

## **Expanding labour geographies: resourcefulness and organising amongst 'unemployed workers'**

### **Abstract**

This paper will consider the enduring acts of care, support and activism associated with unemployment in the North East and Midlands regions of England. It will draw upon literature relating to unemployment, labour geography and feminist economic geography to illuminate different forms of agency and resourcefulness found within the examples considered. The paper engages with Unemployed Workers' Centres in Newcastle and Chesterfield, focusing mostly upon their activities in response to UK austerity policies. These centres provide advice and support for unemployed people, particularly those who may be facing difficulties, such as work capability assessments, tribunals and debt. This supporting role is complimented by the campaigning activities of volunteers within these groups that actively contest related issues, including campaigns relating to zero-hour contracts, organising against austerity policies and wider educational projects as part of a relationship with Unite Community. The paper suggests that the associated organising practices indicate a varied and nuanced form of unemployed political agency that articulates and contests multiple unemployed grievances. This engagement with a wider political realm, alongside the intimate acts of support and care found within the centres, suggests a more nuanced and agentic understanding of unemployed resistance within an austerity context.

**Key words:** unemployment, care, activism, austerity, community unionism

## **Introduction**

Unemployment has been an enduring interest for economic, social and political geographers. It has been explored as a subject of wider macro-economic processes, as a social grouping associated with stigmatising political rhetoric and as measure of economic inequality (Massey and Meegan, 1982; Peck, 1996; Martin, 1997). This wide-ranging work has made noteworthy contributions, not least the identification of punitive welfare conditions and the detailed exploration of the integral capitalist dynamics between work and non-work. Such accounts have paid less attention to the practices and strategies of unemployed people and wider networks, though. To engage more closely with unemployment through agentic lived experiences, this paper considers a case study of developing intersections between trade union and community organising practices around unemployment in the North East (NE) and Midlands regions of England through engagements with Unemployed Workers' Centres (UWCs).

These centres provide advice, counselling and representation for people navigating the UK welfare system within austerity contexts. The paper argues that associated UWC activities reflect an enduring presence of organising practices around unemployment, combining support and care alongside wider campaigning activities. Their work speaks to both an agentic understanding of unemployment and a situated example of unemployed organising practices. This is significant for numerous reasons but particularly so in a context of notable stigma associated with labour market inactivity (Tyler, 2013; 2020). This paper suggests that UWC activities challenge the abstraction of labour market inactivity through categorisation, and provide an alternative characterisation of unemployment as a more active component within economic landscapes. This positioning requires a fluid and nuanced characterisation of agency, to include acts of care, support and campaigning.

The paper begins with some reflections on conceptualising unemployment, primarily through an attempt to build upon perspectives within labour geography. This includes a revisiting of the notion of a 'reserve army of labour', and a call for an agentic approach, centring upon shared experiences, small acts and collective organising. These engagements are situated in relation to theoretical work around unemployment and feminist economic geography, and how an emergent conversation might rethink characterisations of unemployment in relation to labour geography and austerity. Following this, a brief contextual framing of the research is provided to indicate the empirical approach to unemployment adopted. This framing facilitates reflection on three key empirical findings from the UWCs. Firstly, UWC activities are considered as constitutive of an unemployed presence within the two regions considered (author, 2018). This section foregrounds a variety of 'small acts', successes and collective experiences within unemployed communities. Secondly, the paper considers how the centres provide spaces of sociability and solidarity through a closer engagement with organising strategies and campaigning activities. Thirdly, reflections are made on the constraining and challenging conditions of organising and supporting unemployed people, utilising notions of 'endings' and 'resourcefulness' to frame current UWC work (Mackinnon and Derickson, 2013; Raynor, 2019).

## **Unemployment: surplus populations, regulation and agency**

Geographical conceptualisations of unemployment have often relied upon abstractions, notably as a measure of economic progress and inequality. These characterisations are generally articulated through an association with changing national statistics, and understandings that position unemployment in relation to wider political economic processes, such as labour market reforms and supply side interventions (Haughton et al., 1993; Peck and Theodore, 2000). Such macro-level analyses are important and stress the relevance of the subject area, yet are often reductive and do

little to challenge assumptions regarding labour market inactivity (Alcock, 2003; Fineman, 1987). Here, this paper rethinks such abstractions to suggest an alternative approach that considers unemployment in a more dynamic and experiential manner.

This emphasis draws upon from work within labour geography that has consistently stressed the potential for workers to be conceptualised as ‘sentient social beings who both intentionally and unintentionally produce economic geographies through their actions’ (Herod, 2001:15). As noted below, there are clear crossovers here with how unemployed people and collectives might be considered in relation to their own economic geographies. This framing provides potential for smaller acts, as well as campaigns and disputes, to be viewed as characteristic of agency within economic landscapes. The care and support shown below can also be connected with longer traditions of mutual aid and solidarity, and framed as part of a myriad of resistant forms that have responded to the challenges faced by unemployed people (Atkinson-Phillips et al., 2020).

The actions considered are not necessarily reflective of a coherent resistance, an opposition mirroring dominant austerity relations, but instead presented as indicative of intersecting formations of care, support and protest. This wider repertoire of practices is further commented on below and links to more fluid and flexible notion of resistance (Hughes, 2020). In this regard, Routledge’s (1996: 69) emergent understanding of resistance is helpful, framing it ‘to refer to any action, imbued with intent, that attempts to challenge, change, or retain particular circumstances relating to societal relations, processes, and/or institutions.’ Indeed, the acts raised below are framed as resistant to the dominant narrative of austerity, and as suggestive of the generative possibilities of wide-ranging actions aimed towards other ways of being in terms of welfare and unemployment.

This is important given the relative weight placed upon unemployment in both Marxist and post-structuralist terms (Walters, 2000). In this regard, the dynamic between employed and unemployed has long been understood as a ‘key lever’ within political economy, and as central to processes of capitalist accumulation (Harvey, 2006). This lever undoubtedly places constraints on both the agency of employed and unemployed. In Capital Volume I Marx stressed the significance of the ‘reserve army of labour’:

But if a surplus population of workers is a necessary product of accumulation or of the development of wealth on a capitalist basis, this surplus population also, becomes, conversely, the lever of capitalist accumulation, indeed it becomes a condition for the existence of the capitalist mode of production. It forms a disposable industrial reserve army, which belongs to capital just as absolutely as if the latter had bred it at its own cost. Independently of the limits of the actual increase of population, it creates a mass of human material always ready for exploitation by capital in the interest of capital’s own changing valorization requirements.

