

[CH]Contemporary labour geographies within changing places

[AU]Paul Griffin

ABSTRACT: This article recognises the contributions of workers and more broadly the significance of work within economic geography. It considers how engaging with labour experiences provides an accessible vantage point to consider much wider debates and issues. By doing so, the article suggests that the increasingly well-established sub-field of labour geography has much to offer for geographers to consider wider economic processes as experienced 'from below'. The article considers recent UK examples of worker action and emerging community union practices as a model developed by trade unions to counter trends in their membership and respond to changes in their role. As such, the article provides a valuable perspective for assessing geographical themes and scholarly interests, not least for a further expanding of approaches towards 'changing places' and understanding economic change and social inequalities.

[A]Introduction

[start quote] *'[Y]ou don't put your union card and your work boots at your locker at work, and when you come home you're no longer a trade unionist. You're a trade unionist when you're asleep, you're a trade unionist when you're off on holiday, you're a trade unionist at all times [...]* So therefore the trade union should be fighting for you within your home, within your community, within your workplace, within every aspect of your life.' (Unite Community Member interview, May 2018)[end]

A growing human geography sub-field has developed over the last 30 years with an emphasis upon workers' agency and experience. Most notably, the publication of Andrew Herod's (2001) *Labor Geographies* established a renewed interest for economic geographers, stressing the value of viewing economic geography 'from below'. Since then, wide ranging research has emerged indicating the possibilities for understanding work and workers within geography. This includes substantial work on the role of trade unions as a key actor within the economy, research on experiences within changing workplaces and studies on the links between migration and work (McDowell, 2009; Rogaly and Qureshi, 2017). Such diverse interests across historical and contemporary case studies are indicative of the potential value of the sub-discipline for wider geographical audiences and, here, I suggest that the proposition of taking work seriously has continued resonance.

Labour geographies has much to offer for geographers to consider wider economic processes as experienced 'from below'. In particular, labour geographies sheds light on the 'changing places' learning area for secondary education, with the emphasis on work illuminating much wider processes, such as globalisation (e.g. the complex dynamics of work-related migration and the lived experiences associated with multinational corporations), deindustrialisation (shifts in both labour markets and types of work), and wider social change (the impacts of declining trade union density). The proposition of considering economic geography from below encourages the foregrounding of workers' experiences and activism as opposed to an economic geography from above

which might privilege the perspective of capital, employer or state. The relatable and experiential nature of this approach can be enlightening for the study of economic geography. The geographical emphasis allows a re-reading of wider social-economic processes to consider workers' economic and political experiences, and how they regularly enact social-economic change. While acknowledging employer strategies, labour geography places greater emphasis on how workers experience, contest and change their working conditions through negotiations, campaigning and direct action (over working hours, for example) as well as making wider political contributions through local, national and transnational solidarity campaigns.

This article introduces labour geographies before focusing upon a new initiative by the trade union Unite through some empirical vignettes. In 2011, Unite established a community membership scheme, with membership becoming open to non-workers and local community branches established throughout the UK. Non-workers (including those considered retired, carers, students and unemployed) can now become community members and gain access to trade union resources for approximately 50p per week. The sentiment behind the change is captured in the introductory quote from a North East member who stressed the potential for links between trade unionism and wider community issues. Here, the article identifies trade union responses to contemporary challenges as an emergent research interest within a broader discipline of human geography.

[A]Labour geographies and economic geography 'from below'

Economic geographers have contributed significantly to spatial understandings of globalisation and the geographical circulations and influences of global capital. They have shown how financial transactions and exchanges can cross borders and shape places via a distant influence, creating what Harvey (2006) describes as a 'spatial fix' to overcome place based economic challenges. However, understanding economic geography in this way can potentially be disempowering when considered as characterising economic processes as abstractions, practiced by elites and distinct from everyday lives. Thus, while these works are crucial for analysing macro-economic geographies, an over reliance on this perspective might be critiqued for privileging an understanding of economic relations through relatively abstract financial processes. Powerful economic actors (e.g. the state, multi-national corporations) must be included within economic geography, but there is a tendency here to privilege such operations as opposed to those found within working life. In this article, I draw upon the developing work of labour geography to indicate how further economic geography insights are possible and how these approaches may be more empowering, less overwhelming and fundamentally revealing for a study of changing places.

