



Cornell University  
ILR School

Cornell University ILR School  
**DigitalCommons@ILR**

---

Book Samples

ILR Press

---

2013

## Union Voices: Tactics and Tensions in UK Organizing

Melanie Simms

Jane Holgate

Edmund Heery

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.ilr.cornell.edu/books>

Thank you for downloading an article from DigitalCommons@ILR.

**Support this valuable resource today!**

---

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the ILR Press at DigitalCommons@ILR. It has been accepted for inclusion in Book Samples by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@ILR. For more information, please contact [catherwood-dig@cornell.edu](mailto:catherwood-dig@cornell.edu).

If you have a disability and are having trouble accessing information on this website or need materials in an alternate format, contact [web-accessibility@cornell.edu](mailto:web-accessibility@cornell.edu) for assistance.

---

## Union Voices: Tactics and Tensions in UK Organizing

### Abstract

[Excerpt] This book tells the story of what is, in our view, probably the most significant development in British trade unionism of recent years: the increasing focus on organizing activity. We do this by reflecting on the impact of the UK's Trades Union Congress (TUC) Organising Academy (OA), the participants in the training program, and the organizing campaigns that union organizers have run. We explicitly want to give voice to these union activists who have worked so hard to recruit and organize new union members. Much has already been written in the United Kingdom (often by us) about these developments but what is often lost in short articles or surveys are the stories that organizers have to tell. In an effort to build a base of knowledge from which to start to analyze changes, we have so far tended to focus on publishing the studies that demonstrate general trends and developments. This book seeks to do something slightly different. We draw on those previously published papers where necessary, but here we want to engage with the politics and tensions behind those trends; both on a macro and a micro level. We want to tell the stories of what organizing is "like" on the front line, what organizers do, and how they do it. The workplace struggles of workers and their unions are at the heart of these stories. But we also want to draw attention to the wider reasons why union organizing is important. As we will argue, one of the things that happened as ideas about organizing migrated from other countries— notably the United States and Australia—to the United Kingdom is that the political conceptualization of why unions are organizing has been underexamined. We want to understand and examine organizing as a political process, and we want to look at the politics within the union but also the wider purpose of organizing, which often varies from context to context.

### Keywords

United Kingdom, trade unions, organizing, membership, labor movement

### Comments

The abstract, table of contents, and first twenty-five pages are published with permission from the Cornell University Press. For ordering information, please visit the [Cornell University Press](https://digitalcommons.ilr.cornell.edu/books/76).

UNION VOICES

*Tactics and Tensions  
in UK Organizing*

MELANIE SIMMS, JANE HOLGATE,  
AND EDMUND HEERY

ILR PRESS  
AN IMPRINT OF  
CORNELL UNIVERSITY PRESS  
ITHACA AND LONDON

Copyright © 2013 by Cornell University

All rights reserved. Except for brief quotations in a review, this book, or parts thereof, must not be reproduced in any form without permission in writing from the publisher. For information, address Cornell University Press, Sage House, 512 East State Street, Ithaca, New York 14850.

First published 2013 by Cornell University Press  
First printing, Cornell Paperbacks, 2013  
Printed in the United States of America and the United Kingdom

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Simms, Melanie.

Union voices : tactics and tensions in UK organizing / Melanie Simms, Jane Holgate, and Edmund Heery.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-8014-5120-1 (cloth : alk. paper)

ISBN 978-0-8014-7813-0 (pbk.: alk. paper)

1. Labor unions—Organizing—Great Britain. 2. TUC Organising Academy. I. Holgate, Jane. II. Heery, Edmund. III. Title.

HD6490.O72G77 2013

331.880941—dc23 2012016500

Cornell University Press strives to use environmentally responsible suppliers and materials to the fullest extent possible in the publishing of its books. Such materials include vegetable-based, low-VOC inks and acid-free papers that are recycled, totally chlorine-free, or partly composed of nonwood fibers. For further information, visit our website at [www.cornellpress.cornell.edu](http://www.cornellpress.cornell.edu).

Cloth printing	1	0	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1
Paperback printing	1	0	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1

## CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	vii
Introduction	1
1. From Managing Decline to Organizing for the Future	18
2. The TUC Approach to Developing a New Organizing Culture	35
3. The Spread of Organizing Activity to Individual Unions	59
4. Union Organizers and Their Stories	90
5. Organizing Campaigns	118
6. Evaluating Organizing	151
Bibliography	173
Index	185
About the Authors	191

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many people have contributed to the writing of this book, although we alone are responsible for any errors. We want particularly to thank the various institutions that have funded parts of the research since 1996, specifically the Nuffield Foundation, Cardiff University, and the Economic and Social Research Council. The Trades Union Congress (TUC) has given us support, access, and sponsorship in kind, and we are very grateful for their help. Our own universities have been extremely supportive, as have those of other institutions we have worked at over the past decade and a half. To our colleagues, we offer thanks for their consistent support in the lengthy process of researching and writing this book. We also thank our colleagues at the Industrial Relations Research Unit at the University of Warwick and the Working Lives Research Institute at London Metropolitan University for their support of and enthusiasm for this project.

