

Working Paper 10

Organising Unions, Organising Communities?

**Trades Union Councils & Community Union Politics in England and
Wales**

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Glossary

AFL-CIO	American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organisations
BME	Black, Minority and Ethnic Workers
BNP	British National Party
CLCs	Central Labor Councils
CWU	Communication Workers Union
GMB	General, Municipal and Boilermakers Trade Union
ISTC Union)	Iron and Steel Trades Confederation (now the Community Union)
LTC	London Trades Council
MSF	Manufacturing, Science and Finance Union
NFTC	National Federation of Trades Councils
NHS	National Health Service
NUT	National Union of Teachers
PCS	Public and Commercial Services Union
PFI	Private Finance Initiative
SEIU	Service Employees International Union
SMU	Social Movement Unionism
TELCO	The East London Citizens Organization
TGWU	Transport and General Workers Union
TUC	Trades Union Congress
UAF	Unite Against Fascism
Unison	The Public Service Union

Introduction

In November 2005, the Trade Union Congress (TUC) hosted a conference on 'Organising Unions, Organising Communities'. In the context of the conference, TUC General Secretary Brendan Barber highlighted the extent to which the future of trade union organising was dependent on unions building strong and sustainable links with local communities. It is noteworthy that at both this conference and at an earlier conference on 'community unionism' organised by MSF in 2003 there were prominent keynote speeches from representatives of the US labour movement. The 2005 conference was addressed by Ken Zinn Director at the *Center for Strategic Research* which is the research arm of the American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organisations (AFL-CIO) Organizing Department and the earlier conference was addressed by Joslyn N. Williams President of the *Metropolitan Washington Central Labor Council*. Central labour councils (CLCs) are the equivalent of trades union councils and the AFL-CIO is a confederation of trade unions that plays a similar role to the TUC. The AFL-CIO has encouraged the revitalisation of CLCs as part of its strategy of encouraging the development of effective 'community unionism'. The adoption of 'community unionism' as a strategic objective of the TUC seems to represent an extension to the widely recognised emulation of the US 'organising model' by the UK labour movement that has included the establishment of the TUC Organising Academy in 1998 (Fantasia and Voss 2004:121). There is, however, an enduring question as to whether trades union councils are the appropriate mechanism with which to build effective community-based trade unionism in the UK. The TUC does not appear to be prioritising this aspect of the US model and academic research on 'community unionism' in the UK suggests that trades union councils are marginal to existing examples of 'community unionism' (Wills 2001; 2002; Wills and Simms 2004).

In this paper, we report on the findings of our research on trades union councils in 2006 and reflect critically on whether there is a role for trades unions councils in building effective 'community unionism' in the UK. In recent years there has been a moderate upturn in trades union council activity. This is reflected in a growth of community campaigns and alliances (Labour Research 2003) and is confirmed by our own survey of trades union councils in 2006. However, the results of our survey also highlight a series of serious problems that pose a barrier to the growth or indeed long-term survival of trades union councils. These include a narrow and ageing demographic profile, a lack of resources and low levels of affiliation by constituent unions whose own branch network has been seriously undermined by declining membership participation and mergers. So, what is the future for local trades union councils? Is it worth investing in these organisations in the way that the AFL-CIO has invested in CLCs? If so, how could the structure and

organisation of trades union councils be reformed or restructured in order to overcome the above problems and weaknesses? In order to address these questions we focus on the following issues. First, we explore the academic literature on community unionism in an attempt both to define the phenomenon and address the issue as to why community unionism has become an increasingly popular response to trades union decline in recent years. Second, we present a brief history of trades council organising in the UK in order to highlight the complex patterns of continuity and change with regard to contemporary developments. Third, we provide an overview of contemporary developments and initiatives in order to highlight the changing priorities of the TUC and its constituent unions to community organising. Fourth, we explore the development of 'community unionism' in the USA in order to highlight important contextual and strategic differences between the conceptualisation and development of community union organising in the UK and the USA. Fifth, we report on our own survey of trades union councils in the UK in order to examine the scale and form of contemporary community union organising. Finally, we reflect critically on the potential strengths and visible weaknesses of trades union councils as vehicles for effective community union politics in the UK and suggest a series of reforms that could exploit potential strengths and overcome the increasingly visible and serious weaknesses associated with trades union councils.

Community unionism: A Review of the Literature

Trade unions have always balanced their 'vested interest' role of workplace organisation with a broader 'sword of justice' role as part of a movement for progressive social change (see Flanders 1975). Indeed, the political legitimacy of the labour movement often rested on the extent to which trade unions wielded the 'sword of justice' in an effective way outside the workplace. The resulting political legitimacy could be translated back into effective industrial strength measured in terms of trade union membership and the commitment and loyalty of individual workers to the union. Hence, the 'vested interest' and 'sword of justice' roles of trade unions were mutually supportive and contributed towards a virtuous circle of trade union industrial strength and political legitimacy. During the past three decades both these roles have undergone a sustained attack. In the UK, the development of 'Thatcherism' involved a sustained ideological attack on the legitimacy of trade unions by right wing politicians and media in which the 'vested interest' role of trade unions was presented as inimical to the 'common good' and trade unionists were presented as militant extremists (Hall 1979). This provided the legitimation for a sustained attack on the 'vested interest' role of trade unions through the repressive industrial relations legislation of the post-1979 Thatcher administrations and this has been compounded by patterns of de-industrialisation, privatisation and deregulation (Taylor 1993). While we

cannot enter into the complex debate regarding the reasons for union decline (See Brown *et al.* 1999; Fairbrother 2000; Metcalf 2005; Millward *et al.* 2000), trade unions have become locked into a vicious circle of declining industrial strength and political legitimacy in which dwindling union membership and recognition is compounded by reduced levels of political influence. A renewed and re-focussed community union politics promises to break unions out of this vicious circle by demonstrating that community organising can simultaneously reverse the declining membership base of trade unions and re-establish a public perception of trade unionism as a movement for progressive social change.

In the context of globalisation and neo-liberal restructuring, trade unions have been subject to declining industrial strength and political legitimacy throughout the developed world. There are examples of 'community unionism' that have developed in response to the resulting crisis in Australia (Ellem 2003; Tattershall 2005), Canada (Cranford 2003; Mathers 2000; Tufts 1998), and the UK (Wills 2001; 2002; Wills and Simms 2004). The phenomenon is most developed in the USA (Banks 1990; Brecher and Costello 1990; Bronfenbrenner *et al.* 1998; Craft 1990; Fine 2005; Nissen 2004), where the main focus has been on the AFL-CIO *Union Cities* strategy of revitalising CLCs as part of an increasing reorientation of the US labour movement around 'community unionism' (Eckstein 2001; Eimer 1999; Gapasin and Yates 1997). The apparent success of this strategy has been evident in the high profile of initiatives such as the *Justice for Janitors* campaign in Los Angeles that had spectacular success in terms of building trade union organisation and improving the pay and conditions amongst marginal and mainly female and Latino workers in Southern California (Pulido 1998; see Rowbotham and Mitter 1994 for a global exploration of these developments). The literature has demonstrated the increasing importance of alliances between unions and religious groups (Bole 1998; Peters and Merrill 1998) and the centrality of immigrants and black and minority ethnic groups in the development of 'community unionism' (Fine 2006). There has been a focus on the emergence of a new type of activist or 'bridge-builder' - individuals who share the 'labour' and 'community' viewpoints and the importance of local CLC leadership (Nissen 2004).

This academic literature has highlighted a number of potential benefits and a series of dangers and drawbacks for trade unions in the development of community alliances. The potential benefits include the empowerment of rank-and-file members, the recruitment of new union members beyond traditional membership bases and the recruitment of younger activists into the labour movement. The literature also highlights the success of community unions in raising wages and improving working conditions and thereby rearticulating the 'sword of justice' role of trade unions in the contemporary context. A number

of arguments have been developed to explain the success of 'community unionism'. These include the argument that low waged workers tend to have greater political power than economic power in contemporary society (Fine 2005) which can be exploited through the linking of marginal groups with trades unions, local politicians and local media (Wills 2002: 6). There is also the extent to which 'community unionism' enables the labour movement to resist the spatial re-organisation of capitalism associated with neo-liberalism and globalisation (Tufts 1998) and translate trade union traditions across spaces and sectors in a multi-scalar resistance to restructuring (Wills 1996). The literature has also highlighted a number of drawbacks and limitations associated with 'community unionism'. These include the generation of institutional rivalries between trade union and community organisations based on a mismatch in organisational procedures and priorities between formally structured trade unions and looser and more ad hoc forms of community organisation. These rivalries can reflect an imbalance of power and resources between unions and community groups and this is linked to the argument that labour movement organisations can only engage in community alliances as the dominant partner as part of a 'vanguard coalition' which precludes the development of 'common cause' coalitions (Heckscher and Palmer 1993). It has also been suggested that 'community unionism' lacks a political ideology or more specifically an 'ideology of labour' premised on an independent and oppositional politics without which labour lacks coherence as a movement (Gapasin and Yates 1997: 59-61).

The debate in the UK has tended to focus on the promise of what Wills and Simms (2004) have termed 'reciprocal community unionism'. This strategy involves the articulation of trade union interests and agendas in a way that connects with wider community interests. Trade unions thus have the potential to move beyond being the silent partners of the Labour Party to develop their own voice and power through working with community groups. 'Community unionism' is presented as a potential site for the development of a 'transversal politics' with the potential to combine the politics of recognition and redistribution in a way that can unite the cultural and trade union left (Wills 2001: 471). From this perspective, however, the tide of history seems to be against the involvement of trades union councils in this new form of politics. It is argued that trades councils were dominant in the first phase of 'community unionism' in the 19th century. During this period trade unions were not only based in local communities, but also played a central role in the construction and maintenance of local communities. Trades councils were marginalised during the 20th century as a result of the dynamics of Fordism and Keynesianism that consolidated the industrial strength of the labour movement within the workplace and its political strength in the electoral politics of the Labour Party. During the 20th century, therefore, the 'vested interest' and 'sword of justice' roles of the labour movement were subject to a

partial institutional separation. During this period of 'representational community unionism' the trade union movement continued to be involved in shaping the local community through workplace trade unionism, trades councils and indirectly via the Labour Party. This model of community-union relations began to breakdown in the 1970s owing to the Thatcherite attack on workplace trade unionism and the electoral weakness of the Labour Party.

In the new context, the proponents of community unionism argue that trade unions should seek to develop 'reciprocal community unionism'. This involves an important shift from the dominant model of post-war trade unionism which operated with a vertical organisational model based on the workplace. 'Reciprocal community unionism' involves experimenting with new horizontal forms of organisation with a community focussed agenda in which trade unions find common cause with groups centred on affiliations of religion, race, gender, disability and sexuality. There is, however, a question mark as to whether this model of community organising is a vibrant model for trade union renewal or an indication of trade union weakness and defeat. Indeed, Wills (2006), subsequent to her enthusiastic support for the Living Wage Campaigns organised by *London Citizens*, has questioned whether they amount to anything more than an 'agonised liberalism' that reflects the defeat and weakness of the political 'left'. This raises the question of whether these networks of 'reciprocal community unionism' are the most effective forms of organisation to fill the geographical and strategic gaps left by the demise of trades councils. Or do their limitations highlight the need to rebuild and revitalise trades union councils as independent and autonomous organisations of labour in the community? To begin to provide an answer we need to question whether the tide of history is really moving against trades union councils. We will explore this matter through a review of the history of trades councils in Britain.

A Brief History of Trades Councils in the UK

Trades union councils (or Trades Councils as they were formerly known) 'have a long and honourable but chequered history' (Flanders 1968: 66). Clinton (1977: 2) states that trades councils changed from vital institutions in building the strength of a locally based trade unionism in the mid-late 19th century to the 'humble instruments' of the centralised movement of a century later. However, the largely subservient position of trades councils in the latter 20th century, he suggests, was the outcome of a protracted conflict over visions and practices of trade unionism which saw the fortunes of trades councils ebb and flow. Such a perspective highlights the limitations of a recent historical account developed by Jane Wills and Melanie Simms (Wills and Simms 2004). This account tends to read off the changing fortunes of trades councils from the structural and spatial development of the capitalist economy and, therefore, obscures the way that trades councils have played a part in

the struggles through which they have been formed and reformed. The argument of Stevens (1997: 6), that the conflict within trades councils between 'loyalists and left-wingers ... constituted a part of the wider struggle for the overall direction of the British trade union and labour movements', is thus applicable to a period longer than the 25 years on which he focused.

