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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Trade union strategies to tackle labour market insecurity: Geography and the role of Sheffield TUC

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Abstract

This paper analyses the role of trades councils and trade unions in organising within local and regional contexts around the challenges facing and potential union strategies for addressing the needs of insecure and precarious workers. We deploy a case study on the Sheffield Trade Union Council and the Sheffield Needs A Pay Rise campaign as a way of exploring innovations and challenges for the trade union movement for organising the unorganised. We explore the potentials as well as limitations of local organising and campaigning around insecurity and marginalisation by trade unions to demonstrate theoretically and empirically within industrial relations research the role of strategic spaces for action by workers and trade unions and the set of institutional, economic, social and cultural resources that workers can draw on in developing their respective strategies.

1 | INTRODUCTION

This paper analyses the role of trades councils and trade unions in organising within local and regional contexts around the challenges facing and potential union strategies for addressing the needs of insecure and precarious workers. We deploy a case study on the Sheffield Trade Union

Council (STUC) and the Sheffield Needs A Pay Rise (SNAP) campaign as a way of exploring innovations and challenges for the trade union movement for organising the unorganised. SNAP was established in 2016 by STUC activists who were looking for ways to engage unorganised workers and who had been galvanised by a Resolution Foundation report, which highlighted that the Sheffield City Region has a higher proportion of workers on low pay than any other city region (Clarke, 2017). SNAP was initially focused on engaging workers with trade unions across a range of sectors characterised by low pay, precarious contracts and low unionisation, but has subsequently concentrated much of its work on the hospitality industry. While in the first few years of operation, SNAP relied solely upon volunteers to undertake organising activities, in 2019, STUC signed a Partnership Agreement with the 'Bakers Union'— Bakers Food and Allied Workers Union (BFAWU)—and helped crowdfund the salary of a full-time organiser, dedicated to engaging workers in historically 'hard to organise' industries. At the same time, and in relation to the growing numbers of people since the Covid-crisis transitioning between welfare and work, STUC collaborated with other community organisations to campaign around welfare and support people claiming benefits, recognising the regressive impact Universal Credit and the wider benefit system was having on employment rights.

We argue in this paper that analysing the role of the Trades Councils and trade unions organising within 'local/regional' contexts and the opportunity structures, which arise can provide insights into challenges faced and potential union strategies addressing the needs of insecure/precarious workers. Following this, the paper develops both theoretically and empirically within industrial relations research the role of strategic spaces for action by workers and trade unions and the set of institutional, economic, social and cultural resources that workers can draw on in developing their respective strategies (Rainie et al., 2010). The key research questions are, first, what insights does the analysis of the SNAP model provide into the possibilities and limitations of trade union engagement/mobilisation of workers and communities 'outside' the workplace. For example, in what way does analysing SNAP help us to assess the strength and weaknesses of 'mainstream' trade union organisation strategies in terms of engaging with unorganised and marginalised workers and communities. Second, in what way do the findings inform us about how Trades Councils as locally representative bodies of the wider labour movement mobilise insecure workers and claimants.

1.1 | Trade union power, mobilising strategies and insecurity

Kelly, drawing on mobilisation theory, argues that workers will mobilise in response to perceived issues of injustice, which they identify emanating from the employer. Collective action will arise when workers jointly concur on the issues that cause injustice and trade unions will exploit different power resources in terms of mobilisation (Kelly, 1998, p. 51). One criticism though is that mobilisation theory as adapted by Kelly does not adequately analyse the role of organising. There is a tendency in Kelly's approach to conflate organising and mobilising as being the same where in fact they are distinctly different. For example, mobilising refers to the application of usable power—or the attempt to do so—from an existing organisational base, while organising refers to the wider process of creating the organisational and associational forms from which mobilisation, among other things, may then take place (Gall & Holgate, 2018, p. 569).

The turn to 'organising' by the TUC in relation to the establishment of the Organising Academy in 1998 aimed to promote renewal of trade unions in response to the neoliberal offensive against trade unions and the working class. In many respects the Organising Agenda promoted by the TUC was primarily aimed and focused around recruitment and did not sufficiently deal with unequal power relations in the work place. Furthermore, there is a view that the commitment from trade union leaderships was not as it could be, the initiative was underfunded and perhaps importantly it 'wasn't accompanied by the necessary internal organisational change to have a significant impact on membership growth and activity, nor did many unions have the strategic capacity to drive this forward' (Holgate, 2022, p. 135). Looker (2019) shows how this approach was replicated in Unison in which the emphasis by Full Time Officers was on recruitment while organising activists and membership participation was given much less priority.

This has brought about a search for alternative strategies and models, which places an emphasis upon the nature of activism and struggle within (and outside) workplaces and how they shape trade union activities and interventions. The concept of 'deep organising' developed by the US activist Jane McAlevey (2016) is when workplace actors broaden the base of activity (by increasing the number of activists) and identifying new leaders and their ability to increase the 'power resources' of workers. Integral to organising is the day-to-day activities which trade union members undertake to build capacity and commitment within the workplace.