Individual unions have also been extremely supportive and patient by allowing us access to campaigns and being generous with their time. We cannot possibly list all of the people who have helped us but they know

who they are and we are very grateful. And to the officers, organizers, members, and workers involved in fighting the campaigns we have studied, we offer our profound thanks and best wishes.

Of course, books don't get written without support from those in our lives outside work. To them we also offer our thanks for their continued support, patience, and enthusiasm. La Muse writers' retreat in France also helped make the process possible.

Interested readers can find detailed discussions of the research methods we have used for different phases of the data collection throughout this thirteen-year research project in much of our previous work (see, for example, Simms and Holgate 2010a, 2010b; Simms 2007a, 2007b; Holgate 2005; Heery et al. 2000a, 2000b, 2000c). Nonetheless, it is important to highlight the main bodies of evidence on which we base the comments and discussions that we outline in this book. Between us, we have been studying organizing policy and practice in UK unions since 1996, but we were involved before then as union activists. Initially the research was undertaken by Edmund Heery who became interested in the restructuring of the TUC and its efforts to promote union renewal (Heery 1998a). He carried out a series of around thirty-five interviews between 1996 and 1998, during the time that the TUC was developing the Organising Academy. In 1998, he secured research funding for an initial period of three years, for a project that would involve a researcher being sent to the first year of the Organising Academy training as a participant observer. Melanie Simms was hired as that researcher, and in addition to extensive periods of observation at both training sessions and in the work of organizers during the campaigns they ran, we carried out over the next three years a further set of 120 formal interviews with policymakers, organizers, their coaches and mentors, activists, and other key participants. Some of these were done on the telephone, but most were lengthy face-to-face discussions. And, of course, the periods of observation—and sometimes participation—afforded the opportunity to engage in extensive informal interviewing.

Between 1998 and 2002, we also undertook four important surveys. We surveyed all UK unions on their organizing policy and practice in both 1998 and 2000—before and after the statutory recognition legislation. Between 1998 and 2003, we surveyed all academy organizers during their final training session, asking them for their immediate reflections on their training year. And we also asked them to complete a survey relating to

the organizing practices they used in specific organizing campaigns they had been working on. Many of the questions that we used in these surveys replicate each other, which allows a good view of organizing practice at different levels of the unions.

Alongside this, Melanie also started her doctoral research. Following five successful organizing campaigns in detail and over a longitudinal period (1998-2005), she was able to get the kind of in-depth data that were needed to comment on organizing practice in specific contexts. At the same time, for her own doctoral studies, Jane Holgate was undertaking a similarly in-depth study of the particular challenges facing black and ethnic minority workers during organizing campaigns. These "thick descriptions" of UK organizing campaigns have been invaluable to our ability to conceptualize how and why unions, their organizers, and their activists behave in the ways that they do. For this research, between us, we carried out more than two hundred additional interviews and spent large periods of time in these workplaces observing and asking questions.

Last, but not least, in 2006 Jane Holgate and Melanie Simms secured funding from the Nuffield Foundation to go back to the TUC, sponsoring unions, and academy graduates to ask them about their views on what impact the Organising Academy had had over the previous decade. It was always our intention to use the tenth anniversary of the Organising Academy to evaluate the impact of the development of organizing in the United Kingdom. We therefore surveyed all academy graduates about their experiences of their training in retrospect and asked them about where their careers had subsequently taken them. We selected twenty-eight graduates to interview in more depth and asked them about their experiences and views using a biographical narrative interview method (Chamberlayne et al. 2000). Although the biographical narrative method is not common in the field of industrial relations, it is our belief that—even in a modified form as used here—it was particularly useful in our interviews with organizers who were being encouraged to place themselves at the center of the debates around union organizing. The analysis of biographical data is, of course, person centered, but the intention was to draw links between the individual agency of organizers and the wider frameworks in which they were operating and the implication this has for their personal and professional practice where organizing was actually taking place.

We also returned to interview twenty-one key respondents who had been particularly influential in development and training at the academy. In this phase of the research, we carried out short periods (a few days) of observation at each of the specialist training programs set up by three of the largest unions in the United Kingdom: the GMB; the Union of Shop, Distributive, and Allied Workers (USDAW); and Unite. These spin-off academies were an explicit effort by these unions to adapt organizing ideas to their specific contexts, so they were useful to show us what organizing "means" in different sectors and unions. Throughout all of these phases of research we have also collected masses of documentary data. Papers for meetings, flyers, policy documents, collective bargaining agreements, and strategy papers have been among the most useful, but there are plenty of others.

Throughout this time we have developed close links with organizers and other people within the UK union movement. We are eternally grateful for their time, patience, and fortitude; without them, the work could never have happened. We make every effort we can to involve them in our work. In this sense, we are very deeply embedded in the world of union organizing; but our mistakes are purely our own and any criticisms are offered in the spirit of solidarity.

Over the years, we have also presented some aspects of the research at academic conferences and at meetings with trade unionists. Almost all of that material was written by the main authors, but many times the involvement of other members of the extended research team has been extremely valuable. Parts of the discussion about the lives of organizers were presented in a paper written mainly by Rick Delbridge in 2000. We are grateful for his permission to draw on the ideas presented there. Andy Charlwood has undoubtedly influenced our views about how unions engage with their wider environment, and we draw on some of the discussion presented in Simms and Charlwood (2010) in the section about the background to organizing. We have also benefited from extensive discussions with other academics and with trade unionists. We cannot possibly mention them all here, but we fully acknowledge their influence.