The origins of trades councils can be traced back to the 'joint bodies' of unions which were formed spasmodically to mobilise solidarity for workers' struggles occurring in the period of industrial and political unrest lasting from 1816 to 1834 (Cole 1948: 186). Permanent organisations were formed from the 1850s onwards and the period between 1855 and 1866 saw the establishment of 24 trades councils (Fraser 1999). During this period, trades councils played an important economic and ideological role through the coordination of solidarity for strikes and the influencing of public attitudes towards trade unionism. However, they also developed a political role. In the 1868 general election campaign, trades councils 'pestered the candidates with questions about their attitudes on the problem of trade union rights' (Cole *op cit.* 205). In 1868 there was the first conference of the TUC following a call by Manchester and Salford Trades Council (Pelling 1976). Trades councils declined in the decade following 1875 but this was reversed dramatically by 'new unionism' and the spread of the 'idea of solidarity, prominent in the upheaval of 1889' (Cole *op cit.* 246). Between 1889 and 1892 there were 77 new trades councils and the affiliation to the London Trades Council (LTC) increased fivefold while that to Glasgow and Birmingham trades councils doubled (Fraser *op cit.*). It was the 'new unionists' in particular who were keen to establish new trades councils as vehicles for waging municipal labour politics (Pelling *op cit.* 100). In this context, trades councils addressed questions of general interest to working people, such as unemployment, housing and public health and put pressure on local authorities to pay union rates and for 'fair wage clauses' to be inserted in public contracts (Clinton *op cit.* 3). New unionism also had a political dimension which included the aim of creating independent representation for labour. The Labour Electoral Association (1887-1895) was based on trades council affiliations although it did not pursue an entirely independent line from the Liberal Party. By 1895, new unionists and socialists were dominant within trades councils which they used as vehicles for 'Socialist propaganda' and for gaining delegate credentials to the TUC (Cole *op cit.* 247).

Trades councils were expelled from the TUC in 1895. This has been presented as part of a struggle between 'Lib-Labs and socialists' (Fraser *op cit.* 95) or a 'manoeuvre' to reduce socialist influence within the trade unions (Cole *op cit.* 253) by established and more conservative sections of the TUC. While Clinton (*op cit.* 96) rejects this argument in favour of regarding the expulsion as part of a general process of trade union centralisation, it is

notable that it was only after the marginalisation of trades councils and the deradicalisation of the TUC (Hobsbawm 1984: 559) that national unions finally overcame their suspicion and jealousy towards trades councils and in the early twentieth century encouraged local branches to affiliate (Webb and Webb 1920a). Fabianism promoted a restricted and non-partisan political role for trades councils (Webb and Webb 1920b). This vied with the more expansive and partisan role envisaged by the radical doctrines of syndicalism, guild socialism and communism. From the latter perspectives, trades councils were not only regarded as the vehicles for establishing working class unity in the locality, but also as 'future organs of government' (Clinton *op cit.* 84). In the years 1918-1924 there was a significant rise in the number of trades councils and intensified political activity. Trades councils were at the forefront in calling for reorienting the labour movement in an anti-capitalist direction and reorganising it along less sectional lines. In 1922, the National Federation of Trades Councils (NFTC) was established which included participation by Communist Party members. Although making friendly overtures to the TUC, the NFTC received an unfriendly response. By the first national conference of Trades Councils the following year, 'the TUC leaders were in control' with discussion on trades council affiliation to the TUC being disallowed amidst rank and file complaints of exclusion from policy matters (Clinton *op cit.* 111). In spite of their subordination within the structures of the official movement, trades councils experienced their 'hour of glory' the following year in the General Strike (Cole 1939: 187). During the strike, most councils went well beyond the vague instructions issued by the General Council to form local 'Councils of Action' and established committees relating to such wide ranging functions as picketing, workers' defence, prisoners' assistance and entertainment. Trades councils proved to be the only bodies capable of coordinating local support for the strike and therefore wielded 'great power', but this did not translate into any significant or widespread challenge to the established institutions of local authority, nor was any such challenge seriously envisaged (Clinton *op cit.* 132).

Following the defeat of the General Strike, trades councils failed to grow in numbers or size. While they continued to support unions in disputes and engage in community politics, they operated with a more limited degree of independence. This was partly due to the 'almost fanatical force' used by the TUC and national union leaders to stifle any independence (Clinton *ibid.* 137). The witch-hunting of communists and the organisation of the unemployed were two of the main issues around which 'tension and conflict' arose between the TUC and trades councils. Trades councils that refused to implement the 'Black Circulars', that excluded communists from becoming delegates, were removed from the TUC list of recognised councils (Clinton *ibid.* 145). However, while most councils eventually accepted the circulars, many ignored them in practice (Laybourn and Murphy 1999; Stevens, 1993).

The TUC also encouraged councils to form unemployed organisations: a largely unsuccessful initiative inspired by opposition to the communist led unemployed marches (Clinton, *op cit*). The central plank of the TUC agenda for trades councils was set out in 1935 by Walter Citrine who regarded them as agents of local recruitment campaigns. This was a top-down approach 'as the TUC sought to use trades council to increase their profile, membership and influence' (Wills 2002: 54). It was also indicative of the TUC 'policy of containment' of trades councils which operated mainly in this period by measures aimed at detaching 'political' from 'industrial' functions (Stevens 1997: 7). The 'Black Circulars' were finally withdrawn in 1943, but the onset of the Cold War provided a new impetus for the introduction of restrictive measures such as mandatory registration with the TUC and careful examination of council minutes. This was justified by the apparently undemocratic seizure of trades councils by Communists which was highlighted by the TUC in a pamphlet titled *The Tactics of Disruption: Communist Methods Exposed* published in 1949 (Phillips 1999). Despite such measures, trades councils 'expanded considerably' in the 1940s (Stevens *op cit*: 7) and played a prominent role in political activities such as the campaign to ban fascist organisations (Renton 2000). By the 1950s, Trades Councils were still 'important organisations' (Stevens 1997: 7) with 15,000 affiliated branches totalling more than 2.5 million members (Flanders, *op cit*). However, by this time trades councils had largely become the tools of nationally established policies (Clinton *op cit*) especially following the TUC's successful 'battle for control' over the London Trades Council (LTC) which ended in 1953 (Stevens 1997: 14). While these political manoeuvrings were important, it was the rise of national collective bargaining and the national political influence of the TUC through the Labour Party which, from the 1950s onwards, resulted in trades councils becoming largely discredited and left to decline. By the 1970s, a leading industrial relations text described the rather limited functions of trades councils as being 'to nominate union representatives to regional councils, to provide services to the member unions and to spread the policies of the TUC' (Williamson 1970: 58).

The extent to which trades councils went beyond this role after the mid-1950s is a matter which requires further investigation. However, it is apparent that the crisis of Keynesianism in the 1970s was met by an attempt by some trades councils to co-ordinate and generalise resistance and by so doing re-orientate themselves as part of a broader socio-political movement. Wills and Simms (*op cit*) recognised the part played by trades councils in developing alliances to defend jobs threatened by industrial restructuring. Wainwright (1979) identified a tendency for trades councils to co-ordinate local bodies into a more coherent movement and to campaign around broader issues such as unemployment, racism and public services. At this time, trades councils were seen as operating as socialist organisations, but with the significant limitation

of not being capable of wielding any industrial power due to the distance which had developed between the official body and the grassroots membership (Wainwright *ibid*: 226). A similar limitation was also recognised by activists involved in campaigning around welfare state restructuring who argued that initiatives to link community based organisations with trades councils did so mainly at the level of local officialdom (LEWRG 1979). Trades councils were also prominent in taking the initiative to set up Miners Support Groups during the 1984-5 strike, but did not seem to play the same central or co-ordinating role seen in the previous decade (Massey and Wainwright 1985). The idea that trades councils 'have long established roots which can survive failures and isolation' (Wainwright *op cit*: 232) was then put to the test. According to Fairbrother (2000: 78), many must have failed as 'councils were prone to become forums for the politics of political illusion' and a substitute for participation in union branches. The extent to which this position is supported by the recent revival of interest in community unionism in the UK is explored in the next section.

Community Unionism' in the UK: Recent Developments and Initiatives

In recent years there has been a renewed interest within the British labour movement in 'community unionism' mainly as a result of two important developments. The first has been driven by a series of endogenous factors that have resulted in the decline of local trades union councils as organisations which had traditionally formed the bridge between the labour movement and the wider community. The second has been driven by a series of exogenous factors including the success of 'community unionism' in the USA as part of an 'organising' approach that has been emulated by the TUC and the broader labour movement in Britain. The decline of trades union councils is marked. In 1982 the number of officially recognised trades union councils was 418 and in 2002 this had declined to 138 (Labour Research 2003). In 1992, the TUC General Council outlined proposals to reactivate trades councils and made recommendations that affiliated unions should nominate and encourage national and regional officers to take responsibility for liaising with and developing trades union councils. Since that time there have been limited signs of rejuvenation which have been the products of two main dynamics. First, the election or appointment of new officers following protracted periods of moribund activity. This was the case in Cardiff, where the election of a new leadership coincided with new affiliations, increased local networking and the activity of a younger generation of activists motivated by protests against the war in Iraq. In Chelmsford, the election of new officers was followed by intensified local networking and successful campaigns on NHS reform and a joint campaign with OXFAM on making Chelmsford a 'fair trade town'. Second, the concern of the TUC to build community campaigns against racism in the context of the increased electoral success of the BNP in

many towns in Northern England. This was the case in Oldham, Greater Manchester where a moribund trades union council was re-established by the North West Regional TUC in order to coordinate a community campaign against the BNP (Labour Research 2003).

The second externally driven dynamic underpinning the renewed interest in 'community unionism' is the perceived success of labour-community alliances in rejuvenating trade unionism in the USA. The TUC has presented 'community unionism' as a central plank in its 'New Unionism' project which includes the establishment of an Organising Academy to train a new generation of activists to 'reach out to workers in all walks of life' (O'Grady 1999). The development of community union skills was central to the ethos of the Academy and the TUC strategy was based on an explicit attempt to emulate developments in the USA (O'Grady *ibid.*: 11). The emulation of the US 'organising' model has not, however, involved a radical reappraisal of the power and resources available to trades union councils in the way that the AFL-CIO focussed on the power and resources of CLCs in the USA. The way in which 'community unionism' fits into the current thinking of the TUC is expressed by Frances O'Grady, Deputy General Secretary and formerly Director of the 'New Unionism' project:

Community unionism offers a way forward, not as a substitute for workplace organizing, but as a complement to it. It is based on the simple premise that the combined power of all those social movements which want to see a more just and equal society is much greater than any one of them on their own. We all share a belief in active citizenship, inclusiveness and the drive to deepen democracy..... community unionism needs to learn tolerance for our differences, build sustainable links and focus on the real interests we share... (O'Grady *ibid.*: 12).

The development of 'community unionism' is thus about building trade union voice within community campaigns as part of an overarching strategy of organising difficult to organise workers in an attempt to boost levels of union membership and recognition. Hence, the development of union-community links is also a central component of the TUC campaign to recruit black and minority ethnic (BME) workers in which the TUC has made it a priority to re-establish links between black activists and trade unionists (Labour Research 2005). These links were developed in the 1980s and were manifested in the support of union branches for community-based campaigns against the deportation of asylum seekers, racial attacks and racial murders and the support and solidarity of black delegations for striking miners during the 1984-5 dispute. However, the emergence of a new generation of black activists, who have been politicised through the anti-war and anti-globalisation movements, do not see trade unions as their natural allies in their battles for

freedom and justice (See Holgate, 2005 on the broader problems associated with organising BME workers). The TUC 'Organising Black Workers' project is an attempt to organise BME workers by forging links with BME community organisations and has consisted of a number of 'roundtables' in major cities that have assembled black trade union activists and black community activists to explore how to make trade unions more relevant to black people, how to develop links between trade unions and BME communities and the ways in which trade unions can support community campaigns.

