

# Unemployed Workers' Centres (1978–): Spatial Politics, “Non-Movement”, and the Making of Centres

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**Abstract:** This paper revisits the histories of Unemployed Workers' Centres to consider the politicisation of unemployment in the UK. Drawing upon archive material and over 50 oral histories, it considers the emergence of centres as a response to a crisis of increasing unemployment and retrenchment of the welfare state. The paper indicates how Asef Bayat's concept of “non-movement” proves useful for capturing a wider sphere of labour organising, moving beyond more conventional spaces and actions. This approach critically revisits the role of centres in conversation with emerging work in labour geography and social movements studies around the fostering of solidarities. It reveals tensions around their making, whilst also stressing the potential of seemingly small acts when held alongside campaigns. Revisiting this repertoire of activity reveals the persistence of trade union engagements with communities beyond the workplace, as well as a critical insight into the politics of space in forging such alternatives.

**Keywords:** Unemployed Workers' Centres, unemployment, labour geography, presence, non-movement

## Introduction

On 1 May 1981, over 250 unemployed people departed from Liverpool for London on the People's March for Jobs. En route they were joined by parallel regional marchers from elsewhere across the UK and on their arrival into London a month later, became part of a crowd conservatively estimated to be 50,000, with a further 50,000 waiting in Trafalgar Square (Heren 1981). These actions reflected a growing political mobilisation around unemployment from a wide range of collective groupings, including the trade union movement. March organisers captured the spirit of the march, through comparison with hunger marches that campaigned against the widespread poverty of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century:

Ours is a different army. The young unemployed now descending on London may not have starved ... Skinheads from Bolton, punks from Manchester, the mother and her unemployed son from Whaley Bridge, blacks from London and their older marching companions; what brings them together is the cry for work and dignity. (Co-ordinators of the People's March for Jobs 1981)

This campaign was complemented by emerging efforts from the trade union movement to support and advise those people experiencing unemployment, redundancy, and the challenges posed by changes to the welfare state. Unemployed Workers' Centres (hereafter UWCs) were established as a collective response to these challenges, through campaigns on related issues and by providing support for individuals as they encountered challenges associated with their labour market inactivity.<sup>1</sup>

The associated organising and responses to unemployment have received relatively little scholarly attention, particularly when held in comparison with earlier periods of organising associated with the National Unemployed Workers' Movement, or studies of welfare retrenchment by the state and wider analyses of labour market regulations (Peck 1996; Perry 2000; Pierson 1994). It is argued here, though, that these connected activities reflected an emergent form of solidarity and resistance within a context of emerging neoliberalism, and sustained through a period of deindustrialisation and trade union decline (see also Kelliher 2021). In doing so, the paper brings to the fore a politics of space in reflecting on the role of centres as cutting across trade union and community organising (Perrett and Martinez Lucio 2009). As noted further below, such histories can connect with a wider spatial politics that forged creative and persistent alternatives within a period often characterised by industrial and trade union decline (see also Payling 2014).

Asserting the histories of such spaces is crucial within a period that witnessed 17 significant changes, between 1979 and 1988, to unemployment benefits, including the ending of earning-related supplement, the abolition of lower rate benefits, and an extension of the disqualification period (Pierson 1994). This becomes particularly meaningful given the UK unemployed statistics at the time, where 2.4 million people were unemployed in January 1981.<sup>2</sup> Nationally, unemployment rose consistently over 10% in the 1980s and regional variations revealed high concentrations of unemployment in the areas considered here, with unemployment on Merseyside reaching 21.5% in 1986, as opposed to 14.1% nationally (Marren 2016:34). Such changes to unemployed benefit reflected a longer trajectory of general tightening of UK welfare spending over a 30-year period with the percentage of GDP spent on unemployment reducing from 1.95% in 1983 to 0.76% in 1989, and 0.29% in 2000 (OECD 2021). These trends, which have yet to be reversed, reflected a significant policy shift, primarily to the detriment of the unemployed. However, these increasingly harsh conditions were continually contested in multiple ways throughout this period.

This paper traces some of this contestation through one emergent set of organising practices during this time and in doing so speaks across ongoing reflections within the fields of labour geography and social movements studies. The establishment of UWCs was aligned with broader campaigning around rising unemployment and reflected a sustained contestation of the growing inequality caused by industrial closures, redundancies and long-term unemployment (Hudson and Williams 1989). As such, UWCs hold wider potential in examining the role of centres and community organising within constraining social economic landscapes. It is argued here that the combination of organising with groups of people

considered “unemployed” and the related provision of welfare advice, as well as the availability of social spaces within centres, provides a unique insight into associated organising within 1980s Britain. This more agentic sense of a “reserve army of labour” cuts across a range of activities, which in their aggregation reflects a sustained and collective history of an organising presence within deindustrialising communities (High 2013; Lawson 2020).

The paper raises the possibility for resistance formations to contest the impacts of unemployment and for rethinking the moral economy of welfare controls (Koch 2021). A key argument here is that the spaces and activists considered indicate how organising practices connected beyond the work place with notions of dignity building, as raised in the quote above from the People's March for Jobs. The paper continues with a conceptual link with labour geography, due to connections between UWCs and the trade union movement, before specifically an introduction of Asef Bayat's (1997, 2005, 2013) understanding of “non-movement” as a means through which some centre activities might be conceptualised. An engagement with Bayat's work is positioned as central to the paper's foregrounding of a wider realm of trade union activity, beyond the workplace and within communities, as reflecting a politics of space as found within the centres.

### **Labour Geographies, Presence, and “Non-Movement”**

The histories of UWCs, as well as the connected realm of unemployed organising and campaigning during the 1980s, provides opportunities for further conceptual discussions around labour geography, agency, and moral economies (Hastings 2016). Labour geography's emphasis upon workers' ability to contest and change their material conditions and to shape political and economic geographies from below, provides avenues for similar, albeit differentiated through the fragmented nature of unemployment, reflections around trade union and community responses to unemployment (see Griffin 2021; Herod 2001). Closer attention to unemployed resistance can introduce a more agentic sense of unemployment, indicating how labour organising might respond to broader conjunctural forms of crisis in a plurality of ways. Mark Reiff (2015:12) highlights a renewed need for this in his theoretical unpacking of unemployment, foregrounding how dominant approaches:

take the matter on as a technical problem requiring a purely technical solution and imply that once we have decided that unemployment is worth reducing, morality has nothing relevant to say about the matter of how we should go about doing so.