## INTRODUCTION

This book tells the story of what is, in our view, probably the most significant development in British trade unionism of recent years: the increasing focus on organizing activity. We do this by reflecting on the impact of the UK's Trades Union Congress (TUC) Organising Academy (OA), the participants in the training program, and the organizing campaigns that union organizers have run. We explicitly want to give voice to these union activists who have worked so hard to recruit and organize new union members. Much has already been written in the United Kingdom (often by us) about these developments but what is often lost in short articles or surveys are the stories that organizers have to tell. In an effort to build a base of knowledge from which to start to analyze changes, we have so far tended to focus on publishing the studies that demonstrate general trends and developments. This book seeks to do something slightly different. We draw on those previously published papers where necessary, but here we want to engage with the politics and tensions behind those trends; both on a macro and a micro level. We want to tell the stories of

what organizing is "like" on the front line, what organizers do, and how they do it. The workplace struggles of workers and their unions are at the heart of these stories. But we also want to draw attention to the wider reasons why union organizing is important. As we will argue, one of the things that happened as ideas about organizing migrated from other countries—notably the United States and Australia—to the United Kingdom is that the political conceptualization of why unions are organizing has been underexamined. We want to understand and examine organizing as a political process, and we want to look at the politics within the union but also the wider purpose of organizing, which often varies from context to context.

In 1998, the TUC took the bold step of opening the doors of a training academy for union organizers. This move was bold for a number of reasons. First, historically the TUC has been mainly a coordinating organization for UK unions rather than a body that leads particular initiatives. The Organising Academy was explicitly informed by a desire to promote a particular form of trade unionism that encouraged member participation and activism. This was a significant departure from the usual role of the TUC, which has been mainly to establish consensus-based policy that takes account of the interests of a very broad range of affiliate unions (Heery 1998a). But it was a bold step for one other crucial reason that is rarely discussed: it was an explicit attempt to "shake up" the trade union movement by recruiting new people to work in the unions. Although Organising Academy participants all had some experience in campaigning and activism, it was not always gained in the labor movement. The establishment of the academy offered an opportunity to work in the union movement, bypassing the conventional career structure of serving many years as a union representative before becoming an officer for an individual union. In the early years, organizers were frequently referred to as the "next leaders of the union movement" despite the potential that this could create a dangerous hostage to fortune. There was recognition from the highest levels of the TUC and participating unions that the organizers they sought to recruit and train would be very different from existing union officers and leaders. In general, it was hoped that they would be younger, with a more diverse range of experiences prior to working in unions, and crucially, that they would be more representative of the workforce in respect of gender and ethnicity.

So why did the TUC feel sufficiently emboldened to take on this role? The figures on union decline throughout the 1980s and 1990s have been well documented: declining membership, declining income, declining bargaining coverage, failure to organize new sectors and workplaces, and a decline in union power (see Simms and Charlwood 2010 for a fuller overview) all contributed to a context within which the TUC saw a clear role to intervene in renewal efforts. Further, British trade unionism has a long-established history of workplace activism, and the structures of many unions rely on workplace membership to campaign and improve working conditions. Indeed, during the periods of union strength this was often considered to be a problematic feature of British trade unionism (Donovan Commission 1968). But attacks on trade unionism by the state during the neoliberal Conservative Party era from 1979 to 1997 meant that many unions were forced by declining membership rolls, income, and activism to focus on managing decline. That is not to say that unions did nothing during that period. Many still actively campaigned on behalf of the Labour Party, and they campaigned against public-sector cuts and other policies that were problematic for their members. They were engaged with notable campaigns against racism such as the lengthy fight for justice for Stephen Lawrence—a young black man murdered in London in 1993—and they consistently continued to develop relationships with employers that would provide the basis for bargaining and improvement of working conditions. The central problem, however, was that social, economic, and political changes made it very difficult to achieve any substantial renewal. Efforts to establish largely cooperative and consensual "partnerships" with employers came under sustained attack in many workplaces with workers reluctant to join ineffective unions and managers reluctant to pay attention to such unions (Jenkins 2007). The notion of working in partnership also came in for political and academic criticism (Kelly 1996) and has become very much less important in the story of British trade unionism than it was ten years ago (Heery et al. 2003c), although it remains an important approach in the public sector (Bacon and Samuel 2009).

Nonetheless, the TUC has been keen to promote both organizing activity and partnership, sometimes side by side. Although this seemed paradoxical to many commentators at the time (Carter and Fairbrother 1998), it reflected a degree of pragmatism within the TUC to try every possible avenue that might encourage union growth (Heery 2002). As part of this

effort to promote an internal revitalization as well as a broader effort of union renewal, the TUC launched a comprehensive review of its structures and policies in 1994 (Heery 2002), eventually leading to the establishment of the TUC's New Unionism project, which had the objective of promoting organizing activity. Senior trade unionists traveled to the United States and Australia several times throughout the mid-1990s, explicitly seeking to learn from innovative initiatives such as the AFL-CIO's Organizing Institute and ACTU's Organising Works program in Australia. These programs strongly influenced the thinking of senior UK policymakers within the TUC and affiliate unions.