(Marx, 1990: 784)

Understood in such terms, unemployment can be framed dialectically as both a ‘product of accumulation’ and ‘weapon of capital’ whereby capital manipulates labour markets to cater for its labour power needs (see also Gough, 2003). In this regard, the practices of labour market intermediaries, job centres and agencies for example, have become key components for geographers analysing political economy (Enright, 2013). Such an approach has also revealed how those that are unable or unwilling to fit with the societal expectations around their availability for work often become subject to punitive practices (Peck, 2003; author, 2019).

Whether through unemployment's relationship with exploitative economic conditions or as subject to controlling power relations, the continued relevance of unemployment for economic and political geographers is apparent. The emphasis found though, has often lacked the agency of the unemployed themselves. Walters acknowledges this, highlighting how:

[T]he norms and tactics which suffuse the regulation of the unemployed are not simply dreamt up by eminent statepersons like Beveridge. It is not a disciplinary panopticon that I have sought to describe, a system simply imposed from above in which the powerless become ensnared and repressed in perpetuity. (Walters, 2000:149)

It is the contestation of potential ensnarement, repression and the Marxist description of 'a mass of human material always ready for exploitation' that link most with the activities found within UWCs. As such, this paper is positioned as a rebalancing of approaches towards unemployment to include individual and collective acts that reshape material and social conditions. Related authors have consistently stressed the need to recognise the heterogeneous nature of unemployment and to allow for a wider recognition of who constitutes the unemployed (Taylor, 2014). In a similar vein to core ideas from labour geography, as introduced above, this paper begins to indicate how unemployed people might shape and reshape their social and material conditions, albeit often within and against considerable constraints (Coe and Lier, 2010).

Here, some recent works are insightful for indicating more agentic understanding of unemployment. Chatterton's (2005) work on autonomous unemployed workers movements in Argentina for example, noted how collective forms of unemployed activism emerged with sustained emphasis upon 'work, dignity and social change'. Such an approach can be positioned alongside recent works which have illuminated personal experiences and emotionally infused activist responses to unemployment, through concepts such as social citizenship. Edmiston and Humpage (2018: 476) in their work with welfare claimants in New Zealand note the possibilities for 'political struggle to defend and contest the ideals, operation and outcomes of social citizenship'. These works begin to develop a more processual, emotional and sentient account of unemployment (see also Alberti et al., 2018; Peterie et al., 2019.). Developing from such works, and similar work within social history (Perry, 2000; 2005), the paper proposes that the combination of care, support and campaigning found within UWCs, alongside the connectivity with trade unionism, marks their work as relatively distinctive. In this regard, the centres reveal a further layering of individual and community relationships with UK austerity, extending crucial feminist economic geography works that have indicated the significance of more intimate and micro-spatial economic geographies.

### **Contesting austerity: quiet activism and community unionism**

The research considered below is primarily framed within the context of UK austerity policies. These economic reforms emerged in the context of the global financial crisis of 2008/9 and were largely defined as a response aimed towards reducing the state deficit (Hall, 2019). The tightening of the welfare system was a key component of these reforms and the implementation of Universal Credit was one such change. Introduced in 2013, it aimed to reduce complexity and integrate multiple working age benefits into a single monthly payment. A cross-parliamentary report recently concluded though, that 'in its current form, it fails to provide a dependable safety net. It has led to an unprecedented number of people relying on food banks and not being able to pay their rent' (Butler, 2020: n.p., Economic Affairs Committee, 2020). These harmful impacts have been framed as part of a wider 'austerity stigma machine', notoriously implementing budget cuts and policies that punitively target vulnerable people, including the unemployed, people with disabilities and asylum seekers (Tyler, 2020).

Some of the associated welfare changes can be situated within a longer trajectory of welfare reforms, including the 'New Deal' policies from the 1990s which subscribed claimants to a workfare model. The most recent changes, though, have been characterised as a particularly intensified, aggressive and harmful set of reforms (Alston, 2019). Critical scholarship and policy reports on welfare conditionality has shown how controlling measures are increasingly based upon claimant conduct, as well as categorical and circumstantial conditions, and have been applied in a disproportionate manner to those in vulnerable positions (Watts et al., 2014). The wider association of welfare support with cyclical relationships with precarious employment and broader forms of insecurity has also been foregrounded (Watts and Fitzpatrick, 2018). Research has consistently shown how 'cuts and reforms target already marginalised groups and exacerbate divides of class, race, gender, ethnicity, sexuality and disability at a local, regional and global level' (Raynor, 2019: n.p.).

The advisory and organising work discussed below is pertinent within the locations considered which have been impacted disproportionately by these austerity measures. Beatty and Fothergill's (2013; 2014) quantitative research reveals how North East and Midlands have faced harsh reductions in public funding expenditure. Whilst in many ways this is distinctive of the social relations produced during the austerity period, such research is indicative of the challenges encountered by community and trade union organisers in these regions, which have also been impacted by the longer trajectory of deindustrialisation associated with their characterisation as Old Industrial Regions (Hudson, 2005). It is within these post-industrial settings and austerity conditions that the organising and caring practices below are found.

Here it is suggested that reflections on such strategies can contribute towards a politicised understandings of labour organising practices, and debates regarding agency within labour geography (Strauss, 2017; 2020). Valuing such a broader realm of activity, within and beyond paid labour and the workplace, as economically significant has been a key contribution of feminist economic geography. In particular, the associated foregrounding of alterity through a diversity of non-capitalist formations, is central to an alternative and agentic understanding of unemployment (Gibson-Graham, 1996). This attentiveness to a wider realm of economic experiences, speaks to an approach that might include agency and experiences from unemployed individuals and collectives and is instructive for the research below.