While McAleveny's approach is a step change from the traditional organisational politics, there are limitations in that it does not deal with the wider organisational structures of the union and that she has an overly mechanical and prescriptive view of workplace struggle and militancy (Hardy, 2021, p. 216). Darlington and Upchurch (2012) take a different perspective by analysing the structure of trade unions in terms of leadership/bureaucracy and 'rank and file'. They argue that the development of trade unions involves a process of bureaucratisation in which there is a layer of full-time officers who tend to be committed to preserving the 'status quo' because of their common material role, position and interests which bind all officials together as a distinct social group. The layer below this is what he categorises as the rank and file comprising but not exclusively shop stewards, lay representatives who tend to deal with the day-to-day issues of the workplace relating to workers grievances. They also represent a layer of grass roots activists and have the capacity to influence collective action by both promoting—but also containing it depending on objective as well as subjective conditions.

The relationship between the rank and file and leadership/officials is important in terms of influencing the direction of travel of the trade union in terms of its campaigns. In an upturn in struggle and strike activity shop stewards can display confidence in acting independently of officials although in periods of downturn there may be an element of dependency upon officials. The turn toward radical agendas by officials and full timers will be shaped by their politics and history of involvement within the movement as is the case of the current trade union leaders. This can and does lead to alliances between the rank and file and those in leadership positions around more militant struggles. Darlington's study of the RMT (Darlington, 2009) illustrates this concept of unions as 'class struggle' organisations in his study the RMT Union. Jane Hardy's case studies of various women's based struggles provides an important insight into the way trade unions replicate discriminatory practices and inequality as leaders have tended to ignore a section of the workforce who are generally perceived as 'passive' and 'unorganised'. (Hardy, 2021, Chapter 7).

Thinking about geography is an important conceptual tool for analysing the restructuring of industrial relations and labour mobilisation. As Herod et al. (2007, p. 249) maintains,

'an appreciation of how economic actors engage with geographical difference and how the spatial relations of work life can be actively structured to facilitate particular economic and political goals can help us more clearly understand work and employment practices'. Traditional IR approaches, however, tend to treat space as an objective given on which social relations are played out. As a consequence, strategies and political developments within the labour movement are not investigated in relation to spatial changes in the labour markets (Perrett et al., 2012).

Taylor and Mathers study of Trades Councils highlight the way the labour movement can resist the spatial re-organisation of capitalism associated with neo-liberalism and globalisation and translate trade union traditions across spaces and sectors in a multi-scalar resistance to restructuring (Taylor & Mathers, 2008, p. 6). Trade Councils operate within local/regional contexts and class-based analyses of localised capital—labour relations are necessary to understand historically contingent social, economic and cultural practices. Gough (2014) argues that both the attacks on the working class and the contradictions of neoliberalism are clearly expressed—and clearly *visible*—on the local scale. Deindustrialisation, a product of the combined effects of capitalist restructuring and neoliberal policy, has had profound impacts on the UK geography of capitalism. At the same time, the trend toward collective bargaining decentralisation shifts the focus onto local bargaining. Decentralisation strengthens the capacity for companies to exploit local/spatial differentiation to increase management's negotiating position, thus helping implement flexibility. Privatisation in welfare provision can also lead to de-unionisation, as well as loss of trade union representation in employment and social policy delivery.

A case in point is how the expansion of the reserve army of labour has been geographically uneven and has underpinned the precarisation of labour markets. This process has been reinforced by workfare and activation policies, which have placed emphasis upon workfarism and work first initiatives, reinforcing contingent labour markets and competition in the low-wage sector (Briken & Taylor, 2018). Flexibilisation has the effect of dampening unionisation by increasing the numbers of workers with a lower labour-force attachment (Schnabel, 2013, p. 260). The implementation of work first policies tend to underpin oppressive working practices as shown in the studies of warehouse development in former industrial/coal mining communities—for example Amazon in South Wales (Briken & Taylor, 2018) and Sports Direct in North East Derbyshire (Hardy, 2021, pp. 162–172).

2 | METHODOLOGY

This article has developed out of a wider project, which aimed to explore the distribution of low paid and precarious work in the City of Sheffield, how this kind of work is experienced by those who undertake it, and what the potentials for and barriers to increased union organising among these workers are.

This entailed three interrelated stages:

(1) A review of the distribution of low-paid and precarious work in the city, drawing on labour market statistics provided by the Office for National Statistics, a review of existing local research and union reports, and interviews with a wide range of Full-Time Officials and senior lay representatives from a cross-section of unions.