The focus on BME workers and the emulation of the US model have produced initiatives such as the 'living wage' campaigns developed by TELCO and more recently London Citizens that involve trade unions forging alliances with different groups of people who have a common stake in the vibrancy of local civil society and the quality of community life. TELCO attempted to emulate campaigns in North America which successfully aligned unions with faith and community groups around issues of economic and social justice (Wills 2002: 27). As well as this focus on metropolitan areas, there has been an attempt to utilise 'community unionism' as a catalyst for community regeneration in declining or re-industrialising regions. The Iron and Steel Trades Confederation (ISTC), renamed the Community Union, has attempted to move beyond its narrow and declining base in the iron and steel industries in communities such as South Wales, Scotland, South Yorkshire and North East England to organise workers across communities. However, as Wills (2001: 474) notes, following the Industrial Relations Act 1999 the main priority of the ISTC has been on union recognition procedures rather than community organising. At this point it will be useful to review briefly the model of community unionism that has developed in the USA in order to understand the nature and scope of the 'successes' that British unions have been attempting to emulate.

The Revitalisation of Central Labor Councils in the USA: Success and Limits

The general background to the revitalisation of CLCs in the USA in the 1990s was the declining strength of the labour movement as evidenced by low and falling levels of union density alongside a diminished capacity to mobilise industrial and political influence. The long-term decline of the US labour movement was accelerated in the 1980s and early 1990s by an aggressive anti-union stance taken by employers and the state. Since the early 1990s, neo-liberal restructuring has involved the transnationalisation of production, intensified labour migration especially of Latino workers into the USA, a reduction in the quality and scope of democracy as power has been transferred from representative to trans- and supranational organisations and increased capital mobility that has undermined established collective bargaining mechanisms (Robinson 2003: 200-3). The incumbent leadership

clung steadfastly to the dominant model of business unionism and failed to respond adequately to the crisis. The failure of both 'productivity pacts' with employers and the strategy of providing uncritical support for the Democratic Party in return for promised labour reform to deliver substantive gains for US workers provided the basis for the emergence of a new radical leadership during the mid-1990s. Neoliberal restructuring thus contributed to the development of a more critical and inclusive type of trade unionism that culminated eventually in the election of a new leadership for the AFL-CIO that was more inclined towards an organising and community approach to union revitalisation (Robinson 2003). These changes in union culture were responses to the decline in the industrial sector which produced a more critical union perspective on economic management and to the expansion of the service sector where membership growth was greatest amongst women and ethnic minority workers who favoured an inclusive union culture. These workers were particularly open to the moral vision for trade unionism articulated by emerging leaders such as John Sweeney, which drove successful organising campaigns such as the renowned *Justice for Janitors* initiative in Los Angeles. These new members also provided a new political base for the election of the 'New Voice' slate to the leadership of the AFL-CIO. In the light of these experiences, the new leadership of the AFL-CIO changed its political spending towards educating its membership and voter mobilisation which became key tasks for the newly oriented CLCs.

Reorienting and revitalising CLCs were not easy tasks as, by the mid-1990s, they resembled the 'dinosaurs' of a passing era of craft unionism. CLCs were dominated by the conservative building trades unions and produced leadership figures that were unrepresentative of an increasingly diverse workforce. Their activities were strictly limited to 'providing perfunctory services and organizing obligatory Labor Day parades' (Ness 2001: 16). In spite of their largely dormant state, there existed a handful of newly elected local leaders who set about spreading their strategy for reinvigorating CLCs to the national level. In 1996, the AFL-CIO convened the first national meeting of CLCs which set up an advisory council that produced a programme for developing CLCs called 'Union Cities'. Its goal was to 'revitalise labor councils as support centres for expanding labour's economic and political power' (Ness *ibid*: 20) and its practice was to provide additional resources to those CLCs that were able to meet its main priority of supporting union organising. While commentators assessed this initiative as having the potential to revitalise CLCs as vehicles for union solidarity and as means for developing a union focus beyond the workplace (Fantasia and Voss *op cit*) the actual advances made were significant, but still very limited. Union Cities was launched in 1997 and by 1999 only just over a quarter of CLCs had joined (Eimer 2001) and only about 15-20 CLCs in major cities had been fully reactivated (Ness *op cit*).

Nevertheless, there exist specific cases which demonstrate the type and quality of activity of which revitalised CLCs have been capable.

Union Cities encouraged *King City Labor Council* in Seattle to focus its existing organising efforts to help form a multi-union organising body named 'Seattle Union Now' whose main goal was to establish the 'right to organise as a commonly recognised civil right' (cited in Rosenblum 2001: 180). This involved a deal between the CLC and local unions whereby the latter received practical assistance with the mobilisation of solidarity in return for a commitment to engage in campaigns. This assistance ranged from letter writing and picketing to direct action, access to political and community/religious leaders and support and training in research and media relations. The situation facing immigrant workers was particularly pertinent to the attempted transformation of the *Los Angeles County Federation of Labor*. Although still dominated by the old conservative leadership, the organising agenda created some space for radical activists to overcome some of the obstacles to linking organised labour and associations of immigrant workers. The election of new officers from the Latino community also reinforced the political strategy of mobilising the Latino vote which indicates that political as well as organising activity formed an important element of the revitalisation strategy (Gapasin 2001).

An independent political strategy was pronounced in Atlanta where the CLC's backing for a successful mayoral candidate translated into political influence that ensured union contracts for work in relation to the 1996 Olympics. In addition to the usual routine of political activities such as leafleting and canvassing, *Atlanta CLC* also engaged in direct action such as occupying and marching on the office of the Democrat State Governor, who broke an electoral promise not to privatise public services. This campaign also included a prayer meeting with Black church members indicating how CLCs have attempted to gain the support of religious groups in order to underpin the moral legitimacy of their message and mobilisations (Acuff 2001). CLCs have also monitored the voting records of politicians on labour issues and have arranged pre-endorsement meetings to quiz candidates of all parties on policy issues. In Wisconsin, this practice was regarded as having made a significant contribution to the passage of a living wage ordinance (Zullo 2001). Wisconsin was one of a growing number of CLCs that committed staff to the campaigns for living wage ordinances which are local –often city level – laws that establish a wage floor for particular groups of workers. While some CLCs used existing political influence, others used the living wage issue as a means of political leverage with, for example, the CLC in Somerville, Massachusetts refusing to endorse any candidate until a living wage ordinance was passed. These campaigns also involved CLCs in coalitions with a diversity of

organisations including those representing students and the elderly as well as churches and other faith organisations (Luce 2001).

While real progress has been made with the transformation of a small, but significant number of CLCs, this has been limited by both external and internal factors. While there has been some evidence of rising worker militancy such as the strikes at UPS and Boeing in the mid-1990s, this cannot be characterised as the 'next upsurge' in worker mobilisation (Clawson 2003). Significantly, a great deal of the initiative for change in the union movement has come from the influx of radicals from other social movements. Some of these radicals have been appointed rather than elected to positions of influence in unions and the AFL-CIO (Fantasia *op cit*). At CLC level, such progressive radicals have also been engaged in an internal power struggle against the incumbent conservative leadership (Gapasin *op cit*) and where this fight has been too slow or difficult to wage, they have been key in developing the activity of the campaigning organisation 'Jobs with Justice' which has worked closely with CLCs in some localities (Fantasia *op cit*). Another problem of the rather top-down impetus for change has been the institutional relationship between the AFL-CIO and its affiliates. The former has little power to do anything more than prod the latter to ensure that union locals affiliate to CLCs thereby still leaving these bodies subject to chronically low levels of affiliation and underfunding. Moreover, the current leadership has been attempting to overcome an institutional legacy of its own neglect of CLCs and of attempts to restrict their autonomy and power (Eimer *op cit*). This suggests that the difficult task of revitalising CLCs has not only been due to a hostile external environment, but has been compounded by bitterly contested inter- and intra-organisational union politics as evidenced by the split within the AFL-CIO in 2005 when the Teamsters and the SEIU left to form the 'Change to Win' coalition (see Crosby 2006; Milkman 2006).

As we have seen, therefore, from a position of seemingly terminal decline trades union councils in the UK have shown modest signs of rejuvenation in recent years. This has been in a context in which the TUC and individual unions have attempted to emulate successful union-community forms of political activity that have developed in the USA. The transplantation of the US model has been rather selective particularly with regard to the lack of focus on trades union councils in the UK in comparison with the centrality of CLCs in the USA. We have suggested that there may be important historical and political 'path dependencies' in the UK to account for this selectivity. The question that needs to be posed is whether the ongoing weakness and marginalisation of trades union councils best serves the long-term interests of the British labour movement. In the next section, we present the results of a survey on trades union councils that will hopefully contribute towards an engagement with this important issue.

Trades Union Councils: Recent Patterns of Decline and Regeneration.

In order to assess contemporary patterns of trades union council decline and regeneration a survey of trades union councils in England and Wales was undertaken. The research was carried out during 2006 and comprised a postal questionnaire that was sent to 123 trades union councils in England and Wales and a follow-up series of case study interviews with officers in 10 trades union councils. The response rate to the questionnaire was 51 per cent and responses were gained from all TUC regions (See Appendix: Table 1). Yorkshire and Humberside is the only region that is significantly under-represented in the resulting data. The questionnaire and interviews engaged with the following issues: the demographic composition of trades union councils; levels of participation and affiliation; the activities and priorities and the political engagement of trades union councils.

The demographic profile of both officers and delegates is preponderantly elderly, white and male. This reflects the narrow demographic range of union activists and union membership. The age profile of trades union council secretaries is positively skewed towards the older age ranges with 46.7 per cent being over 60, 81.7 per cent over 50 and only 1.7 per cent under 40 (see Appendix: Figure 1). In terms of gender composition, 88.3 per cent were male and 11.7 per cent were female (see Appendix: Figure 2). The ethnic profile of secretaries highlighted that 93.3 per cent were 'white UK' with 'white other' being the only other significant category (3.3 per cent) (see Appendix: Figure 3). The following were typical of the comments on the perceived demographic crisis within trades union councils:

Of all our delegates only one is in employment, the rest of the council are retired members. We often feel that we are out of touch with industrial issues. Someone somewhere has to get young people involved if we are to survive as a progressive organisation.

Our only problem is that we cannot get younger delegates from our affiliated unions. Most of our delegates are 'elderly'.

If you send researchers to the conference in Torquay you will see an ailing organisation. This reflects the collective age of local trades union councils. ... The youngest delegate we have is in his mid-40s. The trades council is mainly male and white, which is something which can only be changed when more branches and hence more delegates from a wider background can be tempted to become members.

There are examples of marked rejuvenation where a younger and more demographically diverse leadership has developed. A good illustration of this is the case of Cardiff, which has seen a marked increase in attendance in recent years (attendance up by 100 per cent). This has been developed

alongside the emergence of a new and very diverse leadership (the president is female, the secretary and treasurer are BME workers, the vice president has a disability). Cardiff has also attempted to increase participation in meetings by introducing workplace reports by delegates. More generally, the decline in participation and activity has been stemmed.