This framing also connects with feminist economic geography research around UK austerity. Authors such as Hall (2020), Stenning (2020) and Raynor (2019) have developed an approach that has stressed the importance of 'everyday austerity', revealing lived experiences of austerity to consider emotional geographies, micro-strategies and the intimate, troubling and hopeful relations that emerge within such contexts. Such research has paid much closer attention to the specific impacts and strategies of individuals, families and groups, to reveal 'relationships to austerity', such as care and support, getting by mechanisms, and mundane mobilities (Hall, 2019). Attending to this realm of experience is insightful for reflecting on the practices found within the case studies below and more broadly for associated thinking within labour geography.

It is the nature of these relationships with unemployment, and relatedly austerity, that this paper seeks to illuminate. Hall (2019: 781) draws attention to the significance of 'everyday austerity', foregrounding intimacy, emotional interactions and caring spaces and how they might also:

[O]ffer a sense of belonging or conviviality, be emotionally and affectively charged, and offer an example of relational spaces of care in the everyday geographies of austerity – albeit these possibilities should not be romanticised, emerging from difficult and painful situations.

As will be considered below, UWCs are similarly relational places that offer elements of hope, care and belonging. These relations can emerge in a variety of unexpected places and through a diversity of practices (Bonner-Thompson and McDowell, 2020). Hall's commitment to the political value of such intimate relations is noteworthy and can be extended to spaces beyond the family and towards community spaces. For example, in the research that follows and wider UWC history, the caring practices of assistance with a redundancy case in the 1980s or more recently a volunteer attending a tribunal with a claimant, are reflective of crucial micro-interactions within economic landscapes that often remain hidden, and have arguably been downplayed within labour geography.

Related literature on 'encountering austerity' has revealed further experiential accounts of macro-economic geographies, noting how austerity is 'felt and lived above and beneath the surface in everyday life' (Hitchen and Raynor, 2020: 186). Again, such works have indicated a relational experience of austerity processes, noting how people reflect on both 'little things', such as small individual adaptations, and 'big stuff', such as engaging with the wider seemingly 'external' economic sphere (Stenning, 2020). Such an emphasis upon encounters and micro-interactions are key for the research below and have also continually stressed the significance of experiential approaches to reveal 'quieter activism' (Pottinger, 2017). Horton and Kraftl (2009: 17) highlight this possibility through a wider conceptualisation of activism that foregrounds 'small acts' to engage with 'the real, banal, messy, faltering ways in which activism happens – and the real, banal, ambivalent and emotional vicissitudes of activists' lives'. They also point to a more nuanced approach that captures 'emotional happenings, experiences and milieus that are constitutive of activism yet exceed the directed, cognisable, intentional 'work' that representations, identities, social movements and, especially, emotions are set to do' (ibid.).

Foregrounding such actions, and the connections with wider economic processes, is enabling for engaging with UWCs. Placing emphasis on seemingly mundane interactions, as a form of agency and resistance within the associated spaces, is important for recognising the wider value of micro-activisms (see also Askins, 2014; 2015). Such smaller acts can be situated as part of a wider repertoire of resistance to austerity politics, which Featherstone (2019: 18) suggests can 'enliven understandings of political contestation and engagement and to position them in relation to dynamic and contested left political trajectories'. Importantly Hall notes caution about romanticising such encounters, and wider austerity literature has shown the pressures and strains of austerity on caring institutions (Clayton et al., 2015; Featherstone et al., 2012). Here there is a need to acknowledge the precarious conditions within which UWCs organise. The violent conditions of austerity (see Laurie and Shaw, 2019) places great strain on unemployed individuals and collectives, making organising in this area challenging. In interview, one member characterised this challenge as 'organising the unorganisable', and the related conditions for organising are considered further below.

These wider engagements with individual experiences, relationality and quieter activism can reinvigorate approaches to unemployment, contributing towards labour geography's engagement with precarity. Strauss has stressed this as a key challenge for the sub-discipline:

Labour geographers can and should be examining the broad range of articulations of precarity that cut across, and are shaped by, the market-making activities of the state and the increasingly state-like activities of empowered market actors. (Strauss, 2017: 627)

In relation to this call for engagements with a range of articulations of precarity, this paper suggests that unemployment provides an important perspective which has been largely unheard within labour geography, and economic geography more generally. This is also what UWCs have regularly

called for themselves, arguing that connections and solidarities between in-work and out-of-work organising are crucial.<sup>1</sup> More broadly, such an emphasis allows a recognition of UWCs as spaces of ‘everyday’ and ‘mundane’ resistance through encounters, quieter activisms and relationality (Petrova and Prodromidou, 2019). This reimagining of unemployment allows further recognition of what Cumbers et al. (2010: 62) describe as ‘the continued agency and resilience of individuals and communities within old industrial cities, and to the politico-economic realities of a continuing class struggle as opposed to an over-determined hegemony for capital and state actors in processes of economic restructuring.’

Given the close connections between the centres and the trade union movement, the connections with labour geography are again noteworthy. The experiences considered can build upon established labour geography understandings of community unionism (Holgate, 2018; Jordhus-Lier, 2012; Wills, 2001). These works, centring on emerging forms of trade union renewal, have critically reflected upon notions of reciprocity and capacity building through a stretching of trade unionism beyond the work place. Thus far, community union literature has been framed as part of a broader set of discussions regarding how best to address the wider context of considerable decline in UK trade union membership (McBride and Greenwood, 2009; Grady and Simms, 2019). Such contributions have noted how initiatives, such as Unite’s Community membership scheme, offers trade unions opportunity to ‘engage with social movements and coalitions in wider society’ and ‘increase leverage, power and legitimacy’ (Holgate, 2018: 6). This approach has effectively considered community organising strategies through an economic lens, but has perhaps yet to fully consider the wider implications of organising such groups, and the ‘transformative potential’ of organising beyond the workplace (Lier, 2013: 42).