By 1996 it was clear that, excepting extraordinary circumstances, it was likely that the Labour Party would win the 1997 general election, signaling the end of eighteen years of right-wing Conservative Party dominance of UK politics. Although the Labour Party was keen to signal to the voting public that there would be a policy of "fairness, not favors" toward the trade unions, and certainly that there would not be any repeal of the legislation that seriously constrains the ability of UK unions to take industrial action, there was a formal recognition that trade unions still contributed around 40 percent of Labour Party funds, and that workers' rights were a core part of the 1997 Labour manifesto. To this end, a commitment was secured to enact legislation that would allow unions to force employers to recognize them for the purposes of collective bargaining if they had the support of the majority of the workforce. Although the devil is always in the details of such statutory recognition legislation, and there were many critics of the way in which the legislation was developed (Dickens and Hall 2006), the Employment Relations Act of 1999 delivered this manifesto commitment, and was subsequently revised and updated in 2004.

From the mid-1990s onward, it was clear that the UK union movement, and the TUC specifically, was gearing up to operate in a changed political and institutional climate. This was an important rationale of the development of the Organising Academy: unions needed specialist, trained organizers to take advantage of the opportunities afforded by statutory recognition legislation as well as developments such as the establishment of a national minimum wage in 1999, the introduction of new information and consultation rights for workers as a consequence of European Union legislation, and a shift in the general context of employment relation toward one of benign tolerance of union involvement. It was hoped

that these political and legal changes would herald a more auspicious era for trade unionism in general. Inspired by developments abroad, the New Unionism task group launched the Organising Academy as a one-year training program for specialist organizers, with its first intake in 1998. The purpose was largely to train these specialists in organizing tactics and ideas so that they could be agents of a wider cultural change within the union movement.

## Cultural Change

The objectives of the TUC Academy were always much broader than simply training specialist organizers to take advantage of opportunities to gain new recognition agreements with employers. Informed by the particular approach underpinning ideas of organizing in the United States and Australia, the academy developed an underlying rationale that in order to appeal to workers who had never previously joined a union, the culture of unions would have to change. Emphasis was placed on membership participation and improving the representativeness of the union movement, particularly in relation to age, gender, ethnicity, and sectoral presence. Beyond the objectives of participative democracy and representativeness, there was also a realization that most unions would struggle to achieve those objectives without committing considerable resources. The TUC generally avoided discussing exact targets, but US discussions about aiming to commit 10 percent of union resources to organizing activity were discussed by senior policymakers. None, however, were specific about whether this was an aspirational target or an achievable target. Equally, none were specific about whether this should be measured as 10 percent of income, 10 percent of expenditure, or 10 percent of activity.

Importantly, and in contrast to organizing activity in some countries, there was an explicit realization that organizing should include both expansionist activity into workplaces where employers did not have an established relationship with unions, and "infill" activity where there was an agreement on the union's representation rights, but where membership, activism, and participation were falling short of expectations. One of the key, senior TUC policymakers promoting the launch of the TUC Academy noted that this had always been an issue of tension:

When we first started... we always emphasized the twin-track approach. We said it had to be rebuilding where we had strands but often membership had fallen to 40 percent in workforces. And it had to be breaking into new areas. But interestingly people only ever heard the breaking into the new areas. And that was the bit that was seen as controversial and those who opposed the agenda alighted upon. (Frances O'Grady, TUC deputy general secretary)

So, it is clear that the objectives of the Organising Academy were manifold, and five core objectives can be identified from the debates and rationales that were presented at the time:

- to recruit and train a cadre of specialist organizers which includes attracting new people to work in the union movement;
- to increase membership and participation in new and existing workplaces, including targeting underrepresented workers for union membership and to encourage their activism;
- to encourage unions to invest a greater proportion of their resources in organizing activity;
- to encourage expansionist activity to nonunionized sectors and workplaces;
- to promote a specific approach to trade unionism, which emphasizes membership involvement and participation.

These capture the ambition of the initiative and the breadth of the objectives. But the danger with this introduction so far is that it risks suggesting that organizing did not exist in the United Kingdom prior to the mid-1990s. Clearly this is untrue. The UK labor movement has a long history of effective workplace, sectoral, professional, and national organization, but there are two crucial differences about the developments in the mid-1990s. The first difference is the notion that organizing should be a particular initiative that demands trained, skilled professional specialists; the second is that these specialists should promote wide and deep culture change and renewal within the labor movement. This ambition developed, in part, as a consequence of a small number of charismatic leaders working internationally to promote these ideas. And in part it reflected growing academic evidence from other countries that increasingly supported the argument that organizing "works" (notably the seminal book by Bronfenbrenner et al. 1998). Because of these ambitions and the way in which organizing initiatives

developed in the United Kingdom in the mid-1990s, it is important to note the importance of the transfer of the notion of an organizing "model" in relation to the tactics these new recruits were being trained to use. This is a deeply contested idea within UK trade unionism that has generated considerable debate among both academics and practitioners (de Turberville 2004, Simms and Holgate 2010a), so it is important to outline here how and why we think the idea of an organizing "model" is problematic.