There is a wide variation between trades union councils with higher and lower levels of participation. There are important geographical differences with participation being in general terms higher in areas where the trade union movement has not been dominant i.e. South West, West, and South East England. In terms of the affiliation of trades union council officers UNISON members (35 per cent) were most active followed by AMICUS (28.4 per cent), TGWU (23.5 per cent), PCS (19.4 per cent) and GMB (13.7 per cent). There were similar trends in the leadership of trades union councils. UNISON, TGWU and AMICUS provided 18.3 per cent of trades union council secretaries followed by CWU (10.2 per cent) and PCS (6.8 per cent). AMICUS provided 22.4 per cent of trades union council presidents followed by TGWU (15.5 per cent) and UNISON (10.3 per cent). AMICUS provided 21.7 per cent of trade union council treasurers followed by TGWU (15 per cent), UNISON (13.3 per cent) and GMB (10 per cent) (see Appendix: Tables 2-4 and Figures 4-6). Participation in trades union councils can be measured by the number of affiliates and the number of affiliated representatives attending trade union council meetings (see Appendix: Figures 7 and 8). The main trend reported by 38.3 per cent of respondents was that there had been little change in the level of affiliation over the past three years, although 31.7 per cent reported that affiliation had increased a little and 8.3 per cent reported that it had increased a lot. A majority therefore reported that affiliation levels had either improved or stayed about the same. Conversely 20 per cent reported that affiliation had decreased a little and 1.7 per cent that it had decreased a lot. The average level of affiliations was 13 ranging from 2 (Ryde and East Wight) to 58 (Battersea and Wandsworth). A majority of the respondents reported that attendance at trades union council meetings had increased during the past three years with 11.7 per cent reporting that attendance had increased a lot and 38.3 per cent reporting that attendance had increased a little. In contrast 31.1 per cent reported no change while 16.4 per cent reported a slight decrease in participation and only 1.6 per cent reported a marked decrease in participation. There was a slight increase in the average level of attendance at trade union council meetings over the past three years: 8.5 delegates during 2003, 9.0 delegates during 2004 and 9.7 delegates during 2005 (see Appendix: Figure 9); although it has to be noted this is from a very low base.

Some of the principal factors accounting for the low level of participation in trades union councils are the decline in workplace activism, the merger of workplace branches and the under-affiliation of branches. The result has been

a decline in the number of individuals able or willing to represent their union branch at the local trade union council. A representative in the North West commented:

Industrial decline is the main problem in our area. Trade union branches are not really functioning well and providing delegates/affiliates as previously. Branch life needs reactivating as a first step

This was highlighted in the case of Lincoln where low levels of activity were related to the moribund nature of the branch structure of constituent unions particularly AMICUS (MSF-AEEU) which had traditionally been dominant within this trades union council owing to the prevalence of large engineering plants in the city. In a context in which many branches have a high proportion of retired members and branch officers have over-loaded workloads, trades union council representation and activity tends to be 'pushed to the bottom of the pecking order'. This is compounded by the merger of branches and the lack of attendance at branch meetings. This partly reflects a demographic shift in that younger union members increasingly join the union for instrumental reasons and younger shop stewards show little interest in getting involved in either the branch or the trades union council. Further, unions are not referring matters to the trades union council so when young people do get involved they soon lose enthusiasm owing to the lack of activity. In Lincoln, the main barrier to greater trades union council activity was presented as a lack of enthusiasm amongst affiliated unions and not as a lack of resources - the council budget was generally under spent.

Despite these problems trades union councils continue to be involved in community campaigns on a broad range of issues. Respondents to the survey were asked to rank the priority that their trades union council gives to activities (See Appendix: Tables 5-7 and Figures 10-12). The results highlight the importance attached to campaigning on local issues which was cited by 27.3 per cent of respondents as first priority and 26 per cent as second priority. Supporting local trade unions in dispute was the first priority of 23.6 per cent of respondents. Recruiting union members was the first priority of 10.9 per cent. Trade union education was an important second (24 per cent) and third (20.9 per cent) priority. Liaising with community groups was cited as first priority by only 5.5 per cent but as second priority by 20 per cent and third priority by 16.3 per cent. These priorities indicate that trades union councils have been focused more on developing a wider set of activities around a broad industrial and political agenda as opposed to focusing on the narrower task of rebuilding membership levels either directly through recruitment campaigns or indirectly through raising the profile of trade unions and trade unionism in the local community. This analysis is supported by examining the issues and resolutions passed at meetings and the focus of campaigns

established by trades union councils. A wide range of speakers were heard at meetings, the most frequently addressed topics were the broader political issues of opposing racism and fascism, defending public services and opposing the war on Iraq. The importance given to these matters was also reflected in the number of affiliations and donations to organisations actively engaged in campaigning around these issues and this was also reinforced by the frequency with which trades union councils developed joint working or campaigning with these organisations. Below we outline the main focus of trades union council campaigns and initiatives and provide examples of trades union activities that address these themes. In the survey respondents were asked to report on activities during the past three years, the activities reported below therefore cover the period between 2003 and 2006. In contrast to developments in the USA, it is notable that there are few examples of trades union councils working in alliance with faith or religious groups and movements. However, there are exceptional cases including Knowsley, Burnley, Lancaster, and Blackpool.

Trades Union Council Campaigns

Union Recruitment

There are few examples of trades union councils either leading or supporting recruitment campaigns. Significant exceptions include:-

- Battersea and Wandsworth have an 'organising centre' and are currently working on three 'greenfield' areas: ASDA store workers with the GMB, Coral bookmakers with Community and CPS car parking attendants with UNISON.
- Ilfracombe supported the GMB in a recruitment drive in local factories and plans to work with USDAW to recruit members at the new TESCO store in the town.

Community Events

A majority of trades union councils (62 per cent) took part in various types of community festivals and events and there are examples of trades union councils sponsoring community organisations. Ulverston, for example, sponsored a free rides day on a small railway in a local park during the school holidays and made donations to a St John's Ambulance uniform appeal. Other community based events were more akin to celebrations of trade unionism and workers' rights. These included workers' memorial day, town centre exhibitions to educate the public on the role of trade unions, the Durham Miners' Gala and the Tolpuddle Festival. However, the majority of trades union councils (67 per cent) did not organise a May Day Event. Amongst

those that did there were 5 demonstrations, 16 rallies, 10 public meetings and 10 social events.

Industrial Disputes

Supporting unions engaged in industrial disputes was a significant and widespread activity. 58 per cent of trades union councils invited trade unionists in dispute to address their meetings, 67 per cent made contributions to strike funds, 49 per cent provided speakers to address rallies and public meetings in support of workers in dispute and 79 per cent sent a delegation to rallies, public meetings or picket lines. There was a particular focus on raising awareness and money for workers involved in the Gate Gourmet dispute (see EIRO 2005), the civil service dispute (see EIRO 2004) and the fire fighters pay dispute (see EIRO 2002). A specific example of how support for industrial action was linked to campaigning with community organisations was around the issue of pensions. Northampton supported PCS strike action on civil service pensions. This involved the organisation of meetings, attending a rally in London, setting up a stall in the town centre and supporting and leafleting the PCS picket line.

Pensions

Pensions was an issue around which trades union councils were engaged in campaigning more than any other and a matter on which they passed most resolutions (along with the Iraq war). Notable examples included:

- Northampton pursued a campaign on pensions working with the National Pensioners Convention.
- Bristol lobbied local councillors regarding the changes to the local government pension scheme. It also had links with the Older People's Forum through which it pressed for free transport.
- Cardiff supported the local government workers' action over pensions and held a public meeting on the theme of 'Pensions not War'.

Public Services

The most widespread activity of trades union councils was around the defence of public service provision and this appears to be in line with the main priority of 'campaigning around local issues' and related to another priority of 'liaising with community groups'. Most trades union council initiatives in this field was in the form of activities around specific single issues, examples of which are given below.

Education:

- Burnley lobbied a local college against cuts to the adult education programme and wrote letters to the press on the issue of changes to school holidays.

Housing:

- Battersea and Wandsworth produced a report on affordable housing.
- Darlington was part of a campaign to preserve local authority control of social housing stock. This involved door knocking, public meetings, meetings with residents' associations.
- Northampton was part of a campaign against the transfer of council housing stock in Northampton. This involved writing letters, organising meetings, lobbying elected representatives. Northampton subsequently assisted campaigns in other parts of Northamptonshire.
- Salisbury had a campaign of lobbying MPs and writing to local newspapers and radio stations on the issue of defending council housing.
- Waveney was part of campaign to retain social housing under local authority control. This involved lobbying, mass leafleting, public meetings and letters to local press.

Health:

- Burnley was part of a campaign against the closure of a local hospital. The campaign involved a rally, march and letter writing.
- Rugby campaigned for a locally managed NHS primary care trust.
- Salisbury had a campaign of lobbying MPs and writing to local newspapers and radio stations on the issue of PFI in the NHS.
- Ulverston and Barrow were both part of a successful campaign to establish an asbestos awareness and support centre.
- Winchester met regularly with the local NHS trust to discuss issues of over-spending, staffing, job-losses and the selling off of NHS property.

Transport:

- Lewisham initiated a letter writing campaign to the local press on the issue of rail privatisation.

- Rugby campaigned for improvements to rail and bus station facilities, improvements to Sunday/Bank holiday bus services, and the restriction of traffic in the town centre.
- Salisbury had a campaign of lobbying MPs and writing to local newspapers and radio stations on the issue of rail re-nationalisation and getting freight back on the rails.
- Ulverston made successful representations to the local authority on serious road problems associated with flooding and drainage.

In addition to campaigning on specific aspects of public services, a small number of trades union councils also developed broader campaigns which involved the construction of an alliance of unions and public service user groups. For example, Northampton campaigned against privatisation, which involved leafleting at a local balloon festival. It also supported the CWU campaign against post office privatisation including participation in rallies and leafleting and petitioning at post offices. It also opposed cuts in local public services including nurseries and leisure centres. This involved the construction of a coalition of user groups and unions such as UNISON as well as organising public meetings, lobbying of MPs and councillors, and leafleting, marches and rallies. Probably the most extensive inter-union cooperation was seen in the Bristol 'Keep Public Services Public' and 'Not for Private Profit' campaigns. These were initiated in January 2006 by a resolution from a PCS branch which called on the trades union council to participate in meetings of local union representatives to coordinate the campaign. It was also given impetus by the NUT's campaign against academy schools which included a call for a public demonstration. Following monthly organising meetings which were held prior to trades union council meetings, a demonstration and rally took place in April 2006 and mobilised approximately 300 people. The demonstration was led by the banner of Bristol Trades Union Council with its slogan of 'Working Together in the Community' which was followed by banners from 10 different public service unions. The rally was opened by the President of Bristol Trades Union Council and was addressed by speakers from national, regional and local levels of public service unions as well as by representatives of local campaigning bodies.

Anti-fascism

The role played by the BNP in the riots in Northern cities in 2001 as well as its electoral strategy triggered a good deal of campaigning by trades union councils. Some trades union councils in the North received additional assistance from the TUC in the form of small grants. Anti-fascist activity involved a lot of joint working with other local organisations as well as with newly created national bodies such as Unite Against Fascism (UAF) which

received the most affiliations or donations from trades union councils of any body. Specific examples of trades union councils anti-fascist activity include:

- Battersea and Wandsworth developed a joint campaign with UAF against the BNP.
- Burnley distributed leaflets against the BNP.
- Lewisham was involved in the organisation of three anti-racist May Day events, public meetings and leafleting campaigns against the BNP.
- Wolverhampton undertook leafleting, monitoring of activity and issuing press releases on anti-fascism which it made one of the themes of its May Day event. It was also involved in working with other local organisations to arrange a 'Holocaust Memorial Day'.
- Rotherham formed Rotherham UAF. The group involved trade unions, local political parties, and community and faith groups. This resulted in public meetings, leafleting, letters to local newspapers, lobbying local councillors and liaising with other trades union councils in the area.
- Stockport *founded Stockport Against Racism and Fascism* under the direction of trades council officers, but also involving representatives of local unions, campaigning bodies and political parties. The campaign was directed against the BNP who fielded candidates in three wards in the 2004 local elections. The campaign involved advertisements in the local press and a large-scale leafleting campaign.
- Leeds made campaigning against racism and fascism a central part of its activity. This seems due to BNP leader Nick Griffin standing for election in nearby Keighley as well as him standing trial in Leeds. The trades union council worked alongside UAF to mobilise large demonstrations outside the court.
- Cardiff joined the demonstration at the BBC studios in opposition to a party political broadcast by the BNP.

The case of Oldham is an interesting and important example of the role of trades union councils in the struggle against the BNP. Oldham was re-launched as a result of a local campaign against the BNP which involved its forerunner (Oldham Trade Unions Against Racism and Fascism) working closely with other local and national anti-racist and anti-fascist organisations. Oldham trades union council only had a small number of affiliated branches and its meetings were not particularly well attended. However, a small group of active delegates focused its activities specifically on local campaigning around racism, which involved organising public meetings, liaising with community groups and participating in local bodies. Its anti-fascist activities

were concentrated mainly around the production and distribution of leaflets opposing the BNP and press campaigning. The secretary was arrested for opposing the disruption of the 'Holocaust Memorial Day' by the BNP. This resulted in a defence campaign with local, national and international support that was successful in ensuring that the charges against him were dropped. More recent campaigning was hindered by the breakdown of collaborative working with UAF.