He points towards a privileging of an economic, non-experiential, and passive framing of unemployment and suggests how alternative visions might reinterpret it. By foregrounding alternative visions and a plurality of trade union and community responses to rising unemployment, this paper recognises the agency and voice of a perspective often present, but largely unheard, within scholarship relating to deindustrialisation, unemployment, and societal stigma (see also Tyler 2020).

UWCs provided a manifestation of a “working-class presence” within urban environments that aimed to resist the associated “slow violence” of deindustrialisation and the severe consequences of unemployment found within these communities (Crossan et al. 2016; Kelliher 2021; Pain 2019). It is suggested here that these alternative activities might be considered through a spatial politics whereby “spaces and the physical documentation of radical politics (pamphlets, leaflets, newspapers, etc.)” are foregrounded in their “production and assertion of a working-class presence” (Featherstone and Griffin 2016:383). In 1982, one UWC organiser noted the role of centres in his contribution at a conference establishing the Merseyside centre:

John Nettleton ... explained how the centres had been set up following the People’s March for Jobs. Facilities and activities differed from one Centre to the next, some concentrated on Education, some on Welfare Rights, etc. ... He felt that the question of unemployment had been a political football for too long. There was a need to involve the unemployed in the activities of the Trade Union movement. (Merseyside Trade Union Community and Unemployed Resource Centre, The Inaugural Conference, 17 January 1982)<sup>3</sup>

By 1983, over 200 centres had opened, providing advice, support, and organising spaces as well as recruiting activists and mobilising campaigns, such as the second People’s March for Jobs in 1983. This paper revisits UWC histories and in doing so develops a wider commentary around centres as radical infrastructures (Kelliher 2021), questioning the role of space in shaping distinctive forms, and combinations, of unemployed organising. The historical approach here, combining archives and oral histories, encourages further reflection on how related solidarities are forged, maintained, (dis)connected, and restricted.

The paper connects with work around unemployed activism and campaigning, as well as reflections relating to the potential for reciprocities and solidarity between trade unions and community organising, particularly those associated across “work” and “non-work” (Holgate 2021). The experience found in Northern England in the 1980s is suggestive of some of the openings and tensions in extending the reach of trade unionism beyond the workplace (Perrett and Martinez Lucio 2009). The actions and activism considered here include drop-in visits and individual case work, as well as more collective organising strategies, for example solidarity at picket lines and protests against the actions of job intermediaries. The combination of these actions is indicative of a reimagining of what it is to be unemployed and asked moral questions of the associated stigmatising processes.

To conceptualise the activities found within these UWC histories, the paper draws upon the above literatures alongside a reading of Asef Bayat’s (2013) concept of “non movement”. It is argued here that an attentiveness to the wide-ranging practices found within UWCs illuminates more typical *movement* type actions (campaigning, organising, demonstrating, and mobilising) alongside a quieter politics of *non-movement* (advice, listening, interactions, and friendships) which might build empathetic and dignifying political spaces. A closer examination of these practices allows further reflection on the moral complexities of

organising practices in such areas, similar to those found in other welfare advice settings (see Koch 2021), and begins to address what Castree (2007) posed as a key challenge for thinking through moralities within labour geography. As explored below, this is suggestive of both openings and challenges for left-wing political formations and connects closely with contemporary efforts by trade unions to develop “more socially orientated responses” (Martinez Lucio 2017:89).

The inclusion of Bayat here offers a new insight for labour geography by drawing attention to actions and organising that has been less visible within the sub-discipline. Most noticeably, Bayat (1997, 2013) situates his work in the authoritarian contexts of the Middle East, drawing attention, for example, to poor people's movements. His research in Iran, and wider commentaries on the Arab Spring, points towards resistance formations that are largely defined by an absence of organising structure or leadership, particularly where more “official” lines of organising have been suppressed. Here, the association of UWCs with the UK trade union movement, and wider forces of the political left, suggests differences in their application. The paper recognises these distinctions and does not situate all activities or actors as neatly fitting this framework, but instead suggests that the conceptual value of “non-movement” is found in capturing the quieter and uncoordinated experiences found within UWCs. More specifically, it enables a closer study of the dynamics between individual strategies and collective action, as has been reflected upon by Sanchis (2016) in his reflections on Spanish unemployed organising.

An attentiveness to such practices is insightful for an exploration of agency within the structural conditions of deindustrialisation and welfare retrenchment. Here, the constraints of redundancy and changing welfare systems provide a backdrop for the more defensive actions of welfare advice work and the sociability found within the centres considered. Bayat (2013:20–21) describes such fragmented agency in his account of “non-movement”:

Thus, theirs is not a politics of protest, but of practice, of redress through direct and disparate actions ... unlike social movements, where actors are involved usually in *extraordinary* deeds of mobilization and protestation ... the nonmovements are made up of practices that merged into, indeed are part and parcel of, the *ordinary* practices of everyday life.

Emphasis below is placed upon service provision such as advice work and listening, as well as the connected realm of campaigns and solidarities. Centres had welfare advice workers and volunteers who interacted with centre users and assisted with their relatively ordinary practices of engaging with the welfare state. Many of these actions did not constitute the formal organising route (of membership, meetings, activism, etc.) but must still be considered crucial in characterising life within centres.

Here, Bayat's (2013:20) emphasis upon practices, which produce “redress through direct and disparate actions”, might provide a language through which the potentially disparate encounters with UWCs can be captured. His emphasis upon those acts less extraordinary might contrast with some work on labour geographies and the political left. UWC histories are suggestive of some of these

quieter, “non-movement”, spatial politics. Some of the experiences found might connect broadly with Koopman’s (2011) work around the role of accompaniment, where claimants are supported through their encounters with the state. The account below offers an alternative perspective to such encounters, as framed through a trade union sensibility that linked with a broader political left culture of antagonism and resistance, as emergent during this period in the places mentioned here but also other UK cities, such as Sheffield (Payling 2014).