## The Organizing "Model"?

The term *organizing model* seemed to enter into handbooks and guidance for labor activists in the United States in the mid to late 1980s (Hurd 1998, 23) and became commonplace in the decade afterward. It is possible that it may have been a term used earlier than that, but our interest in the idea emerges from this period. Most authors and practitioners would agree that the term *organizing* is used to describe an approach to union building that relies on unions facilitating local leadership at the workplace level so that workers are empowered to act for themselves (Heery, Simms, Simpson, et al. 2000). Its purpose is to foster self-reliance and collective identity, organizing around issues in the workplace, which can then lead to increased recruitment and sustained organizing. Importantly, the idea of an organizing "model" was explicitly contrasted with a servicing "model" (Blyton and Turnbull 2004). The former was far more concerned with promoting membership activism while the latter was primarily interested in providing an efficient and effective service to justify the cost of union membership.

However, from the very early stages of this nomenclature entering academic and practitioner debate, there was a great deal of discussion about its meaning and relevance. Added to this, the logic of the organizing and servicing analysis emerged in different national contexts and took on different rationales as the ideas were translated into new countries, new unions, and new sectors. The notion of a "model" was given additional credibility and impetus with the publication of several important pieces of work undertaken by Kate Bronfenbrenner, which presented evidence from National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) data in the United States showing that campaigns that used a range of organizing tactics simultaneously were

more effective in securing a first contract than those that just used one or two tactics (Bronfenbrenner and Juravich 1998). The lesson seemed clear; organizers needed to use a "bundle" of tactics together rather than just picking out one or two.

Within some conceptualizations of organizing there are also some important political ideas, including but not limited to, social movement unionism (Turner and Hurd 2001), worker self-organization (Markowitz 2000), principles of anarcho-syndicalism (Lerner 1992, Rachleff 1999), and arguments about changing the labor movement (Turner et al. 2001). As these ideas transferred to the United Kingdom, researchers and practitioners tried to better understand what these different aspects of organizing meant in the UK context. An early effort to do this was made by the Cardiff research team. They (we) adopted the terminology of an organizing "model" and argued that it is as a model of good practice that "represents an attempt to rediscover the 'social movement' origins of labor, essentially by redefining the union as a mobilizing structure which seeks to stimulate activism among its members and generate campaigns for workplace and wider social justice" (Heery et al. 2000a, 996). Associated with this is a range of techniques or methods that are designed to raise the profile of the union and encourage members to become active in union building rather than remaining as passive recipients. In a survey of UK unions mapping the very early adoption of ideas about organizing into the United Kingdom (Heery et al. 2000a), we reported that union organizers frequently used person-to-person recruitment, workplace mapping, the identification of workplace grievances, and the principle of like-recruits-like in their campaigns. However, we noted that less use was made of visits to nonmembers' homes and links with community organizations, which are more generally associated with union organizing in the United States (see table 1). What was notably absent in that early evaluation—and a theme we will return to throughout this book—was a discussion of the broader political ideas that had been evident in some discussion about organizing in the United States and other contexts.

This early evaluation of the Organising Academy and New Unionism within the United Kingdom showed very patchy adoption of core organizing tactics even in unions that had committed considerable resources to employing and training organizers. For example, table 1 shows that only 21 percent of unions had a policy to establish organizing committees in

**TABLE 1.** Some techniques and methods associated with organizing

<b>Organizing techniques and methods</b>	<b>UK unions reporting frequency of use (%)</b>
Person-to-person recruitment at the workplace	69
Raising the union profile within the workplace (through petitions, surveys, etc)	45
Identification of employee grievances as a basis for recruitment	34
Establishing membership targets at company or workplace level	29
Reliance on the principle of like-recruits-like	26
Establishing an organizing committee within target workplace	21
Systematic rating of nonmembers in terms of their propensity to join	7
Public campaigns against antiunion employers	5
Link-up with community organizations	3
House calls to nonmembers' homes	2

*Source:* Heery et al. (2000a), Survey of Union Policy and Practice 1998; unit of analysis = individual union; N (number of unions) = 61–64.

their targeted workplaces. Yet the need to leave behind sustainable lay organization after professional organizers have withdrawn from a campaign was already evident by that time and had been identified as an essential "exit strategy" if members were not to rely on negotiating, bargaining, and representation services provided a full-time official (Markowitz 2000). What is also clear from table 1 is that in the early days of specialist organizer training there was relatively little effort to apply a "bundle" of tactics together.

What was also absent from most of the early literature and practitioner debate in the UK context is any discussion of the wider purpose of organizing. Beyond a very generic idea of renewal and revitalization, there was little discussion of the core ideas discussed above. It is therefore important to reflect on contested implications of the purpose of organizing activity, as these tensions continue to reverberate in the analysis of impacts of organizing that we present in later chapters.