(2) The second stage involves interviewing workers across a range of sectors (retail, hospitality, transport and logistics, social care, higher education, health, and financial services) who were recruited through trade union and community contacts as a means of capturing their experiences of insecurity and precarious work and evaluating their knowledge of and dispositions toward unions and unionisation.

(3) The third stage involved further interviews of workers in the context of their experiences during the Covid pandemic, as well as a small number of key informant interviews from within SNAP to evaluate the impact of the campaign.

The research can be considered to be a form of action research inasmuch as the authors desired to support the development of the SNAP campaign by highlighting the experiences of workers in the city, supporting those involved in the campaign to understand the local opportunity structure, particularly with regard to the undertaking of their organising activities. In part this was achieved through the publication of a report in 2020 (Thomas et al., 2020), which explored these issues in relation to seven distinct employment sectors. It is also worth noting that one of the authors is the lay chairperson of STUC and played a role in the establishment of the SNAP campaign, while some of the other authors have supported the campaign as active trade unionists in the city. In line with the arguments of Holgate (2021, p. 234) we do not see such commitments as inherently problematic, and they have allowed us to draw on elements of autoethnographic reflection in exploring the case of SNAP. Nevertheless, in terms of the credibility of our analysis, it is vital that we are upfront about those commitments with our audiences and acknowledge that some of the authors clearly have a vested interest in the success of the SNAP campaign. We aspire to have presented enough objective information for the reader to evaluate the contribution the campaign can make to trade union renewal, but final judgement clearly lies with reader.

In practical terms, stages 1 and 2 above were undertaken in 2018 and 2019, and stage 3 was undertaken in 2020 and 2021. Sampling was undertaken partially on a theoretical basis in that we were seeking participants who were associated with sectors characterised by high levels of low-paid and precarious work, and partially opportunistically because they were known to a range of gatekeepers—including union officials and community support organisations—or were recruited through personal networks.

Ultimately 67 individuals in total were interviewed, which included 43 workers (27 of whom worked in the hospitality of 'accommodation and food service' sector and eight individuals who were unemployed at the time of the interview, and 16 Full-Time Officials, lay officials and other stakeholders. Given the focus of this article it is the latter group we will be focusing on here, and included representatives of TUC unions Unison, Unite, GMB, PCS, CWU, RMT, USDAW and RCM, as well as non-TUC unions/campaigning organisations such as ACORN and IWGB, community stakeholders involved in campaigning on issues to do with gender and disability, and the full-time organiser employed by the SNAP campaign.

The majority of these stakeholder interviews were conducted during the first phase in 2018/2019 and took place in a variety of locations, including two community centres, cafes, and participants' homes, and all were audio recorded and transcribed. Two of the interviews took place in 2020/2021 and as with all interviews conducted during that round they took place via video conferencing (due to the social distancing restrictions in place during the Covid pandemic). Almost all interviews last at least one hour in duration, some up to a maximum of two and a half hours. Transcripts were initially read by the research team to identify themes and then entered into NVivo whereupon initial codes were reduced into a small number of

overarching themes. Qualitative interviews were also supplemented by secondary statistical and documentary sources.

3 | CONTRIBUTIONS AND FINDINGS

3.1 | Sheffield's geographies and building associational power

The organisation of the labour movement in Sheffield has a long and dynamic legacy where Labour 'rank and file' politics and the role of the Communist Party have played a prominent role in shaping a more 'activist' orientated politics. The neoliberal policies of the Thatcher Government were a turning point. Sheffield was a focal point for the Steel and Miners Strikes in the 1980s, both born out of the tradition of solidarity and having lasting impacts on contemporary labour movement politics (Seyd, 1993). Many activists in Women Against Pit Closures are still living in the city and active in the movement politics (some have served as delegates with STUC). A number of ex-miners from the South Yorkshire coalfield are active around the Orgreave Truth and Justice Campaign, which is focused on of the question of police violence against pickets at the eponymous coking plant. Union membership and densities in the area remain above the national average (see Benyon et al., 2020; Kelliner, 2017). The resurgence of the Labour Party under the former Leader Jeremy Corbyn (2016–2019) had an impact on the Trades Council in terms of participation in campaigns and meeting attendance (Sheffield TUC Official).

Austerity has shaped the economic and social challenges facing the labour movement, which cannot be underestimated. Sheffield along with similar areas has experienced long term processes of job destruction and restructuring. This has accentuated the impact of austerity as benefit and public sector cuts have disproportionally impacted on the former industrial areas where there are a larger proportion of people of working age reliant on benefits—including disability and long-term health benefits (Beatty & Fothergill, 2017). Job replacement has tended to be in the service sector and features below median average rates of pay and a high proportion of part-time jobs. In particular, the accommodation and food service and retail sectors in Sheffield employ significantly more part-time workers than full-time workers, with part-time/full-time ratios for these sectors higher than the UK ratios.