Thus, whilst the recognition of the relationships between labour market intermediaries (such as job centres, agencies and individuals), government policy and the production of compliance, compulsion and precarity are highly significant (Jones, and Novak, 1990; Peck and Theodore, 2000; Watts and Fitzpatrick, 2018), it is also important to consider alternative visions and spaces of unemployed support. There are connections here with other crossover services, such as food banks which Williams et al. (2016) characterise as spaces of political potential due to their inherent contestation of austerity regimes. Works such as this points to politicisation whilst also exploring the ‘limits of progressive possibilities’ and ‘contradictory dynamics’ of such anti-austerity practices (see also DeVerteuil, 2014; Evans, 2011; May and Cloke, 2014; Williams et al., 2012).

This framing of care and support as resistant practices within austerity regimes is key to the empirical engagements that follow. Set within contemporary austerity contexts, there are challenging conditions for developing ‘getting by’ strategies and wider political forms of resistance. With this in mind, the paper adopts the language of ‘resourcefulness’ to characterise the unemployed organising practices considered below. These acts are considered significant for their relatively autonomous ‘doing’ as opposed to conditioning, but are framed as limited by their austerity defined community environments and uneven access to resources (MacKinnon and Derickson, 2013). The acts and experiences raised below are acknowledged as having potential and definable impact, but are equally framed within their limitations, including those associated with funding environments (Clayton, 2015; Featherstone et al., 2012).

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<sup>1</sup> See TUC Library, London Metropolitan University. Unemployed Workers’ Centres Periodicals - HD 5768.5

## Researching unemployment: working with Unemployed Workers' Centres

UWCs were first established in 1978 in Newcastle upon Tyne and later expanded as a Trades Union Congress (TUC) initiative nationally across the UK in 1982. Their remit, according to TUC objectives, was to provide:

**Counselling and advice:** to provide unemployed people with information and advice about opportunities and assistance for training.

**Contact:** to provide a focal point in the community where unemployed people could make contact with each other. To encourage the unemployed to participate fully in the work of the Centre.

**Representation:** to assist and represent the unemployed on issues pertinent to their welfare.

(Adapted from Centres for the Unemployed - TUC Guidelines, 1990<sup>2</sup>)

The centres took diverse paths to addressing these aims and the emphasis was often dependent on circumstances, organising cultures and particularly funding, but the shared emphasis on supporting the unemployed as well as building solidarity between workers and non-workers was stressed throughout (Bagguely, 1991). The centres were also aligned to, and emerged from, wider regional and national campaigning, including the People's March for jobs in 1981 and 1983.<sup>3</sup> At their peak, it is estimated that there were 250 centres active across the UK in the 1980s, however following funding changes in the early 1990s, the centres have declined significantly in number. At present, it is estimated that there are 18 centres that are active nationally, including those in Newcastle upon Tyne and Chesterfield considered here.

This history of the centres is indicative of a longer lasting presence of unemployed activism and collective organising practices (Forrester and Ward, 1990).<sup>4</sup> This paper engages most, though, with the contemporary role of two notably active centres, focusing primarily on their role post-2008, whereby an increasing emphasis on welfare advice work and responses to austerity have been prominent. Both centres are open to the public with appointments and space available during working hours, and staff (paid and voluntary) working Monday to Friday. As a result of the increased precarity associated with austerity, most recent UWC work has been increasingly directed towards alternative welfare support, providing advice and guidance with medical assessments, mandatory reconsiderations and appeals for welfare claimants (e.g. Personal Independence Payments, Employment and Support Allowance and Universal Credit).<sup>5</sup>

Activities within the two centres considered have also become recently aligned with an initiative by Britain's second largest trade union Unite, through Unite Community (established in late 2011) which aims to expand the remit of existing trade unionism through community union branches and extending membership to 'those not in employment' (see Unite, n.d.). This change was in part made in response to the challenges facing trade unions, particularly around declining trade union density but also as a response to the political challenges of austerity (Holgate, 2018). As such, many of the volunteers within the UWCs (which have charitable status) have become Unite Community members

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<sup>2</sup> Document consulted via personal archive of research participant.

<sup>3</sup> For more on the marches see archive records at People's History Museum. For example: CP/CENT/IND/07/01

<sup>4</sup> See also TUC Library at London Metropolitan University. For example: Centres for the Unemployed Periodicals – HD 5768.5

<sup>5</sup> UWC archives indicate a much wider range of historical activities – including arts and crafts, workplace injury campaigns and redundancy advice for example.



and this organisation has generally been used to frame the campaigning activities discussed below. This paper will combine an analysis of experiences across case studies of community organising practices found within the UWCs and the campaigning activities of the connected Unite Community membership, including support and care provision against austerity and welfare sanctioning and multiple campaigns around precarity (e.g. zero hour contracts, period poverty, Universal Credit). As a volunteer commented, it is this close combination of ‘compassion’ and a desire to be part of a collective ‘fighting back’ that is notable for an analysis of unemployed organising:

I like to think that it’s a bit of an echo going out that there are these people that will assist you and go with you. So there is a bit of compassion [...] it’s my way of fighting back [...] I know I could go on all the marches, and I could sign all the petitions [...] but I would rather my activity was more face to face with the reality.

[Unemployed Workers’ Centre member interview, June 2018]

Quotes such as this are drawn from an ongoing research project with two active UWCs, with material in this paper drawn from research conducted between July 2017 and December 2019. These engagements have been with the Tyne and Wear Centre against Unemployment (TWCAU) and the Derbyshire Unemployed Workers’ Centre (DUWC). The research below draws upon a combination of methods, including archival research through personal archives of key organising figures, institutional archives, interviews and focus groups conducted with UWC members. Here it is important to acknowledge that the 20 interviews conducted have a gender imbalance (16 men and 4 women) and this reflects the current composition of the core organising groups. Recruitment for interviews was based around those who are currently economically inactive and have an active role within the centres, as well as the smaller group of people who have undertaken paid work for the centres, which limited the diversity of respondents.<sup>6</sup>

The triangulation of sources addresses this imbalance in part with documents identifying a wider range of activities, volunteers and service users, past and present. A decision was made not to interview ‘service users’ given the emotive nature of their interaction (often characterised by distress) with UWCs and the high percentage of service users who have a disability and/or mental health issues. As a result of this partiality in data collection, the materials considered are not intended to represent a singular unemployed voice, but instead provides insights that begin to rethink characterisations of unemployment. Data analysis emerged thematically, with interview transcripts analysed within NVivo software to establish cross-cutting codes, experiences and trends, whilst wider empirics (annual reports, leaflets, bulletins, etc.) were used comparatively with these emergent findings. Some of these themes are discussed below with an emphasis upon small acts, campaigning and ongoing constraints.