### **What Are We Organizing For?**

As already highlighted, it is possible to identify a number of interrelated themes about the purpose of organizing activity within existing literature in the United Kingdom and elsewhere. First is a view that organizing

activity is related to efforts to increase union membership. One reason for this position is to increase bargaining leverage at company or sectoral level. So, for example, Lerner (1992) presents an articulate defense of the view that high membership density is related to the ability of the union to take effective action on a range of issues. Specifically, he uses experience of and evidence from the US Justice for Janitors campaign to argue that sectoral density and bargaining strength are the central tenets of a strategy for taking wages out of competition and improving terms and conditions across a sector. He argues that this is the only feasible way to engage in a form of what we would in the past have called industrial democracy. In other words, Lerner (1992) argues that only through sectoral- and industrial-level union density can workers wield any wider democratic influence over their working lives. Thus increased membership is seen as a way to improve the ability of the union to regulate the employment relationship more effectively.

But this is not the only argument that supports increased union membership as a central objective of organizing activity. Also important is the contention that to support their claim that they are the representative voice of working people, unions must ensure that they are genuinely representative of the diversity of workers. Here the argument is that union organizing should focus on increasing membership among particular groups of workers that have been underrepresented in the union movement in the recent past. Specifically, some argue for the importance of targeting young workers (Waddington and Kerr 2008, Bryson and Gomez 2005). Others focus on black and minority ethnic (BME) workers (Holgate 2005, Perrett and Martinez Lucio 2009) or workers on atypical contracts (Heery 2004, Heery et al. 2004, Walters 2002). Still others stress the importance of recruiting workers in particular sectors such as private-sector services (Dølvik and Waddington 2004). It is important to note that these aspects intersect in important ways in the UK labor market; young, BME, and atypical workers are all more likely to work in private-sector service workplaces where unions have historically found it difficult to organize. There are multiple reasons for this historic difficulty in organization, but increasing evidence indicates that it is not primarily explained by negative attitudes of these groups of workers toward unions (Kirton 2005, Walters 2002, Bryson and Gomez 2005). A more convincing explanation of the lower union density among these groups is the structure of work and

employment in the private service sector and, in particular, the dominance of small workplaces (Gall 2007). Thus the emphasis of these debates has tended to focus on how unions can effectively target organizing activity to facilitate higher levels of membership among these groups. However, this raises questions not only about how these groups can be targeted for membership but also about whether and how they engage with the democratic structures of unions.

For this reason, most writers and practitioners agree that organizing activity is more than simply a recruitment drive. At the most basic level, this is prompted by a recognition that if unions want to target underrepresented groups for membership and/or to build density, they have to have an increased presence in workplaces with little or no history of trade unionism. Within the UK context, if unions are to be influential in regulating employment at workplace, professional, sectoral, or even national levels, they must be engaged in collective bargaining. This requires formal recognition from employers, and in practice, for many unions gaining recognition is the central objective of their expansionist organizing campaigns. Because of the voluntarist tradition of UK labor relations, recognition for collective bargaining is not always granted through a legal process. Usually, it is simply a formal agreement with an employer that collective bargaining will take place. A recognition agreement will typically include explicit terms about the coverage (whose terms and conditions will be negotiated), the scope (what issues will be negotiated), and the pattern (how frequently bargaining will take place) of union activities. It may also include an agreement for representatives to take paid time off to undertake union duties. But unless a recognition agreement is secured through the statutory recognition processes, the form of these agreements is entirely at the discretion of the two parties. Thus there is a high degree of variation about whether particular roles are (and should be) taken on by workplace representatives or paid officers, and in workplace representation structures in general.

In the sense that organizing activity encourages membership engagement with the union at the workplace level, some have argued that organizing can be viewed as a strategy for wider union renewal rather than simply a tactic for increasing membership (de Turberville 2004, Simms and Holgate 2010a). Indeed Fairbrother (1996, 2000a) has consistently emphasized the importance of workplace activism in union renewal efforts. Again, however, notions of union renewal are contested. For some authors, the

most important evidence of union renewal is increasing membership activism (Stinson and Ballantyne 2006, Kumar and Schenk 2006). This would be seen in increasing member self-organization, typically at the workplace level, and members taking greater responsibility for addressing workplace issues without officer support. For others, evidence of more extensive member engagement in democratic structures (Sciacchitano 2000) is the key measure of organizing "success" or "failure." A further element of this argument, frequently presented by those who focus their attention on the importance of unions increasing membership among underrepresented groups, is that organizing activity can and should target the engagement of specific groups of members in democratic structures. This is particularly clear among authors who discuss women's involvement in unions (Colgan and Ledwith 2002a, 2002b). Although women workers are proportionately represented among union membership, they are underrepresented in the decision-making structures of unions. Thus there are those who argue that if organizing efforts do not attempt to address this, unions are likely to become increasingly irrelevant to women within contemporary workplaces.