In doing so, it is suggested that labour geography might benefit from some further reflection on the historical role of trade unions within society and community spaces. Similar claims have been prominent within works around community unions that have continually stressed the relationship between trade unions and society, stretching the politics of labour beyond the workplace (Holgate 2021). The UWCs provide one such insight, engaging with “employment and labour struggle not in themselves but as windows onto the *wider* question of how people live and seek to live” (Castree 2007:859). This more holistic approach to labour, moving beyond more familiar workplace studies and to include non-workers, provides room to include a broader range of activity, potentially including those of “non-movement”, as explored further below.

More recently, Roca (2020:1212) has considered the socio-spatial relations within worker centre environments, identifying political dimensions, contradictions, and dilemmas within such spaces:

[T]here is no single political geography of worker centres. Strategies are the result of ideologies (expressed in logics of action) and adaptation to the political and industrial contexts in the deregulated sectors in which they operate ... Each strategy has its strong points, but each entails significant contradictions and dilemmas. Paying attention to socio-spatial relations of alternative forms of labour activism can enrich our reflection on the possibilities for the revitalisation of the workers’ movement in contemporary capitalism.

Roca’s work usefully points towards a closer analysis of centre dynamics and is suggestive of the potential openings and tensions explored further below, particularly with regards to the pluralities of activities found within the centres, as similarly considered here. An attentiveness towards the micro, the everyday experiences found within centres, in this case UWCs, might lead towards examples of more typical movement activity but also acts (such as representation and listening) that might be framed as “non-movement”. Bayat’s concept of “non-movement” is perhaps most useful for linking such activities together and characterising some of the actions explored through archives and oral histories. Again, such insights begin to reveal a politics of space that is complex and contested, drawing attention to the dynamics of trade union intervention, specifically those that might be include both servicing and organising (Sanchis 2016).

### **Small Acts, Presence, and “Struggle Communities”**

The advice and support found within centre histories is not necessarily oppositional or antagonistic, in a binary sense of domination and resistance. Instead,



these acts reflected enduring acts of care and empathy, providing alternatives within often violent structural conditions (Gibson-Graham 1996). Such actions have not always been at the forefront of labour geography or labour history, yet are noteworthy for holding radical potential as Bayat (2013:28) again describes in his account of “non-movement”:

[I]t opens up wholly new possibilities to explore unnoticed social practices that may in fact be harbinger of significant social changes. It helps uncover the logic of practice among dispersed and distant collectives ... It tells us how people, manage, resist and subvert domination through widespread collective (if fragmented) practices.

Clearly, some of the organising already introduced and considered further below does not fit with this narrative. The People's March for Jobs, for example, had a resource and organising structure (including those of trades councils and political parties) that more typically fits with a labour movement infrastructure. Yet, the foregrounding of “non-movement” and Bayat's (2005) related notions of “imagined solidarity” are perhaps more appropriate to characterise the daily work found within centres. It might allow an illumination of the fragmented, intangible connections between the different centres and communities, extending ideas of solidarity infrastructures within everyday life (Bayat 1997, 2005). Bayat's understanding offers a language through which the more transitory and disconnected acts of UWCs might be understood alongside one another. Crucially for the purposes of this paper, it is the combination of acts of care *and* campaigning, which might be found on a continuum of movement and “non-movement”, which established UWCs as a distinctive organising presence within the places they were found.

An attentiveness to fragmented communities is pertinent here as there is no singular “unemployed” group with labour market inactivity much wider than those that are statistically measured as unemployed through welfare claims (Taylor 2015). In this regard, the imagined connections and fostering of solidarities between those with caring responsibilities, those who recently lost work, or the long-term unemployed was central to the role of many UWCs. Bayat's theorisation can speak to a wider notion of agency, linking with a feminist approach that illuminates acts of care as found within centres (Gibson-Graham 1996). Here, the concept of “non-movement”, when held alongside more “traditional” narratives of labour organising, might prove productive for a further unpacking of working class presences as solidarity infrastructures. The centres provide alternative narratives of this period of social-economic change, which are crucial for stressing the historical significance of UWCs as reflecting the “resistance of communities to deindustrialization” as well as broader politicisation of unemployment (Emery 2019:4).

Arampatzi's (2017:47) commentary on emerging approaches to social movements provides a related lens through which such acts might be included within accounts of spatial politics. Her work points to a more processual and relational understanding, marking an “analytical shift—from seeing social movement as ‘event’ or ‘spectacle’ to understanding social movement as a ‘process’ grounded

in the ‘everyday’ and ‘quotidian’”. This shift in emphasis allows her to stress the conceptual potential in “struggle communities”:

[T]he grounding of alternatives, no matter how fragile, contradictory, hybrid or limited, produce new ways of praxis, new vocabularies that subvert the neoliberal “common sense” and open up to changing the way things are “said and done”. (Arampatzi 2017:55)

Whilst her commentary leans empirically towards community organising, it might also illuminate historical organising strategies that have perhaps been less well recognised. In this regard, the notion of “struggle communities” can be read alongside the work of Bayat. Indeed, the notion of “non-movement” might similarly connect with ideas of struggle communities and presence, allowing, for example, the recognition that an “act of giving” (e.g. welfare provision), is simultaneously an “act of getting” (e.g. small acts assisting navigations of the welfare state as a bureaucratic system), something which E.P. Thompson foregrounded as a “history from below” (cited in Sarkar 1997:58). This language allows a fuller portrayal of trade union and community organising, to include small acts, large demonstrations, and a continuum of actions in between.

### **Unemployed Workers’ Centres (1978)**

The first Unemployed Workers’ Centre officially launched at 5 Queen Street, Newcastle, in 1978, following a series of meetings in 1977. The Newcastle Trades Council Centre for the Unemployed opened with the ambition to be a space where unemployed people could meet, access resources and support, as well as providing an organising resource for associated campaigns, connecting workers and non-workers (see Figure 1).<sup>4</sup> Reflecting on their second year, the centre’s annual report described their role as platforming a “voice for the unemployed”, blending together the “mass of day to day issues and queries which crop up among working people, created by the variety of economic and social pressures arising under the present system” and handling cases on behalf of “redundant workers or long term claimants; school leavers or young unemployed”.<sup>5</sup> The report continually emphasises, though, that this advice work was not to detract from the wider campaigning role of the centre:

We have stressed throughout our Second Report on Newcastle Trades Council’s Centre for the Unemployed that a major role of the Centre is as a voice and focus for the continuous struggle to ensure society realises the true facts of unemployment. We shall continue to tackle the “scrounger” myth and we shall continue to build-in the closest alliance with Trades Unionists.