### **Spaces of resourcefulness: small acts of unemployed support**

UWC records indicate considerable successes in overturning benefit claims decisions and notable financial gains through appeals and applications with services users (see Table 1). This support takes numerous forms, including the practical support in terms of form filling, emotional support of talking through a mandatory reconsideration or preparing and accompanying a claimant to medical assessment or tribunal. These activities have significant individual impact as is noted above and considered further below, but also represent a collective agency.

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<sup>6</sup> For anonymity purposes, research participants are referred to as ‘UWC members’ and their location remains hidden.

Table 1 – Derbyshire Unemployed Workers’ Centre Case Work<sup>7</sup>

YEAR	Aggregated value of Individual Claims and Appeals associated with Chesterfield UWC
2015	£3.28million
2016	£3.56million
2017	£4.05 million
2018	£4.60million

The aggregated values include appeals against DWP decisions (mostly with regards to Employment and Support Allowance and Personal Independent Payments) and wider work with general enquiries (e.g. regarding Universal Credit applications) and outreach work (e.g. home visits). The Newcastle upon Tyne UWC records are less rigorous and consistent, but their existing records indicate around 200 ongoing ‘live cases’ and interviews have anecdotally suggested an estimated 70-80% success rate in their appeals. This appears consistent with national statistics which suggest that appeal success rates against benefits, such as Personal Independence Payment, decisions was at least 70% (Butler, 2019).

The collated value of this work is indicative of an aggregation of ‘quieter’ form of agency which has been rarely acknowledged as economically or politically significant. Reclaiming economic entitlements is a vital component of challenging what participants regularly described as a ‘hostile environment’ for welfare claimants. This agency can be viewed in two respects with regards to the role of the centres. Firstly, the individual claimant exerts agency in contesting a local government decision or navigating a bureaucratic challenge in accessing entitlements, such as the new Universal Credit system (Beatty and Povey, 2018). The aggregated value of these actions reflects the reclaiming of an entitlement primarily based upon an individual engagement. Secondly, the associated work and support embodies a sense of political and social solidarity through UWCs providing appeal process expertise and contributing towards a collective endeavour. Whilst the table is an aggregation of individual claimant cases, the wider set of experiences documented below notes how the centres enable and support those seeking welfare support. This collective endeavour speaks to a broader framing of this activity and provides possibilities to view these actions in a more collective manner.

In many ways, the anti-austerity sentiment of reclaiming money for local individuals is politically salient in itself (Williams et al., 2016) but also serves as a platform for a wider realm of anti-austerity

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<sup>7</sup> Data taken from annual reports and includes lump sum arrears (as a result of tribunal), ongoing weekly benefits per annum (as a result of tribunal) and awards made through general enquiries/outreach work.

activisms. As such this form of agency can be viewed as a 'small act' but also as inherently connected to the other activities that might more commonly be considered as resistance (Hughes, 2020):

I want to keep this place (UWC) alive because it did keep me alive when I was in a terrible state before that time when [x] came to my job centre appointment because he was just brilliant and nothing happened, and it was like wow, the threat, the level of threat was there, and then it was like nothing happened.

[UWC member interview, May 2018]

Individuals spoke of the significance of UWC support within a variety of welfare spaces, including tribunals and medical assessments. The quote above is from an unemployed research participant who now volunteers within a centre and described their own experience during a difficult time at their job centre. The 'threat' described in the quote above was a possible sanction which would have reduced the entitlement of the claimant who has since become a centre volunteer. In a related interview, a volunteer similarly commented on her experience of the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and the welfare system, again noting the increasingly punitive welfare system and the related work of the centre:

I've never liked it, I've always wanted to work, but that aside, if you just concentrate on the dealing with the DWP [...] they've made it so hard and it's got harder and harder and harder and harder for people, and now it's horrible with the Universal Credit and you feel like you're being punished and treated like a criminal [...] and the pressure was so immense, that I was so relieved when I got my job, because I really wasn't coping. It made me ill actually and if I hadn't been going to the centre, it would have been even worse. So I am very grateful for that.

[UWC member interview, October 2019]

This participant, a recently recruited volunteer, noted their relationship with the centre and its wider connectivity to her own precarity. She went on to comment on how the centre and the volunteers provide a space whereby she 'can go and rant at them and they know exactly what I am talking about [...] they can listen and they know because they've been through it and know other people that have.' The significance of a relatable and empathetic space was regularly stressed in interviews at UWCs, whereby a shared sense of solidarity within intimidating welfare systems was regularly stressed. Such actions and activisms are significant in numerous ways, but can be especially noted for their hopeful potentiality as part of a wider set of practices contesting the stigma associated with unemployment. This is pertinent in a context of austerity Britain, whereby there is increased scepticism about the existence of poverty and 'a growing lack of sympathy for people who are not in work' alongside 'the increased mobilisation of individualistic explanations about the moral failings of poor people to account for economic inequalities.' (Valentine and Harris, 2014: 89).

The emotional support of accompaniment was regularly referred to as a valuable act in an otherwise intimidating and isolating welfare atmosphere. Off-putting welfare experiences were not limited to the spaces of encounter within job centres and related intermediaries but also found within the bureaucratic processes as another volunteer commented upon:

Most of what I do here is form filling. People need help with ESA 50s and PIP forms and so because the forms themselves seem to be set up to baffle people [...] they just seem to make it as complicated and as difficult as possible for people.

[UWC member interview, July 2019]

Such 'small acts' of supporting individuals haven't received as much recognition within labour geography literatures, including recent work on community unions. Yet within feminist economic geography and recent work on political acts within austerity contexts, such activities, whilst recognising ambiguities and limitations, have been acknowledged as politically valuable (Williams et al., 2016). One volunteer who regularly accompanies 'services users' to such meetings and tribunals described the significance of this related role:

[W]hat we have to do is prepare someone for putting their case to an appeal because technically it is court [...] That's an almost traumatic experience for people to go through so they welcome us attending even if it just for the moral support of being there [...] so there is a lot of face to face contact with the person who has made a claim and wants to do an appeal and so on, there's a lot of getting their confidence up in talking about personal issues.