In 2014 STUC saw the election of a new Secretary, who had a prominent role within the Labour Party (having served on the NEC 2010–2018), but has always had a reputation as a lay-member/rank-and-file trade unionist. At the same time the newly elected president, age 30, was the youngest President of STUC for decades and one of the youngest in the country, which helped create a new focus on younger (and therefore nonunionised) workers.

STUC has also started to build campaigns against regressive welfare reform from 2012 onwards, which brought together a number of individual groups and organisations in a local community coalition—which later developed into a Stop and Scrap Universal Credit campaign (see below)—and also supported the development of new activists who would later become active in the local trade union movement. Furthermore, students who had cut their teeth on living wage campaigns at the University of Sheffield helped to further shift the age profile of the Trades Council and move issues of low pay and precarity up the agenda.

One of the first tasks of the SNAP campaign was to map the involvement of the trade unions in the city in the public and private sectors although there was a focus on the lower paying

sectors and where there was a prevalence of insecure work (casualisation, zero hours contracts). As the SNAP organiser observed:

> I think the distinct thing is that it is a workers movement across sectors and across unions. I think having the geographical campaign as well. Sheffield in particular, but I am sure it is the same everywhere. I feel like people have a lot of pride in being from Sheffield, and to juxtapose that against us being the low-pay capital I think gets people really angry. And I think people want to be part of this Sheffield movement that is very Sheffield, and we talk about these workers in precarious roles being like the grandchildren of the steelworkers and all the rest of it.

Union organising work on a specific city-wide basis is something new in UK trade unionism. Almost every national trade union is pursuing an organising agenda in some form or another, but usually targeted at a national company, or industrial sector. By contrast, 'we are developing the idea of a local union organiser building trade unionism across a wide range of employers and sectors of the economy within our city of Sheffield' (Sheffield TUC Officer[1]).

SNAP was officially launched in 2016 by the then Shadow Chancellor, John McDonnell, and has received support and funding from a range of local unions, political parties (primarily Labour), community groups and individuals. In part this was necessary because of the extremely limited income of Sheffield TUC. This is a common situation for most TCs, which are subscription-based organisations and the falls in union membership more generally over the last four decades have led to dwindling affiliation income (e.g., Sheffield TUC charges 25p per member for each branch that affiliates, which generated around £6500 in 2021–2022). This issue is compounded by the fact that many geographically-based local branches do not affiliate to their local TC (even when in the majority of instances national union policy explicitly supports affiliation) and by the very limited resources TCs obtain from the Trades Union Congress parent organisation (under affiliation and lack of funding were among the most pressing issues faced by the TCs survey by Taylor & Mathers, 2008, p. 52).

In 2019, SNAP signed a Partnership Agreement with BFAWU (Bakers Union) and helped crowdfund the salary of a full-time organiser, dedicated to engaging workers in historically 'hard to organise' industries. As a campaign that is explicitly premised on bringing in new resources into a declining trade union movement, SNAP has involved building links with both workers and claimants, as well as adopting a 'whole worker' approach (McAlevey, 2016) to organising, which recognises the full range of social and institutional relationships within which people are embedded (Peace, 2020).

The partnership agreement between Sheffield TUC and the BFAWU (Bakers Union) was based on STUC's focus on the hospitality industry (among other sectors) and the Bakers Union success in organising workers in fast food outlets such as McDonalds.

> But what helped us really get started was support from the Yorkshire and Humberside Regional TUC. The regional secretary is very supportive of Trades Councils—in many regions TC delegates did not even have seats on their Regional Exec, whereas in Y&H we have 5 seats, (Sheffield TUC Officer).

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[1]This refers to one of the 12 members of the executive committee of the Trades Council, excluding the chairperson, who is one of the authors of this article.

Sheffield TUC has influenced activities at the regional level. The Yorkshire Humberside Regional TUC convened organising weekend in April 2019 where practitioners in trade union and community organising delivered workshops on the latest techniques, developments and best practices in the movement. Furthermore, the TUC Yorkshire and the Humber decided to focus on young people in workplaces such as hotels, restaurants and bars. As the campaign developed, SNAP increasingly drew on existing and newly formed community and activist networks (see below).

3.2 | Sheffield TUC affiliated unions: Some challenges to mainstreaming activism

The fragmentation of certain sectors particularly with respect to the fast food and retail sectors means they tend to be seen as a 'no go' area for trade union officials:

> we're always going to have huge difficulties organising workers when you get down to these three, four, five, six, seven employees level, this is where you need legislation. This is where all these places have got to be legislated for because it's impossible really to have union representation and officers and all these types of things when you've got such a scattered [workforce] (Unite Official)

Most union officials interviewed considered that the main focus of activity is within the workplace focusing on pay negotiating and union recruitment.