Finally, a clear strand of argument can be seen emerging in the US literature in particular, and this highlights the wider objectives outline above. Ideas about (re)building a form of "social movement unionism" (Buechler and Cylke 1997, Clawson 2003) or "community unionism" (Dunn 2010; Holgate 2009b; McBride and Greenwood 2009; Tattersall 2006, 2010) are evident in some discussions of union organizing. In practice this tends to mean developing formal and informal links between unions and other social justice campaigns to improve workers' rights. This implicitly accepts a more radical view of the role unions can play in social change and promoting social justice that may conflict with some of the more institutional and regulationist objectives discussed above. In the United Kingdom, there is relatively little evidence of this kind of organizing objective, although this view has been most closely associated with "community unionism" (Wills and Simms 2004, Wills 2004, Holgate 2009a, 2009b), which focuses on increasing the links between the workplace and the wider community, and on recognizing and building on workers' roles and connections beyond their workplace. What is important here is that the focus of such organizing activity extends far beyond any immediate improvements in workers' terms and conditions (although these may accrue from such activity), and

that union attempts to become relevant to workers' lives means moving beyond a workplace, industry, or sectoral level.

These debates about the objectives and purpose of organizing activity highlight why we think it is so problematic to talk about an organizing "model" in any practical sense. We therefore avoid that term and focus throughout the book on exploring, understanding, and explaining the tensions that emerge between different ideas about what organizing "is" and what it is ultimately "for." The debates and discussions highlighted above help to inform the key themes and questions that link the different chapters.

## Themes and Questions

Clearly then, ideas relating to the objectives of organizing activity are highly contested among both practitioners and academics. In this book we focus on one particular initiative—the establishment of the TUC Organising Academy—which was of central importance in expressing and promoting a particular shift of policy toward expansionist organizing activity, building membership in areas where unions were already recognized for collective bargaining, and advocating greater involvement by members and activists. By taking the establishment of the academy training program as the focus of our analysis, we can see the ways in which this training promotes particular approaches to trade unionism. We then trace the work of the graduates of the program to examine the extent to which their presence has acted as a catalyst for change toward the objectives outlined.

But it is important that we do not condense the story of organizing over the past decade simply to the TUC Organising Academy. We want to consider the broader impact of organizing in a UK context. What are unions doing when they run organizing campaigns, and what do they seek to achieve? What resources and tactics do they commit to these goals? How do employers respond to organizing campaigns? And what outcomes are there? By asking these questions, we aim to present a flavor of what organizing is "like" in the United Kingdom, which emphasizes deep differences between the United Kingdom and other countries such as the United States and Australia where much of this work has previously been done (Reed 1990, Foerster 2003).

We also take a look at the big picture in order to reflect on some of the wider changes we have seen across the union movement. What impact has the academy had on the labor movement more generally? How has the practice of training specialist organizers spread and developed since its inception? How have unions changed in that time? And what mechanisms for training other groups have been developed? These wider measures of the impact of organizers and organizer training give us a much more rounded view of the changes that have taken place since the late 1990s. The story is mixed; there have been some areas of notable success, and other areas where change has been slow and difficult. We explore these patterns and seek to explain them.

## Structure of the Book

We want to reflect on union organizing initiatives in Britain since the mid-1990s. We start by giving a brief background to the central debates and arguments that have emerged around organizing. We are very keen to locate our academic work firmly within practitioner debates as well as academic debates. Inevitably some issues have exercised trade unionists far more than academics, and vice versa. Some of these discussions we have increasingly good evidence about; others less so. We are not trying to produce a definitive overview of all the debates around union organizing across the world. What we want to do in chapter 1 is to highlight key themes that set up our evaluation of organizing policy and practice in British unions so that we can then return to those themes and make a clear statement about what we think has happened since the start of the Organising Academy, which broadly coincides with the period of the New Labour government in the United Kingdom.

So why have we taken the period of New Labour (1997—2010) as our time frame? Clearly unions organized before this time, but in the mid-1990s there was a concerted effort by the TUC and by some senior national officers within unions to reject the consensual politics of "partnership" and to encourage investment in organizing. We therefore start our analysis by considering the national strategies that have been adopted and by explaining the TUC's role in promoting organizing activity through the Organising Academy and related initiatives. In chapter 2 we argue that

the academy's relevance stems not only from its success in training a cadre of organizers—the majority of whom are still employed within the union movement—but also that its establishment promoted a debate about the central role of organizing within British unions. We describe and evaluate the training program and examine some of the ways in which its core ideas have spread through many British unions.

In chapter 3, we look at the spread of organizing ideas in more detail to evaluate how those ideas have changed, developed, and have been adapted to fit specific contexts. In doing this, we want to locate the activity of workplace union campaigns within a broader analysis of the importance of sectoral pressures, union histories and ideologies, employer responses, and the like, and to be clear about why we are doing this. It is not to privilege national activity and coordination; indeed we argue later that a balance between worker activism and leadership support for organizing is essential for effective and sustainable organizing. Rather, the aim is to begin with a picture of initiatives that have been important in securing resources for organizing activity, before focusing on the work that actually makes a difference at the workplace. Unlike some authors (most explicitly perhaps Bramble 1995), we think that there is an important role for coordinating organizing activity at the national scale. We will argue that, whereas these national initiatives have done very little actual workplace organizing, they have developed and promoted a context within which organizing campaigns can take place more effectively. We also agree with Martinez Lucio and Stuart (2009) that these national initiatives have provided important "narratives" for union renewal that help underpin and coordinate workplace organizing. Equally, we should be clear that we are not saying that there is one "best" way of doing this. What we see when we look across the British union movement is a breadth of organizing strategy and a diversity of practice that we could barely have imagined a decade ago. Many of the issues we describe and analyze here are highly contested and still subject to lively debate within the union movement. Individuals and unions disagree on the appropriate way to manage organizing activity; indeed, they often disagree on what organizing is and what they should be seeking to achieve through their organizing activity. A core theme of our analysis is that since the mid-1990s, there have been changes and developments in organizing ideas and practices, and we reflect on these, the motivations for them, and the consequences for the union movement and membership growth.