[UWC member interview, June 2018]

The link between acts such as form filling, talking through cases and accompaniment to assessment and tribunals, might be deemed relatively mundane but is nonetheless significant in resisting the implementation of austerity policies. Each small act of supporting individuals can be linked to the overall outcome of regularly successful appeals and the collective financial value of these appeals. The outcomes of such support can be measured financially, but must also be considered as holding potential for wider social and political possibilities. In many ways, these engagements begin to extend the feminist economic geographers contributions around intimate experiences and strategies to acknowledge a link with collective organising practices and spaces. Thinking within and beyond friendships and family, and towards emergent collective organising strategies, allows a retention of an ethic of care and support, alongside a commitment to campaigning within the wider political context.

The establishment of Unite Community membership to include non-workers was largely viewed as an enabling venture for the centres, providing opportunity for UWC members to become part of a collective campaigning organisation. Trade union membership provided a further organising infrastructure for harnessing a shared commitment towards improving unemployed conditions and complimenting the supportive and caring role of the centres (Holgate, 2018). This is reflected in the campaigning activities noted below and highlights a wider unemployed presence with the urban centres, but also underpins the involvement of many volunteers within the centre who frame their day-to-day involvement within a wider commitment to social justice. This sensibility foregrounds a more active and political conceptualisation of unemployment, indicating small acts of resistance within the wider abstractions of subjectification. Such activisms and successes are deemed politically salient through the variety and combinations of activities, providing individual financial gains as well as fostering connection to a much wider campaigning component.

### **Sites of agency: campaigning and solidarities**

Interviews and archival research revealed numerous individual impacts within the centres, indicative of an enabling influence the centres have had for individuals whilst also reflecting personal motivations for their involvement.<sup>8</sup> This sentiment has already been raised above through interview comments and here the paper expands upon this element by considering the centres as sites of sociability and contestation that provide resourceful places within austerity contexts. When asked

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<sup>8</sup> For wider evidence of this see regular publication of *Solidarity* – The Derbyshire UWCs Newsletter. For a historical and North East example, see *On the Stones* (n.d., Hilary Wainwright Collection, People's History Museum, Box 13 File 8).

about connections between the supportive role above and membership with Unite Community, participants regularly stressed the campaigning element of their work:

We don't ever want to be perceived as we're just doing this out of a voluntary sense or things like that. Our members campaign [...] they're into campaigning on all the things that matter to people and its always underpinned with the sense that if you know what you've been sanctioned or whatever, it is not you that's at fault it's the system and we're out there trying to educate people as well and to agitate.

[UWC member interview, August 2017]

The shared motivation amongst participants indicated the distinctive combination of UWC work in both assisting claimants and contesting wider social relations. Comments like those above are also suggestive of a connectivity between seemingly small acts (such as form filling and accompaniment) and direct actions (such as protests against exploitative employers). More broadly, it is also suggestive of a wider complex of resistance and activism that might not be neatly categorised. This combination is indicative of a wider political consciousness regularly encountered within the centres, and here it is argued that there is no neat separation between seemingly small acts and wider campaigning. The shared experiences considered provide micro-activisms that contest the violent tendencies of austerity politics, and capture an alternative sense of support and solidarity, which can be downplayed when political action is characterised in an overly narrow manner (Featherstone, 2019).

A recurring theme throughout the research centred upon the connections between the acts of care and the wider political context within which such exchanges are found. Participants continually stressed the importance of campaigning as part of their connection to the UWCs. Over the last two years, notable Unite Community campaigns have included protests against Universal Credit, direct actions against working conditions and solidarities with regional worker campaigns. Commenting on their efforts to resist, one interviewee stated:

If you were to look back at the campaigns that the centre has waged [...] a lot of them were defensive campaigns. Fighting to save a job centre. Fighting to stop things getting worse. Fighting to stop a particular policy, training schemes [...] And the thing that I've always been interested in, as well, is trying to paint a picture of what could be.

[UWC member interview, July 2019]

This combination of fighting back in seemingly 'defensive campaigns' is connected to a more hopeful vision of solidarity. Specific campaigns are raised below in more detail, but the combination of these defensive and reactive acts sits alongside a longer history of wider initiatives within UWCs, including creative and innovative direct actions and the provision of education sessions and workshops.<sup>9</sup> It is this combination of small acts tackling the 'little things' and the wider solidarities and direct action aimed at the 'big issues' that begins to reveal the potentiality of the community organising model (Wills, 2001).

A prominent set of protests and actions in recent years has been staged against the sports retail company Sports Direct in opposition to the precarious working conditions within warehouses and retail stores (McLennan, 2015; Goodley, 2016). Actions have been co-ordinated by Unite Community to uncover the punitive and precarious working conditions and generated significant public

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<sup>9</sup> See UWC Periodicals, including *Solidarity* Newsletter held at DUWC and national collections held at TUC Library.

attention.<sup>10</sup> In Newcastle, regular protests have taken place outside city centre retail stores, whilst in North East Derbyshire, wider community union members have also led protests outside the company warehouse in Shirebrook regarding punitive working conditions. UWC members commented on their motivations for campaigning, identifying a link between the struggles of those in and out of work:

Obviously it's a small stepping stone, to being unemployed and working for Sports Direct, or working as a waiter and getting your tips nicked so obviously the precarious and low paid jobs, there is that very vital connection between Unite and what we do.

[UWC member interview, June 2018]

Participants regularly stressed the need for solidarity between workers and non-workers, disrupting abstract distinctions regarding economic inactivity. The interviewee indicated a recognition of the 'low-pay, no-pay cycle' and the need for connected forms of resistance (Shildrick et al., 2012). Many participants explained their hopefulness for a community union model stressing the crossovers between UWCs and the wider political economy of work. This combination has been notable elsewhere too with direct actions and campaigns developing around restaurant working conditions and more broadly the expression of regular solidarity for small scale industrial actions, such as the Chesterfield branch supporting local worker picket lines and demonstrations.