At its most basic definitional level, 'labour geography' emerged with an emphasis upon the need to account for the agency of workers. Herod claimed that workers can be viewed as 'sentient social beings who both intentionally and unintentionally produce economic geographies through their actions' (2001, p. 15). This foregrounding of labour, as an economic actor, was fairly radical for geography at the time and built upon other related traditions that similarly stressed workers as social, economic and politics actors, such as the 'history from below' tradition and historians such as E.P. Thompson. The approach indicates that labour in fact has power within economic geography and

how labour has made spatial fixes, to borrow Harvey's language, of its own. Cumbers *et al.* have stressed this point, revealing how:

[start quote]'[L]abour must be viewed as an ever-present obstacle to processes of commodification and it is labour's ability to continually threaten accumulation processes that leads to offensive capitalist strategies (eg neoliberalism, deindustrialisation, new spatial fixes, etc.)' (2010, p. 53).[end]

This statement suggests not only the potentiality for labour to create and enact economic change (e.g. improving wages and working conditions), but also implicitly how the perspective of labour might be utilised as a 'way-in' to the often off-putting complexities of economic geography. In this regard, it is useful to think of labour as including those in paid employment, but also to foreground the variety of unpaid labour that is essential to a functioning economy (e.g. domestic labour and care work). Foregrounding the value of a wider realm of labour has been a key contribution of feminist inspired contributions to the sub-field. Labour understood in this more open manner has a much wider meaning than simply understanding those within formal, paid employment and it serves as a collective representation within and beyond particular workforces. This attentiveness to the significance of work within the global economy holds the potential for reimagining the dynamics and shifts within economic geography.

This reconfiguration, foregrounding worker experiences and actions, illuminates a key dynamic within economics: that between employer and worker(s). In this regard, labour geography has shown how workers take actions that can interrupt and disrupt economic processes and indeed improve their own conditions through collective bargaining (e.g. protests, strikes, individual acts of resistance). Most commonly, this work has considered the collective actions of workers, generally through the trade union model. Trade unions are defined as 'a group of employees who join together to maintain and improve their conditions of employment' (Unison, n.d.). These negotiations around conditions encompass collective bargaining to negotiate conditions such as pay, hours and health and safety, as well as wider campaigning work including industrial action (such as strike action) and political activity.

The relative strength of labour organising practices in the UK has changed considerably though, with trade union membership decline, reflecting broader economic processes. OECD (2019) statistics on trade union density highlight a dramatic reduction from 1979, when 50.7% of UK workers were trade union members, to 2018 statistics when only 23.4% of workers are unionised. This change has had notable community impacts, particularly within post-industrial places, and is often attributed to political decisions and shifts in labour markets. That said, this trend is not necessarily replicated internationally, with countries such as Iceland, Denmark and Belgium retaining consistently high trade union density (see Figure 1) within the same period.

[insert Figure 1 near here][caption]Figure 1: Trade union density in selected OECD countries, 2018. Source: adapted from OECD, 2019.[end]

It is also worth noting that trade union membership in the UK has increased in the last three consecutive years (2017-19), and total membership now stands at over 6 million people. Their associative bodies therefore continue to carry considerable economic and

political power (Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, 2020). Mackinnon and Cumbers point to this, suggesting that:

[start quote] *'The tendency to write off trade unions as dinosaurs whose days are numbered has been criticized by many commentators who point to the continuing importance of labour action and struggle in the global economy. Not only are there very different experiences between countries, but even in those places where unions have suffered the worst setbacks, there are signs of revival in recent years'* (Mackinnon and Cumbers, 2007, p. 166).[end]