Similar organising practices had been historically present across the UK, including the National Unemployed Workers’ Movement and the hunger marches of the 1920s and 1930s, as well as Trades Council Unemployed Associations and credit unions in latter periods. Whilst undoubtedly linked to a longer tradition, the emergence of the UWCs can be considered as a relatively distinctive initiative with dedicated spaces emerging through the official trade union movement. This was





**Figure 1:** Newcastle Unemployed Workers' Centre mural (image published here with permission from Derbyshire Unemployed Workers' Centres) [Color figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/anti.12899)]

particularly significant as trade union support for similar movements in the 1920s and 1930s was often limited, and sometimes overtly oppositional. Such opposition often centred upon an anti-communism sentiment as found in parts of the official trade union movement in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Watson 2014).

The Trades Union Congress (TUC) supported an expansion of UWCs based upon the experiences in Newcastle and political challenges of the time. In response, the TUC produced guidelines and resources, through regional trades councils, to help establish centres. The TUC President Lionel Murray pledged a commitment to the centres in a letter instructing all affiliated unions and trades councils:

- affiliated unions should do all that they can to retain and recruit more of the unemployed, and to publicise union services available to unemployed members;
- there should be an action programme for the development of unemployed workers' centres throughout the country.<sup>6</sup>

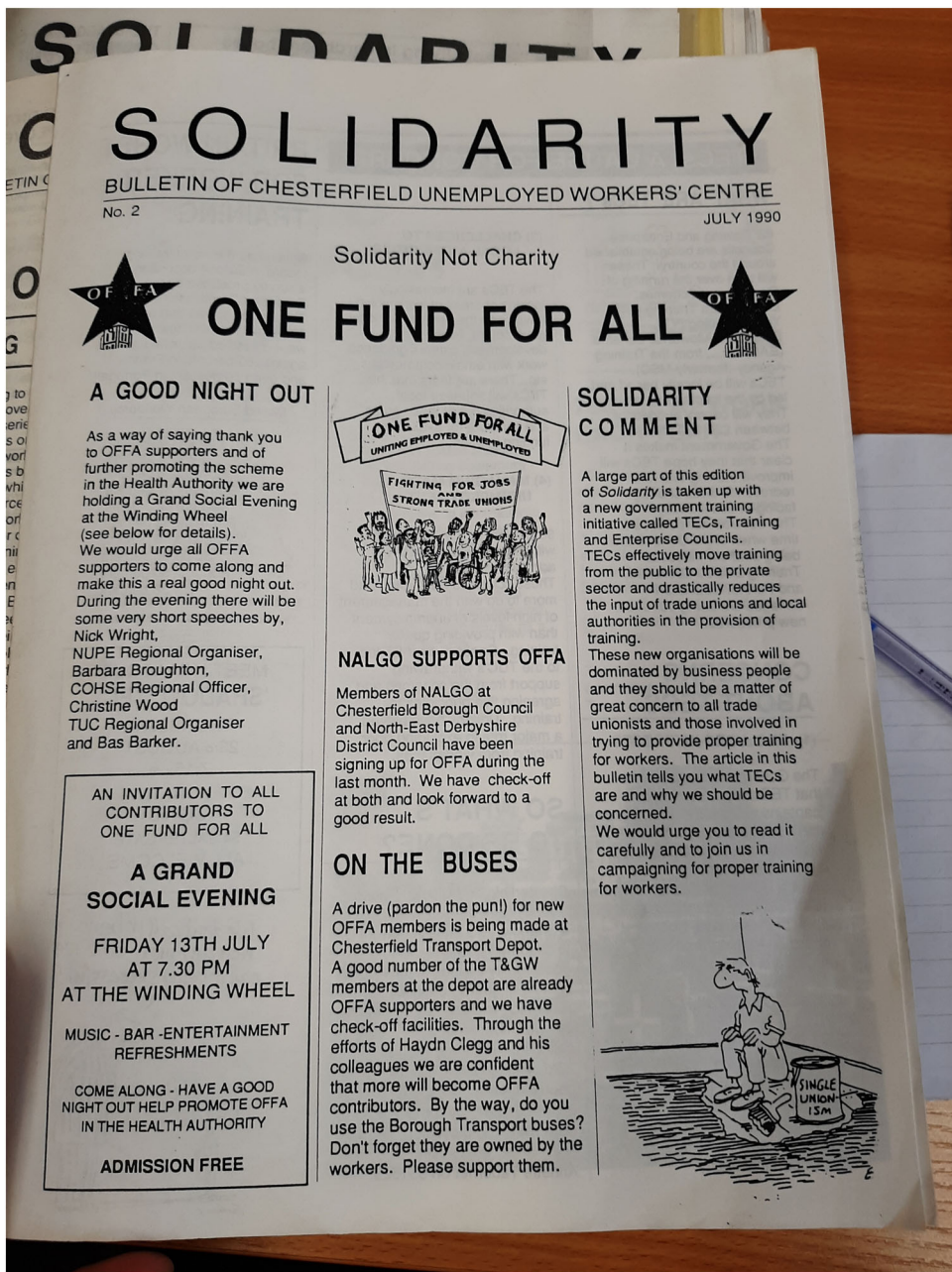
Regional co-ordinators were established and Ralph Don was later appointed as a full-time national development officer. TUC support for the initiative was prominent within conferences yet wider moves for greater involvement, participation and membership of the unemployed within Congress remained a source of considerable tension.<sup>7</sup>

By 1982, the UWC *Bulletin* reported 150 centres had opened, increasing to 210 centres by 1985, before a significant number of closures in the latter period of the decade. In this regard, it is important to acknowledge that each centre has its own history and there were undoubtedly regional variances and divergences in approach. Indeed, as Kelliher (2017:599) notes, the centres were often a source of considerable tension within the labour movement, as “[t]here was no settled opinion on their function, with some trade unionists inclined to see the centres as relatively apolitical providers of services to people out of work”. As such, caution is required in attempting to generalise UWC histories, which could become limited in political reach and constrained by both their location and funding arrangements. One oral history interview with a centre co-ordinator during the 1980s, for example, noted that an UWC in Bacup, whilst providing crucial community services, “couldn’t be political” and instead focused upon the provision of social space and welfare advice, due to constraints from their state funder, the Manpower Services Commission.