Equality

A sizeable number of trades union councils discussed the question of 'anti-discrimination', approximately 30 per cent passed resolutions on the topic and approximately 50 per cent engaged in 'anti-discrimination' campaigns. Wolverhampton was particularly active around equality issues and sent observers to the conferences of the Women's TUC, Black Workers' TUC, and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender TUC. It was also affiliated to campaigns supporting the rights of women and migrant workers. In particular, it aided an anti-deportation campaign to gain support from the local labour movement and invited a speaker to address the trades union council on the subject of institutional racism. Other examples of activity by trades union councils on equality included:

- Bristol sent delegates to the Race Equality Council and participated in the local 'Respect' festival.
- Cardiff sent delegates to the Black Workers TUC conference and to the Welsh TUC conference on Challenging Racism. It also began to campaign in support of migrant workers and participated in rallies following attacks on a local mosque.

International

An international dimension to trades union council activity was also prevalent in many cases. This element of activity was dominated by the issue of the war in Iraq. A majority of trades union councils discussed the war in Iraq and just over half of these passed resolutions on it with even more being involved in the campaign to oppose it. This led to the Stop the War Coalition being the second most frequently invited group to address trades union council delegates and the most mentioned organisation with which trades union councils engaged in joint working and campaigning. Specific local activities included:

- Cowes and District organised a demonstration and public meeting against the war in Iraq.

- Peterborough organised a march, public meetings and distributed leaflets against the war.
- Rugby distributed leaflets for the local Stop the War Coalition.
- Watford organised meetings and protests against the war and lobbied MPs and wrote letters to the press on this issue.
- Wolverhampton coordinated the local campaign against the war and held a public meeting on 'Iraq, the Way Forward' which was filmed and distributed.

There were links between trades union councils and international organisations and campaigns. These included affiliations and joint campaigns. Examples include:

Kingston, Rugby, Leeds, Bridgwater, Barnsley, Coventry, Rotherham, North Staffordshire and Leicester were affiliated to, or made donations to, Amnesty International.

Wolverhampton was affiliated to a wide range of international solidarity organisations and invited speakers from Palestine, Venezuela and Cuba Solidarity.

Numerous trades union councils were involved in the Make Poverty History Campaign.

Trades Union Councils and Political Engagement

There has been a loosening of ties between the trade unions and their traditional allies in the Labour Party. In places there were enduring personal and institutional linkages between trades union councils and the Labour Party. These were strongest in the 'old labour' heartlands of Northern England with enduring linkages of personnel between trades union councils and local Labour Parties. The linkages were weaker or had broken down completely outside these heartland areas. In some places there had been a fundamentally changed relationship between the trades union council and the Labour Party. Owing to cynicism and disappointment with New Labour, Northampton broke formal links with the Labour Party and moved its meeting from the local Labour Club. This was not a sectarian dispute and there was no apparent connection between this development and support for other parties of the left. While this trades union council no longer had a channel of influence via local councillors, it viewed this as an opportunity to develop new channels and alliances. With regard to the relationship between trades union councils and local elected politicians, only 46 per cent of trades union councils had regular meetings with elected representatives. Within those holding regular meetings, 26 per cent had meetings with New Labour representatives, 4.9 per

cent had meetings with Conservative Party representatives and 13 per cent had meetings with representatives from more than one political party. Regarding involvement in local elections, only 43 per cent of trades union councils participated in local election campaigns. In areas where the BNP was active, the main political objective of trades union councils was increasingly resistance against the BNP rather than active support for the Labour Party. In relation to participation in local institutional bodies, some 36 per cent of trades union councils had representatives on Local Strategic Partnerships. There were also examples of trades union councils sending representatives to bodies such as: 'Patient Forum' (NHS), Racial Equality Councils, Regeneration and Tourism Advisory Group, Airport Consultative Committee, Business Health Advisory Group, Further Education Forum.

The Problems of Organising Trades Union Councils

Respondents to the survey highlighted a series of issues and problems that undermine the effectiveness of trades union councils. The main problems cited by respondents were the under-affiliation by local branches and the under-participation of local delegates. The main source of these problems were seen by many activists to be related to the decline of workplace branches, resulting in a lack of knowledge about the role of trades union councils and a lack of delegates and motions forwarded to trades union councils. This decline has been exacerbated by union mergers as one respondent noted:

Mergers of unions have not helped trades union councils as some branches have disappeared and delegates are not therefore replaced to the detriment of trades union councils. The problem needs to be addressed nationally if we are to survive.

For one respondent the answer to this problem lay in mandatory affiliation:

Trade union branches are dying. They can't find people to be delegates to local trades union councils. Trade unions should have a rule that their local branches are affiliated to their local trades union council.

Other significant problems cited were the lack of funding for trades union council activities and the related problem of the over-work of executive officials (see Appendix: Figure 13). The problem of resources is, however, variable and uneven. Leeds, for example, owns its own premises, which are open to trade union branches, campaigns and community organisations to hold meetings and acts as a resource centre for unions and community bodies within the city. It has also benefited from several development grants and from close cooperation with the TUC at the regional level. Battersea and Wandsworth is unique in having an income stream from the Workers' Beer

Company and this is used to support other trades union councils in the vicinity including Lambeth, Croydon, and Merton and Sutton.

Other problems highlighted were of a more overtly political nature. Some respondents suggested that unions in the private sector are resistant to getting involved in trades union councils as they are seen as too 'political' or dominated by left-wing activists. There is also evidence of long standing enmities between trades union councils and the TUC hierarchy and a feeling that the latter have either no commitment to maintaining trades union councils or would prefer to see their demise. This outlook was exemplified by the following comments made by respondents during the interviews:

Some trade union full-time officials want to kill off local trades union councils; they see us as a threat. The regional secretary has no time for us.

We find that the TUC both nationally and regionally do not want trades councils, we are a thorn in their side and they would rather we were not there, they do nothing to generate support for local trades union councils.

There was a perception that the TUC wants to keep trades councils at a distance, although as one respondent noted maybe trades union councils would not be doing their job properly if this were not the case. This was not, however, reflected in a perceived poor relationship between trades union councils and regions of the TUC with over 70 per cent of respondents reporting no problem in this relationship. Over 50 per cent of respondents believed there to be no problem in the relationship between trades union councils and the national TUC. There was, therefore, a degree of ambivalence with regard to the relationship between trades union councils and the TUC. Only 28 per cent of respondents were aware of the TUC's 'community unionism' project and only 10 per cent had participated in its development. There was a feeling that the initiative 'does not involve trades union councils'.

Conclusion: Trades Union Councils and the Development of 'Community Unionism'.

To what extent do trades union councils have a role to play in the construction of effective 'community unionism' in the UK? In order to answer this question we need to consider the potential benefits and drawbacks of the strategy of 'community unionism'. The interest in 'community unionism' has developed in the context of a decline of trades union council power and effectiveness and the attempt to emulate the organising model that has developed in the USA. In the USA, the organising model has involved the encouragement of 'community unionism' and this has involved both the reactivation of CLCs and

the development of alliances between individual unions and community and faith groups. In the UK, however, the emulation of the US model has tended to focus on the latter tendency rather than the former. The efforts of individual unions to build community alliances such as the 'Living Wage Campaign' developed by London Citizens are positive developments that have delivered important benefits to marginalised workers. These community unionism campaigns have demonstrated the benefits of 'community unionism' in raising the moral legitimacy of union demands and thereby suggest the rekindling of the 'sword of justice' role of trade unions. However, even their most ardent supporters have acknowledged that they have been limited to expressing an 'agonised liberalism' (Wills 2006) which appeals to the moral conscience of business and political elites without mobilising the material or political power to enforce their aims. Moreover, these initiatives have largely taken the form of single issue campaigns. Therefore, it is highly unlikely that such forms of 'community unionism' will cohere into an effective organisation/movement that is capable of resisting the array of social, economic and political impacts that result from neo-liberal globalisation.

In contrast, trades union councils provide an organic link to workplace organisations and link trade unionists across a range of sectors and industries thereby connecting workers and unions across a diverse range of problems and issues. As we demonstrated above, trades union councils have been involved in campaigns and political action on issues such as public services, anti-fascism and pensions that articulate the demands and interests of workers across different workplaces and sectors. This is particularly important in the context of the fragmenting and individualising tendencies underpinning neo-liberal restructuring. Furthermore, trades union councils are steeped in an ideology that presents labour as a social and political movement and this also contributes to their capacity to develop a coherent ideology of labour. These factors make trades union councils a potentially effective vehicle for redrawing a virtuous circle between the 'sword of justice' and 'vested interest' roles of trade unionism. This analysis suggests that trades union councils have the (currently unrealised) potential to go beyond the role proposed for them as providers of community support to union recruitment drives (Wills 2002) to make a major contribution to the revitalisation of trade unionism as a social and political movement.

To what extent, however, is the model of 'community unionism' that has been developed in the USA relevant or applicable in the UK context? This question is tied up with the issue of globalisation. The impact of globalisation intensifies rather than weakens the importance of place. Globalisation involves the transformation of localities rather than a simple increase in mobilities (Morley 2000: 14) or the experience of displacement in the same place (Tomlinson 1999). In this context, the maintenance of an independent and critical trade

unionism capable of resisting or shaping these processes of displacement would seem to rest on the revitalisation of 'community unionism'. Given the enduring importance of place and the variability of the ways in which globalisation is impacting across space we should be wary of importing models of 'community unionism' from different social, political and economic contexts. A useful model for investigating this issue is provided by Robinson (2000) in his analysis of social movement unionism (SMU) in the USA. Community organising and building linkages between trade unions and other social and 'citizenship' movements is an important component of SMU. Robinson differentiates between business unionism and SMU on the basis of whether membership and involvement are voluntary or involuntary, whether unions are autonomous or subordinated to political parties, the state or employers, whether the constituency represented by the union is inclusive or exclusive and whether trade union leaders are critical or uncritical of existing economic and political institutions. An assessment of trade union reorientation along these dimensions has led Robinson to argue that neo-liberal restructuring has been pushing US trade unions from the dominant 'business unionism' model towards SMU. This is related to the way in which an adverse political and economic environment has translated into a more critical leadership culture and has demonstrated the declining utility of existing strategies. These developments have further resulted in a change in the gender and ethnic composition of union membership and have demonstrated the viability of alternative models of trade unionism. In the UK the dominant trajectory towards SMU is from a form of social democratic trade unionism which is based on a more inclusive representation than business unionism, but which has been subordinated to the wider political objectives of the Labour Party (see Hyman 2001). Clearly, there are a different set of opportunities and barriers to the development of SMU in the UK in comparison with the USA.

Our survey demonstrated that in some places (mainly but not exclusively in the North of England) the linkages between trades union councils and local labour parties and politicians have endured the institutional distancing between New Labour and the trade union movement. We would like to raise the question as to whether it is a coincidence that the most active trades union councils tend to be where linkages with the Labour Party have broken down or where the linkages were not developed historically. This again highlights the possibilities and dangers associated with 'community unionism'. The de-linking of trade unions and the Labour Party highlights the danger that trade union community politics could develop into forms of union-community alliance that lack an ideology of labour or indeed any political ideology at all. Neither this type of 'community unionism' nor one that clings to the Labour Party-Trade Union linkage regardless of whether it delivers substantive gains

would appear to promise an effective template for effective 'community unionism'.