This has been evident in recent times with numerous work-related disputes taking place in the UK. During 2020 for example, the University and College Union took industrial action for improved working conditions and demands relating to pensions, pay and precarity in the sector (Weale and Al-Khalaf, 2020). These actions have been considerable, including (most recently) 14 days of strike action in February 2020. Strikes involve a withdrawal of labour (those on strike would not participate in any work-related activity) and are deliberately disruptive to normal institutional business. Such disruption is a key strategic tool for labour, and a means through which demands can be asserted and leverage gained in negotiations. In this instance, negotiations continue between the union and employers across the workers' demands. Similar actions are notable in other UK workplaces in recent times, with reports noting a considerable increase in strike action. A total of 96 public and private sector strikes were recorded in the public and private sector in 2019, a 45% rise on the previous year (Havelock, 2019). These strikes included multiple actions from workers organising in the highly precarious areas of the gig economy (whereby people are contracted to carry out short-term, usually temporary, work) and employment characterised by 'zero-hour' (casual, piece or on-call) contracts.

As well as engaging with the collective acts of organised labour, labour geographers have considered individual forms of action and suggested that labour in an experiential sense, can reflect more generally on social economic change. Most recently, this can be viewed through changes in the nature of work in post-industrial Britain. Political and economic change in recent decades, including processes of deindustrialisation, has resulted in significant UK labour market shifts. These shifts have significantly impacted those areas now considered old industrial regions whereby industrial workplaces no longer serve as fixing points within communities. These changes have undoubtedly impacted the depth and scale of trade union activity. Labour is increasingly fragmented in the UK, with service sector work more dominant and precarious working conditions prevalent. This shift has provided monumental change within economic landscapes and heavily impacted the role of trade unions, and it is the emerging labour organising responses to this challenge that the article begins to consider.

Within this context, work is substantially different now than it was 40 years ago with different skillsets required and a wider diversity of workers found within many workplaces. Linda McDowell (2009) has noted this with her indication of the increasing employer reliance on 'interactive embodied work' – as opposed to manual production forms of labour – and how this is associated with changing gender relations within and beyond the workplace. In terms of collective labour experiences and organising, labour geography is attentive to the impacts of macro-economic change, but feminist informed approaches have also provided a more grounded account of these changes, as

experienced within the workplace. In this regard, the micro-scale of workplace interactions and wider experiences within workers' lives become sites of interest for unpacking and understanding wider societal processes.

This sub-field, briefly introduced above, begins to foreground the significance of labour within economic geography. Debates continue regarding the nature of worker agency and how best to understand labour within wider macro-economic processes, such as whether workers can have tangible impact within global production networks. Most recently, emerging research has considered how labour geography might respond to the challenges posed by precarity (having insecure work and/or income; see Strauss, 2017), and the need to consider carefully how trade unions have adapted to meet changing circumstances (Holgate, 2018). Here I seek to introduce engagements with these developing research areas by acknowledging the potential insights to be gained from labour geography.

[A]North East England – challenging conditions for labour organising

A labour geography informed approach is pertinent for understanding the emergence of community unionism in the North East of England. The context of declining trade unionism has impacted communities associated with collective labour organising, while the loss of industrial workplaces still has a significant legacy. There are several studies indicating the prevalence of precarious work undertaken in the region, while the impacts of austerity have been noticeably harsh (Beatty and Fothergill, 2013). This context provides challenges for trade union organisers in the area, who face a declining union density and encounter workers and non-workers in precarious working conditions. These challenging conditions are extended by the difficulties of organising without the singular fixing place of a workplace to develop collective solidarities and campaigns.

The impacts of economic restructuring from the 1970s have left a significant legacy in the region (Hudson, 2005), including reduced trade union density as noted above. Deindustrialisation was hard felt with unemployment rising considerably during this period and while certain economic trends have been reversed in places, it is noticeable that the North East continues to witness higher than average levels of deprivation and unemployment (Clayton *et al.*, 2015). There is a considerable prevalence of precarity and insecurity in the region, with Shildrick *et al.* (2012) noting the cyclical nature of experiences of employment and unemployment, between what they describe as 'low pay' and 'no pay'. This regional context can be positioned within a wider economic context of austerity, whereby budgets for local government and services have been significantly reduced. Public services and charitable institutions in the North East have been disproportionately impacted by such changes. This political and economic context is one which trade unions must also navigate.