In contrast, other centres were overtly “political” in much of their activity. These centres often held independent revenue streams and were sometimes able to distinguish between activities, perhaps most noticeably on Merseyside where a One Fund For All (OFFA) project generated a significant proportion of centre income by levying trade union members in the region to support initiatives. In 1986, for example, £120,000 was raised by OFFA for centres in the Merseyside region.<sup>7</sup> A key emphasis for these centres with greater autonomy was the logic of “solidarity not charity” as articulated in pamphlets, bulletins and wider documentation (see Figure 2).<sup>8</sup> Thus, as Kelliher (2017) acknowledges in his linking of UWCs and the 1984–5 miners’ strike, many centres were notable for their sustained provision of advice alongside acts of solidarity and resistance. In most recent times for example, the Derbyshire UWCs (which remain open, like the Tyne and Wear centre) have reclaimed millions of pounds with claimants through support work and advice during tribunals and appeals, as well as linking with multiple actions against related austerity measures (Griffin 2021). As such, to write a singular history of the UWCs would be inaccurate, as many took divergent paths in the use of their space and approach to funding.

## Oral Histories and Archives of Unemployed Organising

This paper focuses upon particular regional geographies, where centres combined and shared experiences, and held some continuity in their principles and roles. The research below draws primarily upon materials from Northern England, including the Newcastle Centre Against Unemployment (North East), Derbyshire Unemployed Workers’ Centres (Midlands), and the Merseyside Trade Union, Community and Unemployed Resource Centre (North West). These centres worked alongside each other through networks within a wider “Combine” that established links and connections between their key organisers in 1986. These networks reflected similarities in their principles and activities. Whilst not suggesting a homogenous history, it is possible to identify shared experiences and analyse their activities thematically. Each centre was located within an area that might now be



**Figure 2:** *Solidarity Bulletin*, July 1990—"Solidarity Not Charity" (image published here with permission from Derbyshire Unemployed Workers' Centres) [Color figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

described as an Old Industrial Region, and shared commonalities in the challenges faced through industrial closure and high concentrations of unemployment during the early 1980s.



This research project draws upon five years of engagement with Unemployed Workers' Centres. The research below emerges from a more sustained engagement with their history, as supported by a small research grant since 2020. Central to this research has been collaboration with key organisers within the remaining UWC organising structure, including Colin Hampton (Chesterfield) and Kevin Flynn (Newcastle). They have been key participants but have also acted as gatekeepers for over fifty oral history interviews with UWC organisers, volunteers, activists, and "service users". Many participants have held multiple roles, including some who had moved from service user to volunteer to paid staff. In this regard, there are individual lives here who hold potential as a "connective device" (Hodder 2017:456), providing a biographical insight into a history of activism whereby some individuals have committed decades of their lives to sustaining centres. The project intends to make selected oral histories publicly available at the end of the research, as one means to illuminate the story telling found within the alternative narratives.

Oral history interviews have proved particularly productive in revealing the personal, emotional and experiential dimensions of UWC life (Hampton 2022). These interviews are complemented below with archival material (including annual reports, pamphlets, and campaign materials) held at the Modern Records Centre, the Labour History Archive and Study Centre, and the TUC Special Collections. The combination of these sources allowed further analysis of individual and shared memories of UWCs as organising spaces. Interview data has been analysed through a coding exercise, identifying patterns and trends across the data with a particular focus on UWCs as political spaces. This analysis has been shared with, and shaped by, participants in the project, including collaborative workshops that discussed timeline building and emerging themes with participants from the project. Some of these themes are discussed below to illuminate the politics of space within UWCs and a historical geography of efforts to politicise unemployment.

## Establishing Unemployed Workers' Centres

Following the conferences and communications noted above, TUC affiliated UWCs began to open across the UK, operating under the following umbrella guidelines 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.<sup>9</sup>

A survey of centres in 1981 indicated, though, that there was a varied approach to addressing these guidelines.<sup>10</sup> The survey of 21 emerging centres, at a moment when they were growing in number, revealed a variable age demographic of centre users, and suggested contrasting emphases with regards to advice work, social functions, education, and campaigning. This variation in roles

was commented upon across the oral history interviews, and is suggestive of the ambiguous and sometimes uncertain role of community organising in challenging circumstances, as similarly identified by Williams et al. (2016) in their research around food banks in austerity Britain. In the case of UWCs, activity was often dependent on funding arrangements, centre leadership, and regional political cultures. A centre dependent upon Manpower Services Commission funding, for example, could be limited in terms of political work which might undermine their funding agreement. In contrast, some centres developed independent revenue streams (e.g. OFFA), or had more flexible funding relationships with local authorities, and were often less constrained in terms of their campaigning.

A second survey considered these activities in more detail in 1988. Forrester et al. (1988) captured the activities found within centres with their research reaching 115 centres. Their report stated that there was 353 full time, 446 part time, and 509 volunteers staffing the centres surveyed, with a gender balance of 58% male and 42% female. They also revealed the breadth of work found within centres, as well as the “main emphasis” of their activities. 57% of UWCs identified “advice work” as their main emphasis, with 19% citing “education” and 11.5% “campaigning”. Centres also appeared to be well used, with 53 centres having over 100 people visit weekly, leading the research team to conclude that if this rate of use was maintained, 10,000 unemployed people would be in contact with UWCs per week. Whilst acknowledging the challenges of advice work, oral histories regularly commented upon the importance of a shared emphasis between advice and wider activities, and this appeared to be supported through the survey, whereby a further 47% of centres identified education or campaigning as their second emphasis. This combination of individualised advice work with wider forms of collective activity, whether through education work or campaigning, was a distinctive feature of many UWCs, including those considered in more detail here.