> The GMB in itself I think are extremely poor at this. We do have an Equality strand, a growing Equality strand within the region to engage with people, but predominantly the GMB's approach is within the workplace, so if they're not already in the workplace you aren't going to come into contact with those groups of people. (GMB Official)

The rail industry is a major employer in Sheffield but the way the industry has been reorganised and restructured around outsourcing has presented considerable challenges to organising.

> If we don't turn our attention to organising these groups of workers, then the trade union movement in ten years' time will be even...will probably be half of the size that it is now. (RMT Official)

There was sympathy regarding working with community organisations although there was an emphasis upon the nature and difference of the respective organisations.

> Obviously, you're going to have to have a little bit of understanding there and respect on each other's backgrounds but we in trade unions, you have an old standing structure, an understanding on how meetings work and what have you. You can't ...throw all that out and become some sort of free-for-all, do you know what I mean? Throw all the discipline out of the movement. (RMT Official)

This said, the GMB Union in the Sheffield region has focused upon attempting to organise workers in Amazon.

> We've been outside the gates, we've handed them leaflets, we've got Facebook pages set up to say to people, 'You need to get in the union. This is what we can do for you'. we need to challenge legislation nationally to change law, but we also then need to organise on the ground to hold them employers to account, because even when legislation's change, employers aren't just going to start doing it. Look how many people don't pay the minimum wage.

A cost–benefit assessment for mobilisation as highlighted in Kelly's (1998) work underpins most trade union official decision-making. In the context of four decades of membership decline, consequent retrenchment and repeated amalgamations, there is a perhaps understandable focus on so-called 'low hanging fruit'. Those who are perceived to be easier (less resource intensive) to organise are seen as the path of least resistance and this tends to prioritise so-called 'in-fill' over 'greenfield' organising.

> So if you are a regional organiser and you're dealing with half a dozen companies— big companies—and then you might have two or three of these smaller cleaning companies and security companies, who are you going to concentrate on? You know who you're going to concentrate on because you've got fully trained reps there. (RMT Official)

In our discussions with two Unison Officials in relation to their efforts in the social care sector (one of the major employment sectors in the city) they also emphasised how resource intensive organising is in workplaces where they did not have statutory recognition, given the importance of personal contact with members, at the very minimum through a phone call.

> We've got their details, many of them have given us their telephone numbers, you can email them and write to them, but you'll probably never hear back. If you ring them, then they'll speak to you and often they'll speak to you for half an hour, cause they've never had anyone call them before and ask them how it's going. (Unison Official)

While Unison was making headway with this campaign, with membership at one medium-sized provider increasing five-fold in the course of the year, there were concerns regarding the durability of these activities. In the same interview the Unison officials intimated that organising drives that did not show results within certain time periods (12 months) could be cut.

The organising model of SNAP was seen as attractive by the USDAW union although there were reservations about how the union would relate to activists drawn from beyond its own structures (USDAW Official, Sheffield), echoing the problems of bringing together social movement orientated activism and more transactional service unionism together (Holgate, 2021, p. 239).

3.3 | SNAP the promotion of the 'activism' model

3.3.1 | Identifying and exploring experiences of insecurity

A number of emerging themes have been identified arising from the interviews. As a key focus of the campaign itself has been the hospitality and fast-food sector one of the important roles of the research and the campaign itself was to educate people about trade unions. Young people were mostly not aware of what the functions of a trade union are and therefore struggled to see how they could improve their lives at work. Nonetheless, some interviewees also noted how precarious employment made being in a union or organising workers very difficult because of the threat of victimisation and discipline if employers noticed workers were attempting to join a trade union.

> And the thing is, if you are on a zero-hours contract there's just nothing to stop them from just not giving any more hours. I think potentially one of the things that blocks people from joining unions or actively searching them out is that there is so many people who want these jobs and there's not enough jobs for people working, for unskilled or unqualified work. So if there's even something that might risk you losing that job and not having the money to support yourself, is it worth doing? (Sheffield Focus Group of young people)

Moreover, increasing hours and incomes relied heavily on relationships with the employer. For example, the problems of negotiating stable hours at work are shaped by employer attitudes:

> They constantly hire staff under the assumption that they are going to lose them, so they have a certain number of hours to give out and that's when the battle starts. (Sheffield Shop Worker)

Flexibility works in favour of the employer and not employees:

> ... this is the thing with zero-hours ... it's that you can't join a union. You can't even look like you're going to join a union. That's what I always say to people, That's what it's about. It's about having complete and utter control over everybody. (Unite Official)

In all cases shifts were changed at very short notice to cover staff shortages and fluctuations in demand. Requirements to 'flex-up' offered challenges for those dependent upon childcare, those with children in general and those on benefits. It could minimise rest-breaks between shifts or require the unscheduled extension of shifts.

Other difficulties to organising arise due to language barriers. Several respondents suggested that with some international workers, who would potentially know very little of their employment rights and were hence vulnerable to exploitation, gaining trust alongside raising their awareness of what a trade union is, could be difficult.