A further question concerns the extent to which trade union councils are prevented from becoming effective vehicles of community unionism as a result of the political legacies of their history. The review of trades union council history highlighted the extent to which changes in the economic and political milieu associated with the development and crisis of Fordism and Keynesianism provides only a partial explanation for the ebb and flow of trades union council fortunes. During the 20th century, the labour movement in Britain did indeed go through a marked process of centralisation and bureaucratisation and this certainly contributed towards the marginalisation of local trades union councils. However, this marginalisation was not just a product of a rescaling of labour movement politics. In the context of Bolshevism and the Cold War trades councils represented an important forum in the struggle between the revolutionary and reformist left in the British labour movement. During this period, trades councils endured as a movement in civil society at a time when the legitimacy of workplace trade unionism was being undermined by bureaucratic centralism (Offe and Wiesenthal 1985) and Keynesian state planning was resulting in the 'statisation of civil society' (Panitch 1986: 189) or what Poulantzas (1978) termed the 'statisation of social life'. These were the elements of the post-war social democratic consensus that were attacked most ferociously by Thatcherism. Trades union councils are thus an important bridge linking the demobilised and marginalised trade unions of today with the existence of trade unionism as a vibrant movement of civil society during the 19th century and early 20th century. In the context of the decline of the Communist Party, whose influence on trades union councils was significant but never decisive, alongside the growing institutional separation of the Labour Party from the trade union movement, trades union councils would seem to provide an opportunity for the reconstruction of trade unionism as a movement in civil society that is capable of reuniting the 'sword of justice' and 'vested interest' roles of trade unions.

To what extent, therefore, are there signs that trades union councils are reversing decades of decline and realising their potential to re-emerge as a 'social' movement of labour? The survey data suggests that after a considerable period of decline there has been a modest upturn in affiliation and membership. Where trades union councils remain active, there is also evidence of activities and campaigns across a wide range of issues and problems. The campaigns around the defence of pensions and public services were around the kind of 'unifying class themes' which can form the basis for 'an ideological alternative for the labor movement' (Gapasin and Yates *op cit.* 60). There were, however, few examples of campaigns on the issue of low

pay, which could also be usefully addressed given the way that the CLCs and *Jobs with Justice* have successfully exploited this issue in the USA. In addition, trades union councils have campaigned around international questions and in opposition to discrimination and fascism. These are the kind of issues that are of concern to young people who have engaged in the rise of extra-parliamentary protests in recent years, without necessarily associating themselves with, or being engaged in, trade unions. This suggests an important point of contact with a generation which has largely been lost to the labour movement. This kind of activity could be extended to include the question of the environment, which is probably the least developed area of campaigning and arguably the most likely to encourage the participation and support of younger members and delegates. However, of perhaps more fundamental importance is the potential role that trades union councils could play, and do indeed wish to play, in educating young people about trade unions and trade unionism.

The activity of trades union councils around supporting industrial disputes alongside their campaigning around the kind of issues mentioned above suggests that they are indeed oriented around both the 'vested interest' and 'sword of justice' roles and that there is no need for any fundamental reorientation in order to begin to their revitalisation. The main problem, however, lies in the small scale of such activity where, even in the case of councils with a higher level of attendance such as Bristol, participation remains extremely limited. The results of the survey demonstrate the uphill climb that needs to be undertaken in order to revitalise trades union councils. The immediate obstacle is the number of trades union councils and County Associations that have become defunct. This has occurred not just in remote or rural areas, but also in large industrial cities such as Nottingham. There are, however, financial resources connected to these defunct institutions that could be utilised by active trades union councils or neighbouring trades union councils in an attempt to bring these defunct councils back to life. However, it is questionable whether sufficient resources are currently available to achieve significant success. Moreover, the exemplary case of Battersea and Wandsworth demonstrates clearly the level of resources required to achieve full scale revitalisation. The solution to adequately resourcing trades union councils and addressing the question of under-participation seems to lie not only with the TUC, but also with its constituent unions. Currently, it is left to individual union branches to take the initiative in affiliating to trades union councils and this undoubtedly has a major effect on both resourcing and participation. One way to address these problems would be to make affiliation mandatory: a call which has also been made in relation to CLCs in the USA. Such a measure might be opposed on the grounds of cost to individual unions that are already hard pressed financially. Therefore, mandatory affiliation could be accompanied by a significant reduction in affiliation fees.

Increasing the level of resources through increases in branch affiliations could also have the desirable effect of increasing participation in trades union councils by lay officials as well as by branch activists. This matter of union commitment to trades union councils is of importance in that there remains an enduring perception that trades union councils are mistrusted by the trade union hierarchy, particularly by the TUC, and by the full time officials of affiliated unions. We are not in a position to say whether this perception is true especially as the evidence on this matter in our survey was equivocal, but the TUC and full-time union officials could go a long way to dispel such perceptions encouraging the affiliation of union branches to local trades union councils and by fully involving trades union councils in national debates and initiatives on 'community unionism'.

Increasing resources and the commitment of unions to trades union councils are important but not sufficient measures to ensure their revitalisation. Some problems are more serious and the solutions less obvious. The decline of the branch networks within affiliated unions and the increasingly instrumental and individualised orientation of rank-and-file trade unionists reflect deeper and more fundamental trends in the nature of contemporary society. We can only suggest that alongside their role in campaigning around issues of general interest, trades union councils can also have a part to play in the specific recruitment initiatives undertaken by individual unions and encourage collectivist sentiments and solutions through public education campaigns. There is, moreover, the enduring problem of an ageing and narrow demographic profile in relation to the leadership and membership of trades union councils. In common with developments in the USA, we have also seen in the UK how the formation of a younger and more diverse leadership can transform levels of affiliation and activity in particular trades union councils. We have also noted the difficulty that unions face in getting activists to attend the trades union councils and in maintaining enthusiasm amongst the few delegates that attend. The contemporary trade union movement is a product of a century of centralisation and bureaucratisation and this is reflected in the organisational procedures of trades union councils. This suggests that the ways in which meetings and events are organised are reviewed in order to produce a new vibrancy to the conduct of trades union councils. The idea of workplace reports practiced by Wolverhampton and Cardiff could prove to be a useful way of increasing the participation of delegates.

There is, therefore, scope for the renewal of trades union councils where the enthusiasm and vision of younger and more diverse leadership can be combined with a commitment to organisational change. In the absence of these changes, and in the context of the ageing and narrow demographic of trades union council leaderships and delegates, the future of trades union councils is indeed bleak. There are few examples of significant community

campaigns outside the trades union councils and there are important historical and political factors that are likely to block the straightforward transplantation of the US model of community organising into the UK. The future of trades union councils ultimately rests on a political decision as to whether trade unions are, or should be, part of a broader movement for progressive social change. In the context of weakening ties between trade unions and the Labour Party, an affirmative answer to this question implies the building of solidarity between trade unions and the development of union-community links. In the current context, trades union councils are the only organisations capable of fulfilling this role. In this context, and in conclusion, it would seem worthwhile to consider a process of institutional reorientation and restructuring that gave priority to reactivating defunct trades councils and reinvigorating those that remain.

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Appendix: Results of Postal Questionnaire

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Midlands	9	14.8	14.8	14.8
Northern	7	11.5	11.5	26.2
North West	10	16.4	16.4	42.6
Southern and Eastern	16	26.2	26.2	68.9
South West	12	19.7	19.7	88.5
Wales	3	4.9	4.9	93.4
Yorkshire and Humberside	4	6.6	6.6	100.0
Total	61	100.0	100.0	

Table 1: Breakdown of responses by region:

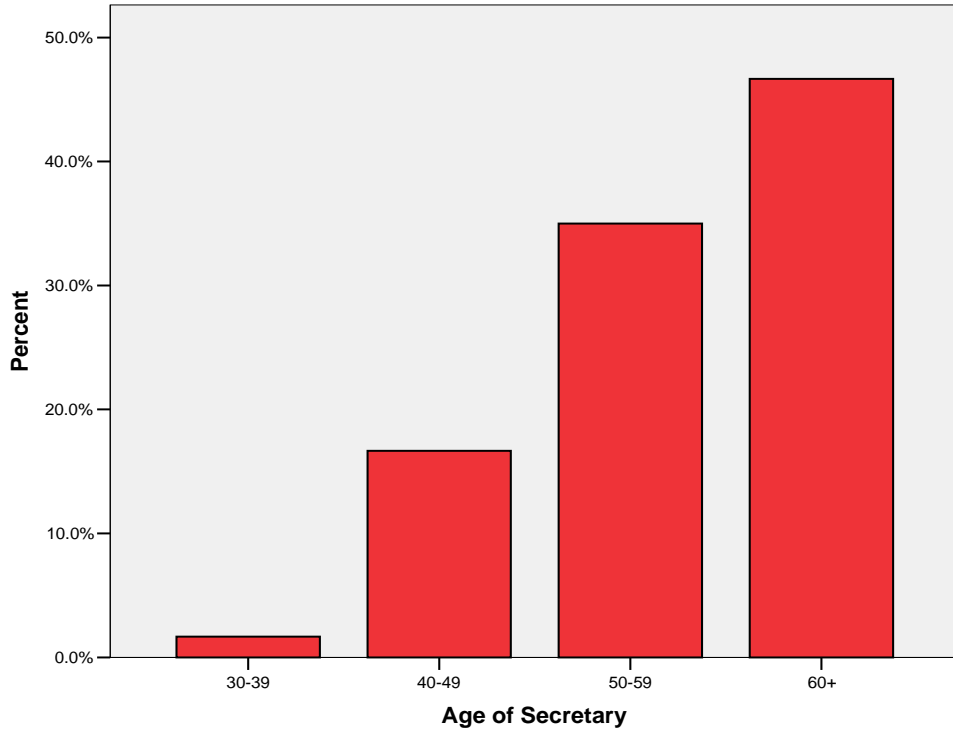


Figure 1: Age breakdown of Trades Union Council secretaries

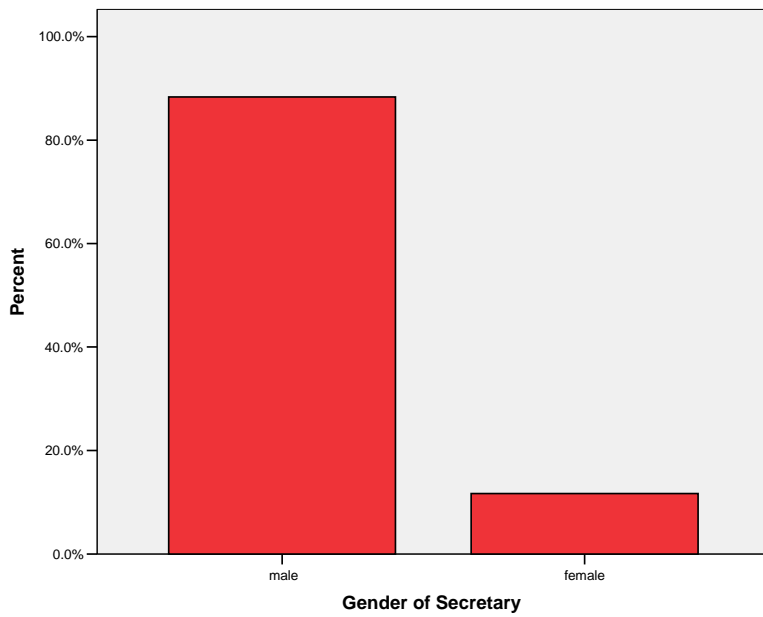


Figure 2: Gender Profile of Trades Union Council secretary

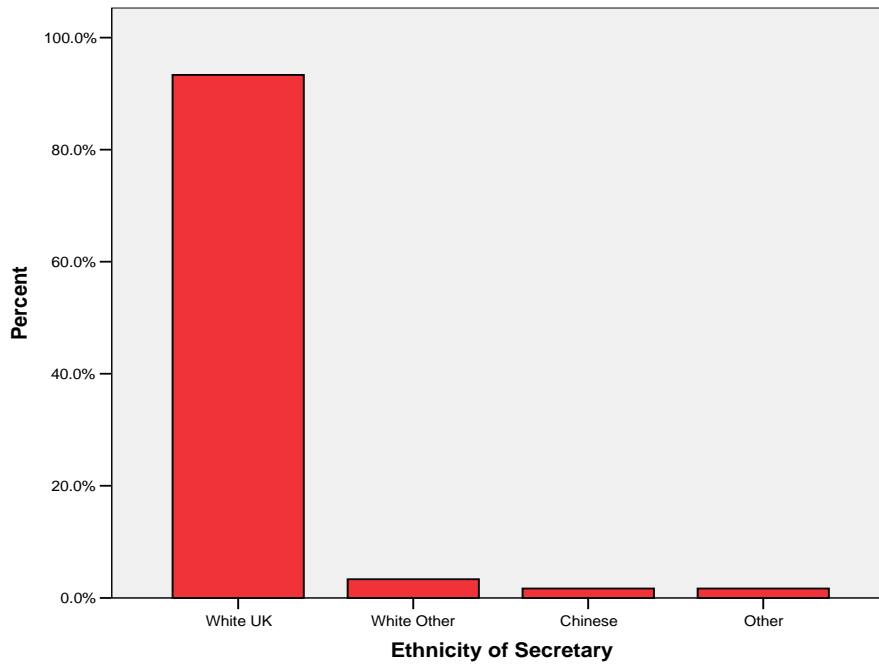


Figure 3: Ethnicity of Trades Union Council Secretary

Union of Secretary

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	UNISON	11	18.0	18.3	18.3
	TGWU	11	18.0	18.3	36.7
	GMB	5	8.2	8.3	45.0
	Amicus	11	18.0	18.3	63.3
	UCU	1	1.6	1.7	65.0
	RMT	2	3.3	3.3	68.3
	CWU	6	9.8	10.0	78.3
	NUT	2	3.3	3.3	81.7
	USDAW	1	1.6	1.7	83.3
	PCS	4	6.6	6.7	90.0
	UCATT	3	4.9	5.0	95.0
	NUJ	1	1.6	1.7	96.7
	BFAWU	1	1.6	1.7	98.3
	Community	1	1.6	1.7	100.0
Total	60	98.4	100.0		
Missing	missing	1	1.6		
Total		61	100.0		