The work of UWCs in these areas emerged with a trade union sensibility which informed much of the centres' activity at a time where trade unionism was facing considerable challenges posed by industrial closure and anti-union legislative change. Kevin Flynn, who since 1982 has been involved as a volunteer, activist, and co-ordinator of the Tyne and Wear UWC, described how the centres developed with significant trade union influence. Describing his experiences, he commented that:

... a lot of people who I've spoken to were active in their workplace, as shop stewards, and when they found themselves without a job they found a way, the TUC Unemployed Workers' Centres, were a way of continuing that. So where you would have championed the rights of people in work, you found yourself championing the rights of people out of work. Both in the sense of campaigning for more jobs but also out of solidarity. (Oral history with Kevin Flynn)

Such characterisations are suggestive of how an exploration of UWCs might reveal alternative narratives of deindustrialisation, identifying a sustained form of community activism and generative acts of resistance and solidarity. The distinctive feature here was the combination of activities found, including acts of advice,

representation, and campaigning. The practices considered reflect a trade union sensibility as noted above and might align with more contemporary efforts to build and mobilise trade union and community reciprocities (Holgate 2021). The next empirical section unpacks this sensibility further by drawing attention to UWCs as spaces of care *and* campaigning.

## Spaces of Care / Spaces of Campaigning

As suggested in the survey data explored above, activities within centres could broadly be characterised across a continuum of two connected aims, individual advice work and collective activity, including campaigning and education. The advice work provided support for individuals in navigating the welfare system. This might be advice to those facing redundancy, support in completing an application to receive benefits, or accompaniment through an appeal process. In practice, this resulted in welfare advice work as well as a series of other services, such as those found at the large (0.93 acres) Merseyside UWC at 24 Hardman Street in Liverpool. The centre here had numerous resources, including a music venue (The Flying Picket) and recording studio, library, office space, and crèche. In this regard, the facilities could be considered as constituting a working-class presence as previously discussed (Thompson 1963). Most pertinently here, like at the other sites considered, there was a very clear emphasis upon the importance of advice work and listening, alongside campaigning. Welfare rights worker Bob Towers commented on his role in the late 1980s, within the Welfare Rights Advice Centre which operated independently in Liverpool as a tenant of the UWC. He notes their response to changes made by the Secretary of State for Employment in the late 1980s:

Norman Fowler reviewed the benefits system, and it all became much worse, you know, because they wanted to save money. But advice workers at that time could get people huge amounts of money because we just knew what the entitlements were, and people had never been told this. (Oral history with Bob Towers, 2021)

Similar work was ongoing in centres across England, whereby centre users would receive individualised support and advice. Derbyshire UWCs have more recently begun to quantify and measure the economic value of this work and indicated how each year their support and advice contributes annually towards over a million pounds of aggregated claims in the local economy (Griffin 2021). These actions can be linked to the notion of welfare advice as “a bulwark against” market driven reforms (Koch 2021:256), but importantly here the acts of care are forged from below. The support offered is also suggestive of dignity building in quieter ways whereby claimants are guided through accessing, and where necessary appealing for, their entitlements.

A wider array of activities, including art classes, library facilities, and sporting activities within UWCs was also evident, suggestive of a trade union sensibility that connects with a wider sphere of everyday life (Castree 2007). Beyond these acts of welfare advice, the social spaces, such as The Flying Picket pub in Liverpool, provided examples of social spaces within centres, which could be



considered crucial in challenging the fragmented and isolated nature of unemployment. The nature of these spaces would be shaped by a centre committee, with a wide range of services and groups found in different localities, including the women's advice groups against domestic violence in Coventry and Chelmsford, the computer classes in Stockton-on-Tees, and the sports and arts initiatives found in Chesterfield.<sup>11</sup> Such community and trade union crossovers, as found within centre spaces, are testament to an emergent political left culture that shifted the sphere of trade unionism beyond the workplace in the 1980s (Paying 2014).

Some centre activities might also be considered as limited and constrained when framed through the organising, and often collective, language of labour geography, but it is suggested here that some of the “non-movement” based centre activities (e.g. the provision of social space, acts of listening and advice) might be considered as holding organising potential, whilst also providing fundamental foundations to wider co-ordinating strategies (Bayat 2013). Oral history interviews regularly stressed the significance of this, foregrounding UWCs as spaces of listening and empathy in providing advice and support, but also positioning the acts as central to contesting these conditions:

You can't find out what the problems that people are facing who are out of work unless you offer advice. So you have to offer advice, but when they come in, we're not just gonna sit there in a bovine fashion and just say well, we can help with that, we can't help with that, you can claim that, you can't claim with that. If we saw that there was an injustice, then our job was to get people together to do something about that injustice. (Oral history with Colin Hampton, 2021)

In many ways, centres acted as a nodal point for unemployed support and organising throughout the 1980s, providing connections between a largely fragmented and diverse group, as described above. The archival evidence and oral histories were suggestive of fragmented experiences, from individual bureaucratic navigations, to social activities and campaigns. In this regard, much of the activity found within the histories of UWCs might be considered as practices of “non-movement”. The quotidian histories of the centres, of micro-interactions, including advising, counselling and socialising aligns more with the “everyday encroachment” that has proved so central to Bayat's (2013) theorisation. Indeed, many of the actions found do not easily lend themselves to the vocabulary of labour geography in terms of collective organising. Instead, the actions might be more easily linked with Bayat's (2013:20) understanding which points towards “the collective actions of noncollective actors” that “tend to be action-orientated, rather than ideologically driven; they are overwhelmingly quiet, rather than audible, since the claims are made largely individually rather than by united groups”.

Acknowledged in these more open terms, this repertoire of actions might speak to an intangible set of connections and imaginaries that inform solidarities. Yet, the range of activities also provided a potential tension around the role of centres, revealing the challenges of labour and community organising crossovers, as well as the possible conflicts when working across advice work, maintaining centres and making movements. Here the “multi-faceted nature of community politics”

can prove challenging for trade union approaches (Perrett and Martinez Lucio 2009), reflecting the possible tensions between sites of service provision and organising spaces. Such tensions and possibilities are shared by a wider sphere of welfare and advice work, as more recently commented upon by work focusing on third sector responses to austerity (Dagdeviren et al. 2019). This potential tension, considered further in a section below, related to the distinctive feature of the centres considered which was found in balancing the combination of advice work with campaigning activities.