> It's left a situation that we've eventually got round to addressing but it's a very, very difficult area because what you have is you have a high turnover, English isn't

necessarily the first language, as I said, and there's no trade union culture in a lot of these places. (RMT Official)

Labour market marginalisation in cities like Sheffield was increasingly influenced by work first policies with increasing numbers of people claiming Universal Credit also in work. The blurring of the boundaries between welfare and work means that being in low paid work involves negotiating both with employers and the DWP. The result is often a negative experience of the welfare system which is driving people into increasing poverty.

> The thing with Universal Credit, they put you under so much pressure. If you are paid and you are on Universal Credit all the money comes of your benefit. It's just the way—I never wanted my life to turn out like this and I am just a pawn of the Universal Credit. That's how I feel, and they are ruthless; the employers are ruthless and Universal Credit is useless as well. (Interview with UC claimant)

3.4 | SNAP strategy for unionisation and building activism

In the early years of the SNAP campaign (2016–2018), organising activities were carried out by volunteers, who would hand out information about basic employment rights to young people outside workplaces that were known for issues of low pay and insecure contracts. These volunteers would attempt to engage workers in conversations around their experience of work and perhaps in some instances would signpost them to relevant unions.

> One of the other key things we've done as a campaign [...] is trying to just make links in local areas. So when we initially started, it was me and a few mates all around my age who decided to go and go into shops and just talk to people; we weren't going for a hard sell, we just explained, 'we're from a campaign, Sheffield Needs a Pay Rise, here's a few things we want, of...ending zero-hours contract, ten pound an hour union recognition, just want to find out what it's like to work there', and we built up a database of two-hundred, three-hundred contacts. (SNAP Activist)

Nonetheless, the reliance entirely on volunteers had certain drawbacks, most obviously in that activists with many other competing responsibilities and commitments could not provide the kind of consistency needed to follow-up on initial contacts in a timely manner, or to engage with the same group of workers over the duration necessary to begin shifting perceptions.

Reflecting on these issues led to discussions with the Bakers' Union around the idea of crowdfunding part of the salary for a full-time organiser who help give the campaign greater coherence. Part of the attraction of a partnership with the Bakers' Union was due to their appreciation of the need for 'boots on the ground' to make organising breakthroughs, and which had clearly paid dividends in terms of their successes in leading the first ever strikes in the McDonalds fast-food chain in the UK.

> Our organiser spent hours and hours [...] talking to staff, finding out what their issues were, getting them on board and then it's a different way of organising. You

still build up the relationships as you would in traditional organising but you've got these, 'Whatever it Takes' cards and it's almost like soft-organising because you get them to sign these cards and they've got the details on, so you can build up a database and then you give them tasks. (BFAWU Regional Official)

With a full-time organiser in place from January 2019, the campaign was able to start building more meaningful relationships with workers, and with the recruitment of a particularly energetic organiser from the beginning of 2020, the campaign was able to build closer links with a variety of activist groups in the city and make much more effective use of its volunteers.

One example of this was the way in which the campaign developed the idea of a 'community canvasser', essentially volunteers who would strike up conversations with workers about their terms and conditions and then relay intelligence to the organiser who would then arrange follow-ups (magnifying the organiser's capacity to establish new relationships). This practice built on the 'Summer Patrols' organised by the Yorkshire and Humberside TUC from 2019 onwards. This initiative is developed from a similar one organised by the Norwegian Confederation of Trade Unions (*Landsorganisasjonen i Norge*, LO) and involved groups of young trade unionists from Yorkshire and Norway going into workplaces across South Yorkshire to conduct a survey about their experiences of work.

In developing the campaign, it was important to manage relationships with other trade unions (via the Yorkshire and Humber Regional TUC) to avoid any disputes relating to the focus of trade union organising. In doing so the STUC was clear that while the organiser may have a key focus on the hospitality industry (given the sectoral focus of BFAWU as the partner organisation), the campaign also needed to demonstrate value for the wider movement through general consciousness raising (promoting the wider issues of low pay and precarious contracts in the city), directing workers encountered in non-hospitality workplaces (or where other unions had existing campaigns) to the most appropriate alternative, and by supporting other unions through offering training and community mobilisation.

