
Inner City Health Program
Link Housing Ltd Metro
Marrickville Uniting Church
Migrant Resource Centre
*National Tertiary Education Union
Northmead Uniting Church
NSW Jewish Board of Deputies
*NSW Nurses and Midwives’ Association
Parramatta Nepean Presbytery
Pitt St Uniting Church
*Rail, Tram and Bus Union
Settlement Services International
Sisters of the Good Samaritan
Shire Churches
*Shop, Distributive & Allied Employees Association
South West Sydney Legal Centre
St George Migrant Resource Centre
St John's Anglican Church Glebe
St Vincent de Paul Society NSW
Sydney Marae Inc
Sydney North Presbytery
The Hills Holroyd Parramatta Migrant Resource Centre
Unions NSW
United Muslim Women Association
*United Services Union
*United Voice
Uniting Church Synod of NSW ACT
UnitingCare NSW
Western Sydney Community Forum
ACT Youth Action

* = trade union
Trade union involvement in broad-based community organising

References

References


The Centre for Employment Relations Innovation and Change (CERIC) is an ambitious research initiative based at the University of Leeds. The Centre draws from the expertise of internationally renowned scholars at Leeds University Business School and the Faculty of Social Sciences. The Centre aims to create a vibrant research environment incorporating established, Doctoral and leading visiting researchers. Our work contributes to contemporary, national and international debates surrounding the changing dynamic and the future of work, employment and labour markets. It capitalises on the expertise of Centre members to fundamentally engage with societal issues that have explicit practitioner utility and policy relevance. It currently houses the respected Industrial Relations Journal.

The central objective of CERIC is to contribute through high-quality research, teaching and knowledge transfer, to contemporary national and international debates around the changing dynamics and future, of work, employment and labour markets. A distinctive element of the work of the Centre situates understanding of employment processes and outcomes within a broader regulatory and structural context. In empirical terms, the Centre’s research is broadly concerned with examining the modernisation of employment relations, and how processes of organisational restructuring and innovation shape patterns of continuity and change in employment relations. It evaluates the consequences of such change for different stakeholders and is committed to developing new strategic and policy relevant visions.

http://lubswww.leeds.ac.uk/meric