Alongside these small acts of listening, advice and the provision of social space, the centres considered here are noteworthy for their political commitment to related campaigns. These active organising efforts can be broadly characterised in two regards; first campaign and organising work centred upon those issues faced most closely by the unemployed, and second those actions characteristic of a solidarity between workers and non-workers. Multiple actions were prominent throughout the 1980s across unemployed and employed struggles and there is not sufficient space to detail these in full here. Instead, two snapshots are introduced, in addition to earlier references to the People's March for Jobs, to give an indication of the organising histories. During the 1984–5 miners' strike, for example, UWC workers, volunteers, and users were involved in substantial fund-raising efforts and picket line acts of solidarity (see also Kelliher 2017). These efforts to attend picket line demonstrations were made with worker and non-worker solidarity in mind. A former UWC co-ordinator on Tyneside, Alec McFadden, commented on centre expressions of solidarity as found in the North East:

There was a lot of young people who were activists and they were members of the Tyneside Unemployed Workers movement and they worked night and day for the miners. They were all political, there was anarchists, Communists, probably Greens, all kinds of different people but they all took the position of supporting the miners ... I'm talking about young men and young women, 23, 24 years of age, you know, some of them had probably been on YOP [Youth Opportunity Programme, changed to Youth Training Scheme in 1983]. (Oral history with Alec McFadden, 2021)

These fundraising campaigns included town centre collections, support at regional picket lines, and involvement in broader campaigns, such as the Toy and Turkey Campaign in 1984, which raised over £20,000 (according to an oral history interview) to support mining communities at Christmas<sup>12</sup> and included support from Jack Charlton, then Newcastle United Football Club manager. On Merseyside, similar solidarities were prominent in the 1980s and 1990s, including welfare and debt advice being made available to dockers, alongside support at picket lines during their dispute between 1995 and 1998. Such collaborations are reflective of a longer history of trade union and community solidarities, as well as the persistence of a multifaceted political left (Gibbs 2016), which shaped an alternative moral economy during accelerated deindustrialisation (Lawson 2020).

Similar campaigns were also instigated in relation to these issues directly impacting the unemployed. UWC had a regular presence outside government offices and labour market intermediaries to highlight the impacts of policy shifts. For example, in 1984, sustained campaigning against “welfare snoopers” was

prominent across all the regions considered, whereby centres looked to expose state surveillance of welfare claimants through a “claimant control team”.<sup>13</sup> Their campaigns, including petitions and public meetings, highlighted the detrimental impacts this had on individuals and communities, and more broadly contested the associated stigma of perceived “scroungers” who the state positioned as requiring surveillance. Such political histories are suggestive of an opening and broadening of trade union struggle, and indicative of a movement towards combining workplace and community struggles. These histories may have been limited in scale but can provide reference point for more contemporary efforts to similarly extend the reach of trade union activism (Perrett and Martinez Lucio 2009).

The activities found within UWCs reflected an empathetic and enabling characterisation of the centres as political spaces, in a more oppositional sense where organisers and activists articulated alternative visions. These actions and campaigns were channelled into a “Charter for the Unemployed” (1989), which was published as guiding principles for centre activities, and included a “political commitment to full employment”, “full maintenance for the unemployed and under-employed”, and “no work conscription”.<sup>14</sup> Individual experiences within UWCs suggested how these principles and the combination of support and campaigning, fostered a radical potential found within the centres. Archive materials suggest that centre activities allowed a reimagining of unemployment with a more general stress upon dignity, as reflected by a North East centre user comments from the early 1980s:

I spent the first six months of my unemployment searching diligently for jobs ... But because I'm involved a lot with the Unemployed Workers' Centre I am not affected by my unemployment as much as other people. I have been able to take a positive look at unemployment. I know it is not my fault. I know that I am not a scrounger.<sup>15</sup>

The testimony here reflects the potential of a wider realm of interactions as found within centres. Such individual reflections and emotional experiences have not necessarily been foregrounded within labour geography, but are suggestive of how dignifying acts might emerge from a trade union sensibility, fostering an alternative moral economy, in this case through a reimagining of unemployment (Hastings 2016). Throughout the wider research there are many examples of centres identifying similar strengths, but the research also encountered some tensions in UWCs balancing these roles and maintaining their presence.

## Maintaining Presence: Tensions and Limits

Oral histories with UWC workers and volunteers were often reflexive about the role of centres, noting their limitations alongside successes. Interviewees would regularly acknowledge the challenges of extending their reach and resourcing their activities. Often these challenges would be based upon the difficulties of sustaining a centre, identifying funding constraints and maintenance challenges. The inclusion of these constraints adds a further layer to how a working-class presence or solidarity infrastructures might be characterised (Crossan et al. 2016). Whilst

providing relational and formative spaces for solidarity building, many commentaries also recognised that the centre itself, in terms of the building and space, posed particular challenges. Julie Gibson was a senior research officer and campaigns worker at the Merseyside centre in 1996, and commented on these challenges in relation to her work:

It could be quite an elephant to control. I know some of the staff, it was really quite hard for them sometimes, where they had to draw attention to doing the day-to-day things, like making sure the building wasn't leaking and things and so on, and that became quite a hard thing for a lot of people, when what they wanted to do was being out doing the campaigning. (Oral history with Julie Gibson, 2021)

Her quote speaks to a potential tension in understanding working-class presence, whereby the maintenance of an organising space might constrain the radical potential of movement building activity. Such tensions have been similarly foregrounded in other alternative spaces with Nolan (2015) identifying the multiple forms of labour required in shaping a radical alternative politics. Oral histories revealed how solidarity infrastructures, so often referred to in an enabling manner, might also be limiting of the movement potential of organising practices. In Chesterfield, concerns were expressed about the model of centres at the time of their emergence:

Barry Johnson, who was president of the Trades Council, he was against the idea of UWCs, he wanted to see an unemployed workers' movement and was concerned, I suppose, that the attempts to form centres was a way of putting the lid on the pressure cooker of unemployment, but centres was what we got and he immediately threw himself into his support for the centres. (Oral history with Colin Hampton, 2019)

In this vein, many centre staff and volunteers, across the regions considered, acknowledged the potential to be overwhelmed by case work and the challenges of continually generating funding for their daily activities. These difficulties do not necessarily undermine the significance of UWCs as spaces of resistance and solidarity, however, they do speak to a fine grained and nuanced sense of centres as political spaces, suggestive of what Roca (2020) similarly describes as centre contradictions and dilemmas.