In chapter 4, we introduce the work of organizers—who they are and what they do. As specialist actors in the process of organizing, their training and experiences of work tell us a great deal about how organizing is managed and focused in British unions. They are at the sharp end of the difficulties and tensions inherent in trying to manage a cultural shift in unions toward organizing activity. They have competing and contested views about how these tensions can and should be addressed, and they are, in general, a highly reflective group of practitioners. We are therefore interested not only in the work that they do, but in what that tells us about how British unions are approaching organizing. We are interested in their challenges, stresses, and dilemmas, as well as the victories and failures because these tell us a great deal about how tensions are managed. In this chapter, we are particularly keen to give voice to these workers because their experiences of organizing are so central to the developments and initiatives on which we are reflecting.

In chapter 5 we look at organizing campaigns. Given that all union organizing activity must at some point engage with workplace concerns and must engage workers at that level, it is essential that we look at the processes involved in this endeavor. In this chapter, we engage the notion of workplace activism, and we argue that although it is essential that workers are actively involved with their union at the workplace and other levels, there is an important role for the kind of strategic coordination mentioned previously. We argue that workplace organizing alone is not sufficient to promote union renewal in Britain, although it is a necessary part of that process. In this chapter, we also engage with the responses of employers to organizing campaigns. Employer behavior is very often left out of descriptions and analyses of organizing activity, and this, we argue, is a mistake. We can often only understand the behavior of unions, workers, and organizers in the context of the behavior of employers. We therefore want to explain why employers are often resistant but not unrelentingly hostile to unionization in the United Kingdom, and why some employers are in fact supportive. Our central argument here is that the outcomes of union organizing campaigns, and therefore of the impact of organizing activity more widely, can only be understood within a much broader evaluation of the purpose, strategies, and context in which they take place. The competing views about the purposes of organizing activity can often lead to organizing strategies that have multiple, contested, and sometimes contradictory objectives.

In the final chapter, we step back from looking at specific issues and campaigns to evaluate the consequences of organizing activity across the union movement. Although the story that we tell is complex, contentious, and occasionally ambiguous, we can, nonetheless, generalize about broad trends and directions. It is absolutely clear to us that there is more organizing activity taking place within British unions now than there was when the academy was launched in 1998. Lessons have been learned (often the hard way—by losing cases, by failing to mobilize workers, and by having to back out of resourcing campaigns), and those lessons inform present practice. It is also clear that, despite problems gaining reliable financial data, unions are investing more in this kind of work. There is a cadre of people within the British union movement who regard organizing as central to the work they do. They are vocal and reflective, and many of them are becoming increasingly influential. In this sense, "critical mass" has developed that is changing—albeit slowly—what many unions do and how they do it.

The story, however, is far from universally optimistic. Union membership has stagnated even in the broadly favorable political and economic conditions of the past decade until the financial crisis of 2008. Employment grew strongly across the British economy but unions largely failed to recruit and organize in these new areas. As a result, density levels have declined at an aggregate level, but as we shall see, this masks distinctive sectoral and industry patterns that are not as gloomy as the overall picture suggests. The period of economic and fiscal challenge, since the financial crisis of 2008, presents even more serious difficulties. It is unclear whether unions will be able to take advantage of their sectoral and industrial position to negotiate wage increases in the coming period. It seems unlikely that governments in the near future will actively support the right to statutory union representation or to the statutory imposition of collective bargaining. Overall then, our evaluation comments not only on what unions have achieved under New Labour but also on the position that leaves them in to weather future storms. In summary, our view is that unions have done much to change themselves in the past decade and that they are probably better placed than they were, but very serious challenges remain.

## FROM MANAGING DECLINE TO ORGANIZING FOR THE FUTURE

The steady decline in British trade union membership from 13.3 million in 1979 to 7.2 million in 1996 led the Trades Union Congress to launch the New Unionism initiative, not only to provoke a debate on how to revive the future of trade unionism but also to provide guidance and support to unions on developing new renewal strategies. As highlighted in the introduction, New Unionism was far broader than just a focus on organizing. It was a broad-based effort at using a range of strategies to promote revitalization. So, for example, the development of the Organising Academy sat alongside an almost simultaneous development of a Partnership Institute that promoted cooperative relations with employers in the hope of winning mutual gains. The apparent contradictions between these initiatives led to significant debate, particularly within the academic community (Carter and Fairbrother 1998, Heery 2002, Badigannavar and Kelly 2011), although some practitioners were more relaxed about the implications. John Monks, then general secretary of the TUC, argued that the position should be to organize "bad" employers and develop partnership