These forms of solidarity sit alongside actions contesting issues relating to unemployment, such as the national day of action against Universal Credit. Commenting on these actions, interviews again placed emphasis on the connections, in this case between workers and no-workers:

But what we've got to try and do is to get the message across, that Universal Credit, and Unite is doing this, Universal Credit is going to affect about 7 to 8 million people who are in work as well as out of work and it's going to affect them negatively. It's going to drag a lot of people into job centres for the first time to explain what they are doing to get more hours or a better job, which is called in work conditionality.

[UWC member interview, June 2018]

The connections between the small acts noted in the first section and the wider political context were stressed regularly during interviews. An awareness of the increasing conditionality relating to the payment of in-work welfare payments is also made above (Watts and Fitzpatrick, 2018). Unite Community demonstrations have been a notable presence within Newcastle and Chesterfield, raising the profile of the issues, particularly Universal Credit, and petitioning objections. The campaigns have had reasonable success, raising the profile of welfare issues with considerable national coverage and the message of 'scrap Universal Credit' adopted by the Labour Party during the 2019 General Election (see also Pemberton, 2020).

UWC and Unite Community presence on picket lines and within direct actions is notable, but the centres have also held a wider engagement with precarity. The centres have recently campaigned on wider societal issues related to the cost of living within austerity, including period poverty and the cost of child care. In Newcastle, a recent campaign centred upon 'positive finance'. Members printed and disputed 107,000 informing NE communities about the financial benefits of credit unions (through partnership with Moneywise) and discouraging the use of payday loan lenders. Their work

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<sup>10</sup> Sports Direct inquiry: <https://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/business-innovation-and-skills/inquiries/parliament-2015/working-practices-at-sports-direct-inquiry-16-17/> [Last accessed: 23/1/20]

directly contributed to over 100 people joining a credit union and assisting 30 people with significant debts. In one case, an individual who contacted the centre, had their debts reduced by 95% due to collaborations with charities. Thus, whilst not always constituting outright resistance or measurable by discrete notions of demand related success, as has more traditionally been the case within labour geography, the activities considered can be positioned as part of a longer trajectory of maintaining unemployment, and more broadly precarity, as politically salient organising areas. The outcomes of such diverse activities are rarely linear, and instead can be viewed as contributing to a wider multitude of anti-austerity organising practices. As such, a more fluid, relational and somewhat speculative understanding of actions and their connections with wider notions resistance is useful to characterise the activities considered (Hughes, 2020).

In this regard, there is no neat distinction between the acts of care, support and the direct actions raised above, which might be more easily identified as resistance. The variety of activities, from form-filling and accompaniment to demonstrating and campaigning, are all constitutive of agency associated with unemployment. The combination of care, support and campaigning links closely to the wider need for 'raising expectations' within labour organising as well as the continuing challenging of workplace and welfare practices (McAlevey, 2012). This broader conceptualisation of labour geography, to develop a less rigid characterisations of labour agency, including political campaigning, solidarity practices and enabling acts of care and support as being significant in their own right, is productive (Crossan et al., 2016). These initiatives are not without limitations, though, and these are considered below to briefly unpack the challenges of 'organising the unorganisable' as one research participant commented upon. In doing so, the paper argues for a more sustained engagement with unemployment through the subjective experiences found within the case studies considered. Such an approach provides insights into alternative imaginaries of austerity and neoliberalism through the emerging commitment towards solidarities developed beyond the boundaries of paid work. The following section also acknowledge though, that such developments and experiences are found within punitive, challenging and constraining conditions which significantly limit the capacity to continue such acts and campaigns.

### **Unemployed resourcefulness: austerity and organising challenges**

UWCs continue to play a crucial role, as noted in the work and campaigns discussion above, but they have faced considerable challenges in recent years. Funding for their work has been increasingly difficult to secure, with local government working under reduced budgets. This relative decline and wider difficulties, relates to Raynor's recent reflections on austerity and her comments around 'endings', whereby she calls for associated scholars to:

Story the lost, attending properly to their declines: How did it happen? Was it slow? Was it abrupt? How was it experienced? What lingered or remained? And then we might trace "fragments and their patterns" of the ends in austerity. (Raynor, 2019: n.p.)

This emphasis upon 'endings' encourages an attentiveness towards gaps, limitations, challenges and fundamentally what is lost through austerity. UWC participants discussed their relative decline, noting ongoing anxieties and echoing these challenges:

I belong to an organisation that peaked at 250 centres, and in 1981 [...] So I belong to an organisation that peaked in about 1985 and has been in decline ever since, so the trade unions have become much more about people in work and much less about people in the community.

[UWC member interview, May 2018]

We cover Chesterfield, NE Derbyshire, Bolsover and parts of Amber Valley and then all of a sudden we lose the County Council's ninety-three plus thousand quid, with the possibility that we are going to lose more through the NE Derbyshire and through a number of town councils that used to support us.

[UWC member interview, July 2019]

The quotes reveal a temporality to the experiences considered above, with one participant reflecting on a longer decline in trade union density and capacity whilst the other identifying more immediate funding concerns within austerity conditions. This balancing of immediate constraining circumstances with longer lasting trajectories and trends within the trade union movement, is useful for understanding the notion of 'endings' proposed above. The spatial and temporal context provides the conditions through which Unite attempts to mobilise an unemployed membership. The challenges and limitations are clear, with concerns around funding and reciprocity present.

Most recently, the Derbyshire centre lost significant council funding which places their role in a precarious position. This collective precarity is combined with the anxiety amongst potential volunteers and campaigners regarding any repercussions from taking actions:

It's hard to draw people into campaigns on these issues because people are frightened. I mean the number of times we've wanted to do things outside the job centre and people have just said I'll do it outside somebody else's job centre but not my own and people are concerned about being victimised if they put their head above the parapet.

[UWC member interview, July 2019]

In a context where funding for such organising practices is undermined, and concerns around possible repercussions for taking action, there is perhaps added significance to those that have taken actions such as those noted above. However, the wider context of organising in this area undoubtedly presents challenges and difficulties given the precarious conditions welfare claimants find themselves in. As such, the language of 'endings' might not be entirely suitable for the centres considered who have shown considerable tenacity in challenging conditions, but their experience does reflect wider trends in community union organising practices combating considerable loss of public services in many places.