Unite is the second largest union in the UK with 1.4 million members. It arose from a series of mergers (notably between the Transport and General Workers Union and Amicus in 2007) and now represents workers across multiple industries. In December 2011, Unite announced it was to recruit 'non-workers' (retirees, students, unemployed) into the union. The initiative links to other similar attempts to connect work places with wider community organising practices and indicates a union response to the challenges introduced earlier. As well as indicating economic geographies, this change can also be framed in relation to the context noted above, with Jane Holgate commenting that the

'decision to open up Unite's membership to "non-workers" arose from seeing a grass roots response from different sections of society to the election of a neoliberal coalition government in 2010' (2018, p. 10). Unite Community has now grown to more than 10,000 members organised within 106 Branches nationally. The community-based approach provides a flexible model responding to local variations (through nine regional co-ordinators) and based upon members concerns, with the North East region having approximately 1400 members. While this might appear a relatively small membership when held in comparison to the more substantial industrial membership of the union, the community union organising approach has notably 'punched well above its weight' (Holgate, 2018, p. 12). Here, I briefly reflect upon Unite Community initiatives in the North East and highlight how labour organising through this model has potential to develop productive solidarities between workers and non-workers within precarious situations.

[A]North East community unionism – spaces of trade union renewal?

Unite Community has had a noticeable presence within the North East since 2012. Their campaigns, demonstrations and wider activities are based around a combination of support and advice sessions for those in precarious economic situations alongside related campaigning. Their activities have included collaborations and connections with existing forms of community organising practices in the region, such as those within the Tyne and Wear Centre Against Unemployment (TWCAU) to provide support for benefit claimants, lead campaigns around precarity and to develop related education programmes. The focus of this short intervention is to consider the impact of the initiative on community union members themselves and to highlight the range of related activities. This close engagement with members, primarily through interviews, is used to illuminate the potential for labour geographies to foreground social and economic issues, reflecting individual and collective experiences within changing economies.

Unite Community activities in the North East are fairly wide ranging and diverse, adapting to changing conditions, but they primarily revolve around engaging with precarity. Membership includes a variety of people considered 'economically inactive', including welfare claimants, students and retired members. It has become noticeable that the collective experience forged through trade union organising has fostered a sociability and confidence building amongst members. A recurring theme throughout community members interviews was a sense of potential empowerment through the organising model:

[start quote]'*The fact that Unite allows me to have a voice outside the workplace, when I was thrown on the scrapheap again and for people with health issues is absolutely excellent ... because every effort is made by Unite to get people involved. And empowerment. The one thing that our organisation want to do is to get people empowered so that they don't feel victims to the system, but that they can actually challenge it.*' (Unite Community Member interview, June 2018)[end]

Unite Community members made it clear that at, an individual level, trade union membership was a familiar, enabling and potentially empowering venture. This participant reflected upon the challenges faced when unemployed and indicates how the community organising model holds solidarity building potential. This sentiment was often shared and is indicative of the general strengths of a collective labour organising

approach, which in this instance is expanding beyond the workplace to include non-workers. This emphasis upon collective experiences often emerged with a specific emphasis upon sociability, and the community model as providing networks and contacts at times of potential social and economic isolation:

[start quote] *'I know that workers have never had less rights ... I have somewhere to go and they understand because I can go and rant at them and they know exactly what I am talking about. And even though they can't physically do anything, they can listen and they know because they've been through it and know other people that have.'* (Unite Community Member Interview, October 2019)[end]

The quote above is from a woman volunteer at the TWCAU who has been in precarious employment and received Universal Credit. She volunteers at the Centre and is a Unite Community member. Her emphasis upon having 'somewhere to go' and an empathetic listener is a key element of the related work. This is in marked contrast to the difficulties associated with labour market intermediaries such as job centres and welfare schemes such as Universal Credit. This sociability emerges through the variety of collective activities associated with the branch, which have developed in response to numerous economic and social matters within the region, particularly through alternative welfare advice and support. This collective experience is central to the trade union model, whereby personal difficulties and individual circumstances can be aggregated with those of others in similar situations.