Table 2: Union Affiliation of Trades Union Council Secretary

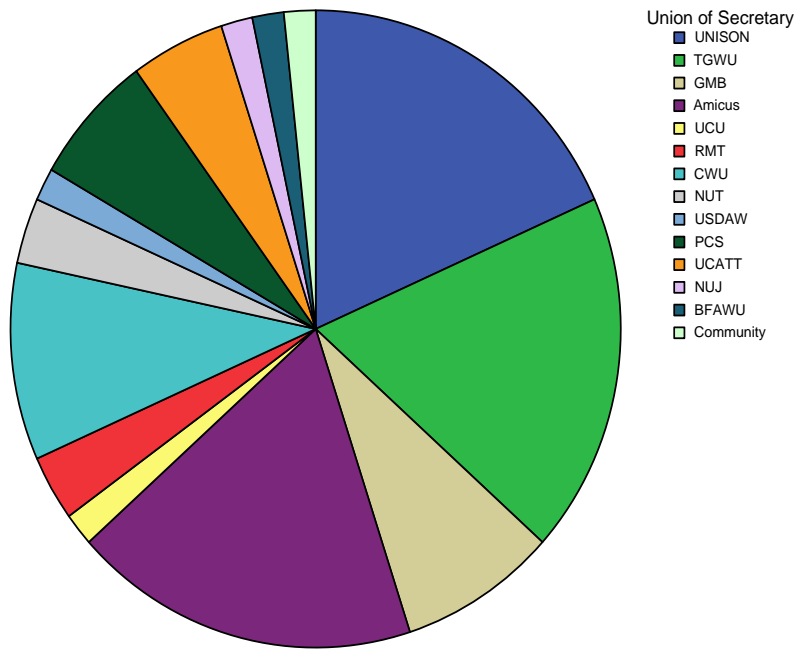


Figure 4: Union Affiliation of Trades Union Council Secretary

Union of President

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	UNISON	6	9.8	10.3	10.3
	TGWU	9	14.8	15.5	25.9
	GMB	5	8.2	8.6	34.5
	NASUWT	1	1.6	1.7	36.2
	AMICUS	13	21.3	22.4	58.6
	UCU	3	4.9	5.2	63.8
	RMT	3	4.9	5.2	69.0
	CWU	2	3.3	3.4	72.4
	NUT	5	8.2	8.6	81.0
	USDAW	1	1.6	1.7	82.8
	Musicians Union	2	3.3	3.4	86.2
	PCS	5	8.2	8.6	94.8
	NUM	1	1.6	1.7	96.6
	TSSA	2	3.3	3.4	100.0
	Total	58	95.1	100.0	
Missing	missing	3	4.9		
Total		61	100.0		

Table 3: Union Affiliation of Trades Union Council President

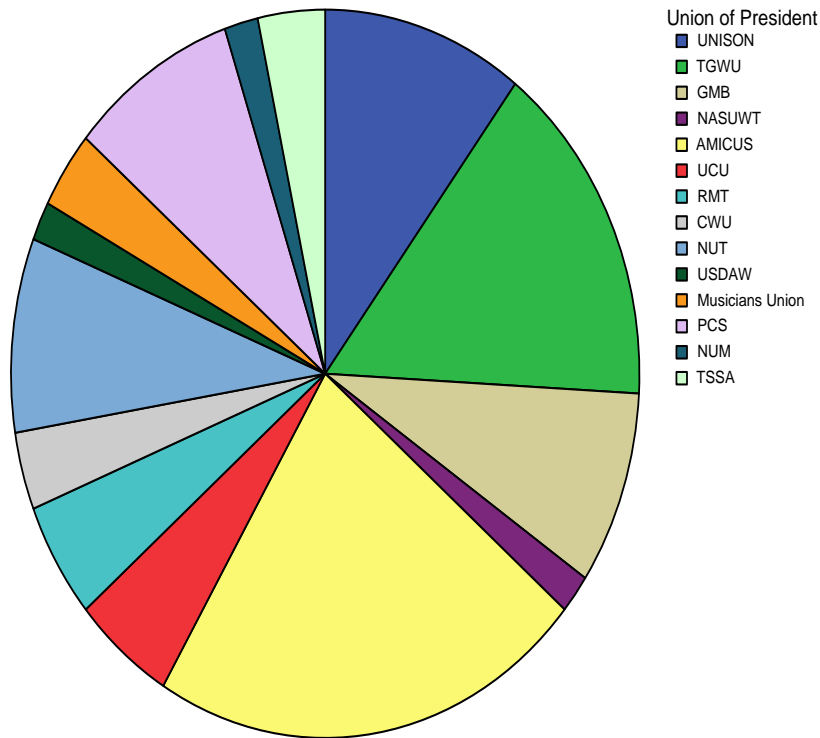


Figure 5: Union Affiliation of Trades Union Council President

Union of Treasurer

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	UNISON	8	13.1	13.3	13.3
	TGWU	9	14.8	15.0	28.3
	GMB	6	9.8	10.0	38.3
	AMICUS	13	21.3	21.7	60.0
	UCU	4	6.6	6.7	66.7
	RMT	3	4.9	5.0	71.7
	CWU	4	6.6	6.7	78.3
	FBU	1	1.6	1.7	80.0
	USDAW	1	1.6	1.7	81.7
	MU	1	1.6	1.7	83.3
	PCS	4	6.6	6.7	90.0
	Prospect	1	1.6	1.7	91.7
	UCATT	3	4.9	5.0	96.7
	NUJ	1	1.6	1.7	98.3
	Community	1	1.6	1.7	100.0
	Total	60	98.4	100.0	
Missing	missing	1	1.6		
Total		61	100.0		