These constraints pose challenges and undoubtedly impact the scale of work within the centres. Again the notion of resourcefulness is pertinent, as it 'focuses attention upon the uneven distribution of resources within and between communities and maintains an openness to the possibilities of community self-determination' (MacKinnon and Derickson, 2013: 267). Despite continued concerns and uncertain futures, the centres' histories suggest an enduring ability to maintain activities. In this regard, the Unite Community link has been stressed in many interviews as an opportunity for resource and alliance building. When asked about what the link with Unite might offer, responses were predominantly positive, noting the potential connections between employment and unemployment as an organising hook was shared. This sentiment was captured best with an interview describing the unemployed experience:

[Y]ou haven't got any economic power so unless you align yourself to those with you can find a common cause, i.e. people in work, then what could you do and also there is no such thing as the unemployed as a homogenous group. Unemployed people are in and out of employment, on and off schemes, it's a sort of merry-go-round where people are going off and going on, and so you can't say there is a group of unemployed people.



[UWC member interview, July 2019]

The interviewee picks up on many of the challenges of organising within precarious communities. The 'merry-go-round' is indicative of the transient nature of unemployed experiences and the challenges of sustaining organising in this area, however the potential for emergent solidarities is also acknowledged whereby workers and non-workers might campaign together. Indeed, in some instances it has been Unite Community members who protested within workplaces associated with precarious working conditions and exploitative managerial practices. These solidarities indicate the strengths of a community union organising model, and the possibilities for trade unions to stretch their influence beyond the workplace (Wills, 2001).

Whilst optimism persists, there are continued concerns with the current organising practices both in terms of external funding circumstances but also trade union organising structures. This was notable in participant reflections on their membership's relationship with the trade union:

There is a feeling that the larger trade union movement kind of looks down on Unite Community, it's not a proper union, because they're not fighting their bosses because they haven't got bosses.

[UWC member interview, July 2019]

This comment was triangulated by several interviews noting a general positivity towards the support and link with Unite Community, but also a sense of it being too early to fully assess the success of the initiative. Looking forward, comments such as this indicate how broader questions remain, as similarly raised by Holgate (2018) regarding the possible problem of a union 'facing in two directions.' Participants here similarly suggest a need to develop more sustained forms of reciprocity as key to sustaining this organising model.

### **Conclusions: 'more-than' a reserve army of labour**

Framing unemployment within the Marxist language of a 'reserve army of labour' provides a vital thesis for a dialectical understanding of labour markets and economic relations. Such abstractions can be problematic in their definition, though, as they can often characterise unemployment in overwhelmingly negative terms (Reisse and Perry, 2011). Thus, whilst undoubtedly relevant, an over emphasis on categorising and measuring those deemed 'without a job' potentially supports more stigmatising and disempowering narratives of unemployment (Tyler, 2013). Instead, by repositioning the emphasis towards unemployment from below, this paper foregrounds a variety of unemployed experiences and forms of agency. This compliments and builds upon ongoing works within labour geography, particularly reflections around spatial politics, community unions and workers' centres (Roca, 2020). It reveals the connections between work and non-work through solidarity, but also a variety of resistant acts towards punitive welfare systems that disrupt a simplistic 'reserve army of labour' characterisation. Instead, UWCs provide a further insight into the geographies of precarity by revealing 'quieter' acts of care and support, whilst also considering the significant role of supporting organisations and social groups in contesting this rhetoric and providing social, political and economic opportunities. The paper concludes with three reflections that attempt to capture the significance of thinking through a 'more-than' reserve army of labour perspective.

Firstly, the range of UWC activities are indicative of the need to further politicise and challenge understandings of unemployment. In 2019, former UK Employment Minister Alok Sharma claimed that recent national figures represent the 'underlying resilience of our job market' in times of difficulty (BBC, 2019). In contrast, many opponents have argued that such rhetoric simply masks

growing in-work poverty, precarity and insecurity. A recently published Centre for Cities report for example, notes a possible 3 million people as 'missing unemployed' in the UK because of their status as economically inactive not being recognised within statistical definitions (Partington, 2019). The term unemployment has been considered through the work of UWCs to include a continuum of people that are out of paid work for varying lengths of time (Burnett, 1994), and includes those with disabilities and caring responsibilities (Taylor, 2014). Interviews also noted how the interaction found within the UWC spaces and the associated campaigning provided an alternative framing of unemployment. Participants stressed how UWCs placed greater value on a personal development ethos, through care and solidarity, as opposed to compulsion models currently prevalent within welfare systems (Peck and Theodore, 2000).

Secondly, rejecting a broad-brush approach, the paper has surveyed UWC responses to unemployment to recognise the agency and experiences of unemployed people themselves as individuals and through associated supporting networks. By doing so, a more agentic conceptualisation emerges to unpack unemployed experiences, agency and solidarities as well as ongoing constraints. This illuminates how unemployed organising practices have contested the violent conditions of austerity (Laurie and Shaw, 2019). These activities and experiences have empowering potential but are also constrained by the environments within which they are found. Here, Mackinnon and Derickson's (2013) language of 'resourcefulness' characterises both the potentiality of the organising model, and the constraining environments in which such acts are found. Such attentiveness to this dynamic is key for a more agentic account and a widening of labour geographies, most notably through the emergent community union organising model.

Finally, the provision of care and sociability remains crucial within austerity conditions. The accounts considered provide alternative imaginaries within neoliberal contexts and austerity defined societies (Nolan and Featherstone, 2015, Featherstone, 2019). As such, the spaces themselves are geographically pertinent, providing places to articulate alternatives to the wider stigmatisation of unemployment. The centres can be considered as part of an unemployed presence creating infrastructures for unemployed solidarity. With an emphasis upon dignity and solidarity encompassing all centre activities, they are sites of quiet activism with possibilities for wide ranging resisting impacts. These micro-activisms, associated with wider trade union initiatives, such as Unite Community, indicate an emotional geography of care, support and empathy (Hall, 2019), that has transformative possibilities for trade union and community organising.

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