> For example, SNAP recruited a Sheffield worker who held two part time jobs—one at a local cinema and one at a bar. SNAP trained her in organising conversations tactics and facilitated a meeting between her and BECTU. This worker went on to recruit 20 co-workers to BECTU before being elected as the Unite rep in her bar job, and leading negotiations with management to win increased furlough pay and sick pay. She has also gone on to lead SNAP canvassing sessions, supporting volunteers to visit low wage workplaces and recruit workers directly. (SNAP Organiser)

A further novelty of the SNAP model is its emphasis on 'direct action', tactics that have been borrowed from an exceptionally successful branch of the private renters/community union ACORN, which has been increasingly active in the city since the late 2010s. For ACORN this has involved confronting rogue landlords and estate agents with mass community mobilisations to secure wins for tenants, whereas in the SNAP iteration it has entailed the tactic of 'marching on the boss', whereby a large number of workers (preferably everyone on the shift) confronts the manager over a particular grievance. In one example this included demanding that a lock was installed on the staff changing room. As the organiser stated, there are clearly issues 'they know they're not going to win, from marching on the boss, pay, hours,

etc', but nonetheless, those smaller victories were vital in terms of empowering workers, building cohesiveness and growing the union.

The campaign has also prioritised grassroots worker empowerment by organising various workers into both geographically and workplace-based committees and ensuring workers are making collective decisions. In these meetings workers plan actions, develop skills and most importantly discuss what it means to work together as a union in their workplace. The value of a geographic or city-wide approach means union members at different workplaces can support each other's struggles, partially overcoming the necessity to achieve high levels of density in any one workplace. These shop committees invite guest speakers from other areas of the SNAP campaign to come and share learnings, skills, experiences and ideas, as well as connecting with other activist groups (such as Black Lives Matters).

The value of the geographic focus of the campaign was demonstrated at the beginning of the pandemic in 2020 when SNAP organised workers in various pubs across the city belonging to the same national corporations and coordinated simultaneous actions. This led to a huge win, of a guarantee of no job losses during lockdown for workers in the company nationally, as well as local improvements like extra staffing, training, and the removal of an abusive manager. A key focus of SNAP has been to support workers across various workplaces and sectors to tell their stories publicly, gaining public support and increasing pressure on employers. Regarding worker grievances, it was evident from our interviews with both workers and SNAP activists that nonpayment or holding back wages was an issue in the industry. Following an investigation by Unite the Union, SNAP began active campaigning in support of their national initiative against the restaurant chain TGI Fridays due to their deduction of 40% of workers tips and the withholding of tips (Unite the Union, 2018). The Sheffield Citizens Advice Bureaux (SCAB) had highlighted the increasing prevalence of 'wage theft'—unpaid work where people who are owed outstanding wages when they leave employment and/or they work hours beyond their agreed contracted hours of work are not paid by existing or former employers (see also Clark & Herman, 2017).

The impact of the Covid health crisis and lockdown exposed the paucity and fragility of the UK social safety net, clearly illuminating multifaceted class, ethnic and gendered dimensions of social inequality. Low-paid, often minimum wage work already leaves many Sheffield workers and their families living in poverty, so furlough reductions are causing increased hardship. Furloughed fast-food workers revealed huge worries around paying rent and bills, debt and having enough food.[2] Furlough then, as it has been constructed, becomes an opportunist instrument for reducing wages, hours or making redundancies.

In July 2020 SNAP demonstrated the value of a broad-based community campaign on working conditions by spearheading efforts by workers at a Papa John's Pizza outlet in the city to reclaim 2 months' back pay (a total of £10,000) after staging a protest that won support across the city. The campaign was initiated by SNAP activists and supported by the local community and politicians, with sympathetic reporting by the local media. The workers were employed at a branch of the pizza takeaway chain, which was run by a local franchisee. He shut the business down without notice and disappeared without paying workers. All workers involved in the action have been paid in full for wages owed, from shifts worked as long ago as February 2020.

In the same way STUC and SNAP gave priority to supporting the actions of the International Workers of Great Britain (IWGB) which has run one of the longest strikes in the

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'Just Eat' sectors in Sheffield. The strike began when Stuart (the Company) changed the pay structure for its UK delivery drivers which represented a significant pay cut (see Pidd, 2022).

Building solidarities with welfare claimants has also been a focus of the SNAP campaign with the STUC playing a key coordinating role in developing the campaign and involving other trade unions. It can be argued that the STUC involvement with supporting those in the welfare system was stimulated by the campaign against the closure of the Eastern Avenue Jobcentre in a deprived area of Sheffield in 2017. The Public and Commercial Services (PCS) trade union which represents staff working in the Jobcentre organised a strike and campaign to prevent its closure (PCS, 2017). The campaign brought together STUC, Unite Community, and community organisations to keep the jobcentre open and while it was not successful in preventing the closure of the Jobcentre, it did however galvanise the Sheffield TUC in developing its campaign around Universal Credit (STUC interview).