[insert Figure 2 near here][caption]Figure 2: Promotional flyer for positive finance advice available at the TWCAU. [end]

These collective experiences include volunteering within the TWCAU and taking part in related campaigns. The Centre has consistently supported people with appeals against welfare decisions and has a notably high success rate.¹ Since its emergence, the branch has also been heavily involved with campaigns relating to changes to the welfare system (consistently opposing Universal Credit, for example), actions against the use of zero-hour contracts and actively supporting ongoing workplace disputes. One recent campaign centred upon 'positive finance'. Members printed and distributed 107,000 informing North Eastern communities about the financial benefits of credit unions and discouraging the use of payday loan lenders (see Figure 2). Their work directly contributed to over 100 people joining a credit union and it assisted 30 people with significant debts. In one case, an individual had their debts reduced by 95% due to collaborations with charities. These experiences reflect the wider realm of community organising, expanding traditional notions of trade unionism and indicating the potential micro-scale, sometimes personal, impacts of organising practices. These activities have been crucial in generating wider public scrutiny on these issues and have foregrounded some of the emerging inequalities during times of austerity. Keeping these issues, often impacting vulnerable groups, on the political agenda through campaigning activity has been a key motivation of members and they have been relatively successful in generating further scrutiny.²

There have been notable successes through the organising model with campaigns against workplace conditions contributing to a wider awareness of the issues raised and the establishment of government reviews into workplace practices. This success is not solely down to the campaigners here, but, rather, a multitude of diverse forms of activism. The community organising approach has many strengths evident from individual experience as members but also provides a more collective approach to challenging political issues. This ability for the community union model to illuminate and contest the economic challenges and precarity in the UK reflects the emergent role of labour geographies through community organising. The examples considered here, alongside the brief reflections raised above, begin to reflect the enduring nature of labour as a significant influence within economic landscapes. Indeed, recent growth in trade union membership reveals the persistence of the organising model. The article concludes with some comments on this wider significance and points to the continued resonance of a labour geography approach.

[A]Labour geographies: changing places and uncertain work futures

The empirical vignettes raised above suggest the possibilities for solidarity across those in and out of work. The organising and collective experiences associated with a range of labour activities indicates a potentially wide-ranging impact of worker and non-worker action. That said, the activities must be contextualised within the present political conjuncture and the wider structural conditions within which these acts are found. This article notes the decline in UK trade union density and this challenge is reflected in the scale of activities considered above (e.g. smaller actions and the extent of community membership), alongside the challenging funding environment for community initiatives within an austerity context. As such, it is important to recognise the often defensive nature of community campaigns and not to romanticise the activities by recognising the conditions within which they are found.

In this regard, the actions outlined here can be considered both as a reflection of the transformative experiences of labour organising and as a wider set of challenges associated with the role of trade unionism. The examples raised are considered above with two key arguments in mind. Firstly, the article has looked to use labour geographies as an alternative way of engaging with the economy. The organising experiences found within community unions are illustrative of this as they foreground the individual experiences of participating within community organising through support and campaigning activity. This begins to indicate the potential for workers and non-workers to have agency within economic landscapes. Secondly, the article also begins to illustrate how these experiences, found within a relatively small trade union initiative, are reflective of much wider social, political and economic trends. The experiences considered here are symptomatic of wider economic processes, with participant comments reflecting anxieties regarding austerity, precarity and insecurity. The emphasis within the article has primarily been upon emerging resistant acts of collective solidarity, but the wider purpose here is to introduce the theoretical lens of labour geography, which has much potential for the study of changing places.

[A]Notes

1. TWCAU members anecdotally suggested that they are currently assisting 200 'live cases' and claimed an overall appeal success rate of over 70%, which would be in line with national averages (see Butler, 2019).
2. Scrutiny includes the 2015 Parliamentary inquiry into working practices at Sports Direct (see Parliament, 2015) and campaigns include Unite's *Stop Universal Credit* (see Unite the Union, 2019).

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[auth panel]Paul Griffin is Senior Lecturer in the Department of Geography and Environmental Sciences at Northumbria University, Newcastle, UK (email: paul.griffin@northumbria.ac.uk).<end>