More broadly, the comments here are also suggestive of the resource associated challenges that community organising groups regularly face. These tensions were unpacked further during an anonymised interview with a former worker at a South East region UWC who conceded the challenges of maintaining a centre whilst attempting to engage a wider unemployed community. They highlighted the dangers of a centre where "volunteers ... didn't want to leave the centre ... they didn't want to do that door knocking, they didn't want to stand outside the Job Centre and get people in". Whilst this characterisation is certainly not true of all centre experiences, it does speak to a potential tension within UWCs, whereby the wider reach of activity might be questioned when centre activities—care, support, and maintenance—became dominant over the practices of making movements, such as wider campaigns and organising. Such nuance

and quotidian reflection has perhaps not always been at the forefront of labour geography's characterisation of working-class presence.

### **Conclusions: Care, Persistence, and Spaces of Dignity**

This paper has presented a history of Unemployed Workers' Centres and extended ongoing debates within labour geography, particularly those reflections on workers' centres and more broadly ideas of workers' presence (Crossan et al. 2016; Roca 2020). It is suggested that the combination of care *and* campaigning is where the distinctiveness of UWC histories lie. The examples presented offer an alternative imaginary of the period considered whereby the stigma of unemployment was consistently challenged and contested, through a trade union sensibility that fostered community activism. The persistence of UWCs throughout the 1980s into the 1990s, and in the case of Derbyshire and Tyne and Wear centres continuing to operate, is suggestive of a continuity in trade union and community organising. Such organising should be recognised as emergent during this time and framed within a wider context of an enduring political left within deindustrialising societies (see also Gibbs 2016).

This broader perspective is key for a characterisation of UWCs which in many cases were, at least in part, defined through their provision of care, support services, and social opportunities for the seemingly disparate, fragmented, and unorganised. Equally, their campaigning work contested the changing welfare conditions within which centres operated as well as developing solidarities across work and non-work spheres. Such activities might be considered as both *centring* and *making* labour geographies in contexts of increased challenges posed by labour market inactivity. Here, "centring" is framed to consider those activities which might be considered through Bayat's language of "non-movement" whereby the unconnected and fragmented can come together through small acts and interactions within a space. At the same time, many centres were actively enacting a politics of "making" movements, through campaigns and solidarity actions, whereby a much more active and processual sense of organising might be more appropriate. The language of "making", similarly used by E.P. Thompson (1963), can be linked to a processual understanding of class, antagonism, and cultures of solidarity, through resistance practices as introduced above.

The distinction in language here is useful for labour geography, particularly in terms of a further unpacking of agency. Here it is suggested that "centring" be considered an appropriate descriptor for those acts and practices which create and sustain the social infrastructure required for organising within and beyond the workplace (Kelliher 2021). An attentiveness to the politics of space here, reveals both the enabling potential of solidarity infrastructure, but also possible tensions in the dynamic between service provision and collective organising. Alongside this, the notion of "making" has broader, and more processual, connotations characterised by acts of antagonism and resistance that contest the structural constraints and social inequalities found within places. The possibility for tension here does not undermine what was achieved, and the centres are suggestive of the "quiet encroachment" that Bayat describes in his characterisation of

“non-movement”. The paper also speaks back to these ideas by offering a spatial lens to understand how the dynamics are framed in relation to politicising unemployment. It reveals a history of dialogue and interaction stretching across workplace and community. This is perhaps where UWCs worked best, as places for dialogue and everyday interaction, which reimagined the categorisation and alienation of unemployment based upon an ethic of dignity and solidarity.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> There is some variance in centre names as centres have evolved over time. For consistency, the umbrella reference of Unemployed Workers’ Centres is used throughout the paper. All centres considered were aligned with the Trades Union Congress (TUC). Similarly, some interview participants are named where permission has been granted, whilst others remain anonymous.

<sup>2</sup> “Services for the Unemployed: Unemployed Workers’ Centres”, *Bulletin*, February/March 1981; available from the Modern Records Centre, MSS. 292D/135.58/1.

<sup>3</sup> TUC Special Collections, London Metropolitan University, Unemployed Workers’ Centres Periodicals HD 5768.5.

<sup>4</sup> See *On the Stones* published by Newcastle Trades Council Centre for the Unemployed (no date); available from the Labour History Archive and Study Centre, Hilary Wainwright Collection Box 13 File 8.

<sup>5</sup> Newcastle on Tyne Trades Council—Centre for the Unemployed—“The Second Year” (1979); available from the Modern Records Centre, MSS. 292D/135/16.

<sup>6</sup> “Letter to the Secretaries of All Affiliated Unions, Regional Councils, Wales Trades Union Council, CATCs and Trades Council”; available from the Modern Records Centre, MSS. 292D/135.58/1.

<sup>7</sup> *The Guardian*, 11 March 1987.

<sup>8</sup> See pamphlets held at TUC Special Collections, London Metropolitan Library, Centres for the Unemployed Periodicals HD 5768.5.

<sup>9</sup> “Centres for the Unemployed: TUC Guidelines”; document accessed via personal archive of research participant.

<sup>10</sup> “An LRD Survey of Unemployed Workers’ Centres”; available from the Modern Records Centre, MSS. 292D/135.58/3.

<sup>11</sup> See Endnote 3.

<sup>12</sup> *The Journal*, 13 November 1984.

<sup>13</sup> *The Chronicle*, 2 April 1984.

<sup>14</sup> Modern Records Centre, MSS. 661/8/11.

<sup>15</sup> See Endnote 4.

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