Following this was the establishment via the STUC and joint union and community campaign (Sheffield Stop and Scrap Universal Credit) which until the lockdown played an important role in forging links with community organisations in the campaign against Government welfare policies. The close links between the Unite Community, SNAP and the STUC facilitated a more proactive role for the STUC to respond to the impact of welfare reform:

> In terms of networks and people, some of the direct-action tactics utilised by Unite Community in protesting around welfare reform shepherded some Unite young members toward the Trades Council and brought about closer links between STUC and Unite Community. (Unite organiser)

4 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

A theoretical contribution of this article is the importance of geography vis-à-vis traditions and cultures of mobilising and resistance. The geography of socioeconomic and political processes matters. Gough (2014) argues that both the attacks on the working class and the contradictions of neoliberalism are clearly expressed—and clearly *visible*—on the local scale. Cumbers et al. (2010, p. 68) emphasise that 'agency and resistance of the more everyday sort continue even in the most coercive and regressive economic environments [and] that past processes of activism and class consciousness remain as latent reserves that can be drawn upon for present and future collective struggles'. This is highly relevant because it informs theoretically the role of localities as sites of (potential) innovation and signposts our focus to understanding the traditions of labour movement and local politics.

In the study of the role of Sheffield TUC, the paper makes additional theoretical and empirical contributions to the literature and debate around trade union and 'community' organising and strategies for organising the unorganised. Our study of Sheffield TUC demonstrates the need to include Trades Councils as important actors in labour movement and trade union struggles. Sheffield TUC SNAP is one of the few initiatives which has focused on the city for mobilising people experiencing insecurity, placing 'grassroots' rank and file organisation at the heart of trade unionism. This has occurred via solidarity actions but also by developing partnerships/collaboration not only with community organisations but with other trade unions. Perhaps, of more significance, is the national profile of SNAP as illustrated in the 2020 Trades Council Conference in which passed resolutions to adopt the SNAP model under

the banner of 'A New Deal for Workers: Precarious Work—a role for Trade Union Councils'. Motions highlight the need for developing across the board initiatives similar to SNAP but to develop the TCs in a way that gears their organisation toward developing 'new ways of organising precarious workers, which some trade unions, both TUC affiliates and others, are already leading in…(and) exploring sources of Trade Union Council support with Peoples Assembly groups and other activists, such as "Sheffield Needs a Pay Rise" and other similar strategies' (TUC, 2020, p. 2). Other trades councils such as Leeds have embarked on similar initiatives[3] and Leicester TC has played a key role in drawing attention and developing a joint union campaign against exploitative conditions in the garment industry (TUC, 2021).

The focus on individual trade unions, while essential, provides only a partial analysis of the possibilities and challenges of trade unions addressing the need of precarious workers. It is important to consider the overall role of the TUC in terms of leadership and capacity-building and the way that it can shape individual trade union agendas and policies. This means a more nuanced analysis of the activities and resource Taylor and Mather found, noting there 'is also evidence of long-standing enmities between trades union councils and the TUC hierarchy and a feeling that the latter have either no commitment to maintaining trades union councils or would prefer to see their demise'. (Taylor & Mathers, 2008, p. 28). In their study of devolution and trade unions in Northeast England the authors found that regional TUC bodies' role and power to shape policy remains relatively underdeveloped and circumscribed by national centralism and ambivalent attitudes within affiliated trade unions and the TUC (Pike et al., 2014). Trade union officials have commented on the 'remoteness' of the TUC and that more could be done by the major trade unions to support initiatives such as SNAP. The lack of commitment by the TUC to SNAP can be illustrated by the need to crowdfund the campaign rather than providing a long-term sustainable investment.

Through our interviews we found that the structures of traditional unions can be risk-averse, predominantly focused on their membership, and failing to provide an adequate organisational response to precarious workers (see Bertolini & Dukes, 2021). Research by Keune (2013) suggests that the resources and efforts of traditional unions have not always been sufficient to implement and sustain organising initiatives for addressing the needs of insecure workers. This situation has been challenged by the STUC who have attempted to bring new resources into the trade union movement through the model of community-based organising, which has allowed a certain freedom from the logics of cost benefit analyses and the focus on 'low hanging fruit'.

Although there are some important initiatives by the various individual trade unions concerning engagement beyond the workplace our survey reveals little evidence that the main trade unions have been able to implement a coherent and sustainable strategy for organising unorganised groups or promoting outreach work with communities. This is perhaps in part due to bureaucratic inertia that makes it difficult to reorient their strategies to include workers that lie outside their traditional constituencies (Bertolini & Dukes, 2021). The formation of Unite Community has represented a powerful example of the trade union movement responding to the increasing incidence of marginalisation among the working class. Nevertheless, Holgate contends that there is an essential tension between the main industrial part of Unite operating along 'traditional lines' while Unite Community operates around an orientation toward non-workers and welfare claimants (Gall & Holgate, 2018). Sheffield Needs A Pay Rise and the

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[3]https://www.facebook.com/leedsgetorganised/

model of community-funded/supported organising represents a further attempt to bridge such divides and realise the potential of community-based alliances for the trade union movement, but greater support for such experiments, in addition to other kinds of experiments (in different sectors, among different categories of workers), will be required to fundamentally reverse the longer term trajectory of the trade union movement.

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