Table 4: Union Affiliation of Trades Union Council Treasurer

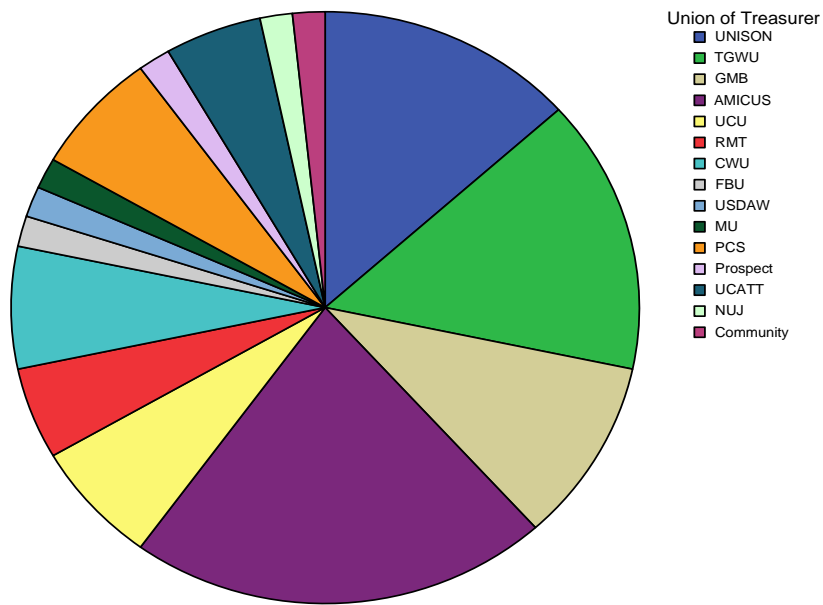


Figure 6: Union Affiliation of Trades Union Council Treasurer

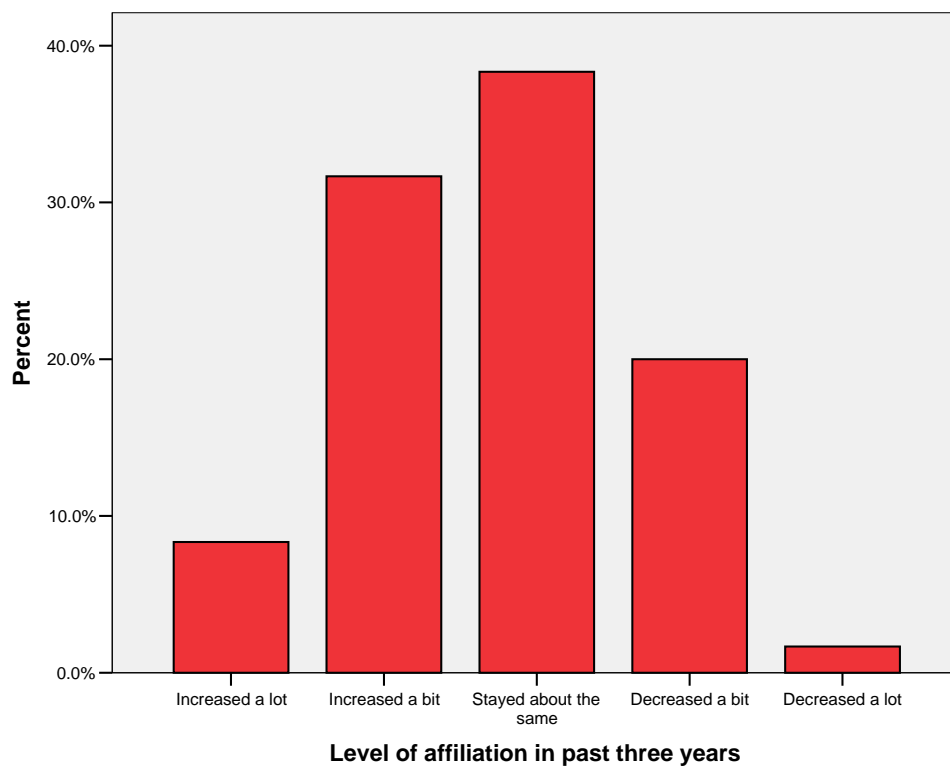


Figure 7: Changes in Level of affiliation in last three years

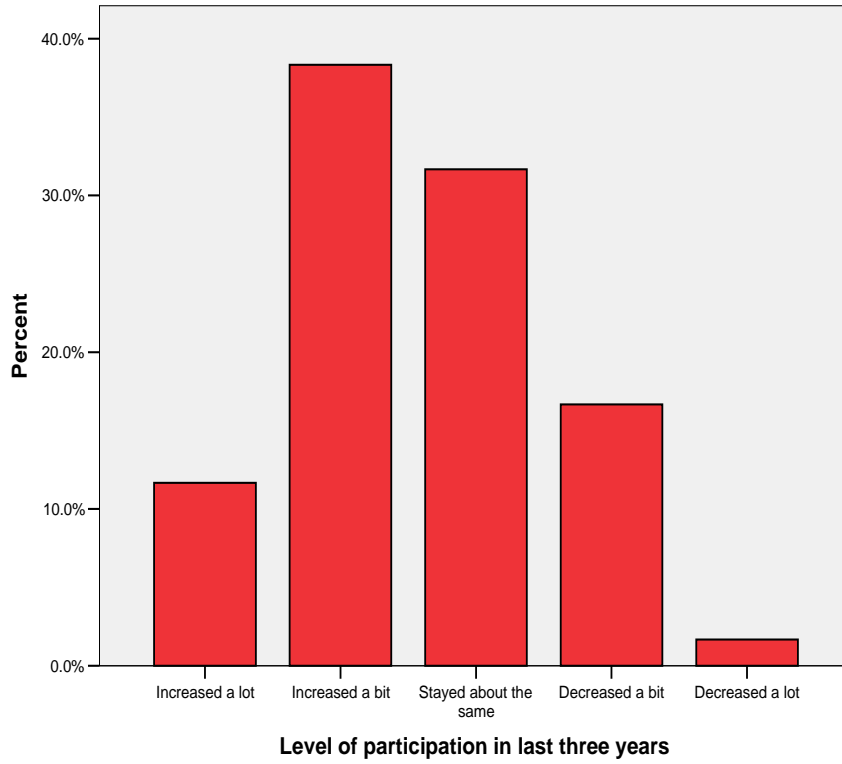


Figure 8: Changes in Level of participation in last three years

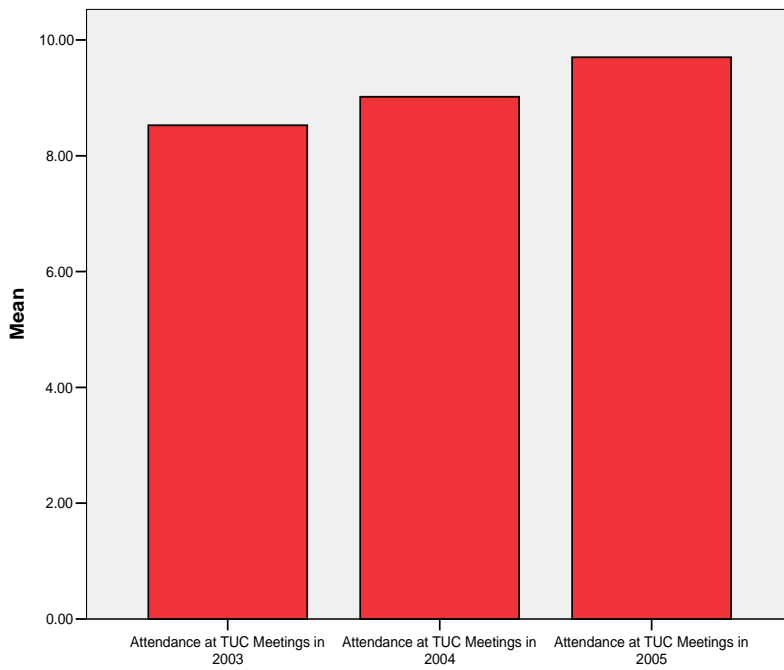


Figure 9: Changes in attendance at meetings in last three years

First priority of TUCs

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Migration	1	1.6	1.8	1.8
	Recruiting Union members	6	9.8	10.9	12.7
	Trade union education	3	4.9	5.5	18.2
	Liasing with community groups	3	4.9	5.5	23.6
	National Health Service	2	3.3	3.6	27.3
	Local Strategic Partnerships	3	4.9	5.5	32.7
	Increasing TUC affiliation	2	3.3	3.6	36.4
	Campaigning on local issues	15	24.6	27.3	63.6
	anti-racism/fighting BNP	2	3.3	3.6	67.3
	Supporting unions in dispute	13	21.3	23.6	90.9
	Administration	1	1.6	1.8	92.7
	May Day event	3	4.9	5.5	98.2
	Protecting local jobs	1	1.6	1.8	100.0
	Total	55	90.2	100.0	
	Missing	No answer	6	9.8	
Total		61	100.0		

Table 5: First Priority of Trades Union Councils

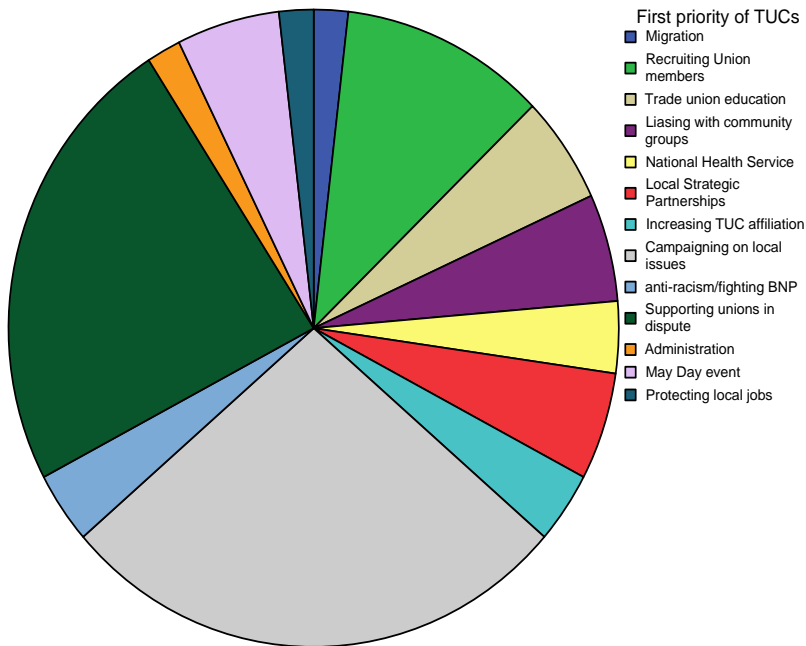


Figure 10: First Priority of Trades Union Councils

Second priority of TUCs

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Housing	1	1.6	2.0	2.0
	Recruiting Union members	1	1.6	2.0	4.0
	Trade union education	12	19.7	24.0	28.0
	Liasing with community groups	10	16.4	20.0	48.0
	National Health Service	1	1.6	2.0	50.0
	Local Strategic Partnerships	3	4.9	6.0	56.0
	Increasing TUC affiliation	2	3.3	4.0	60.0
	Campaigning on local issues	13	21.3	26.0	86.0
	anti-racism/fighting BNP	2	3.3	4.0	90.0
	Supporting unions in dispute	2	3.3	4.0	94.0
	May Day event	2	3.3	4.0	98.0
	Protecting local jobs	1	1.6	2.0	100.0
	Total	50	82.0	100.0	
Missing	No answer	11	18.0		
Total		61	100.0		

Table 6: Second priority of Trades Union Councils

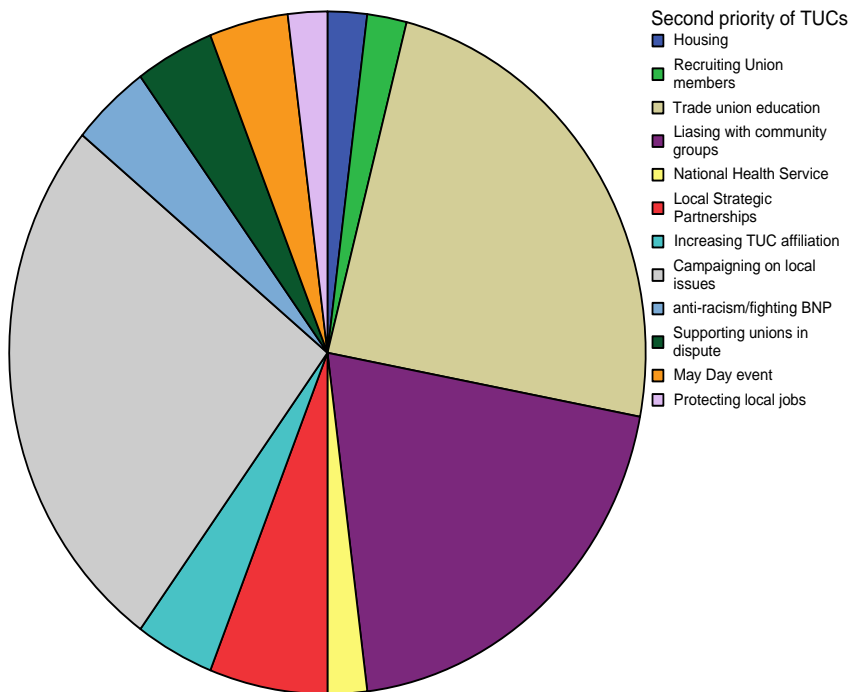


Figure 11: Second priority of Trades Union Councils

Third priority of TUCs

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Migration	1	1.6	2.3	2.3
	Low Pay	1	1.6	2.3	4.7
	Housing	1	1.6	2.3	7.0
	Recruiting Union members	3	4.9	7.0	14.0
	Trade union education	9	14.8	20.9	34.9
	Liasing with community groups	7	11.5	16.3	51.2
	Local Strategic Partnerships	4	6.6	9.3	60.5
	Campaigning on local issues	1	1.6	2.3	62.8
	anti-racism/fighting BNP	4	6.6	9.3	72.1
	Liasing with local politicians	4	6.6	9.3	81.4
	Administration	4	6.6	9.3	90.7
	May Day event	1	1.6	2.3	93.0
	International Issues	2	3.3	4.7	97.7
	Public transport	1	1.6	2.3	100.0
	Total	43	70.5	100.0	
Missing	No answer	18	29.5		
Total		61	100.0		

Table 7: Third Priority of Trades Union Councils

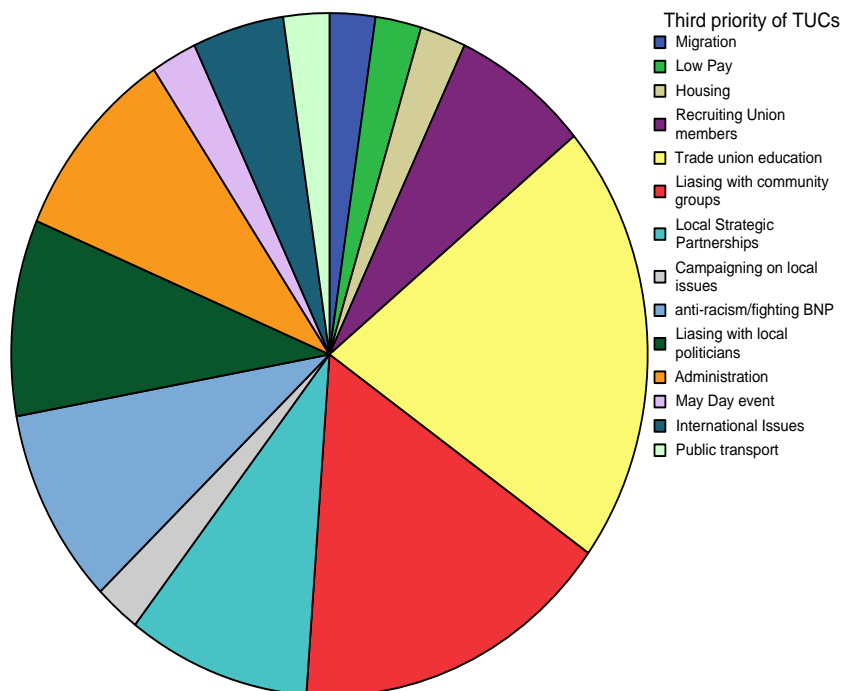


Figure 12: Third priority of Trades Union Councils

	Speaker at TUC meeting	Affiliation or donation	Joint Working or campaigning
Amnesty International	1	10	2
Campaign to Defend Asylum Seekers	7	5	6
Campaign to Defend Council Housing	19	17	19
Citizens Advice Bureau	3	4	7
Commission for Racial Equality	5	5	4
Faith-Based Organizations	3	3	5
Friends of the Earth	0	0	3
Keep Our NHS Public	8	10	18
Make Poverty History	9	9	13
Stop the War Coalition	11	16	21
Unite Against Fascism	9	25	16

Table 8: Percentages of Issues, Resolutions and Campaigns pursued by Trades Union Councils

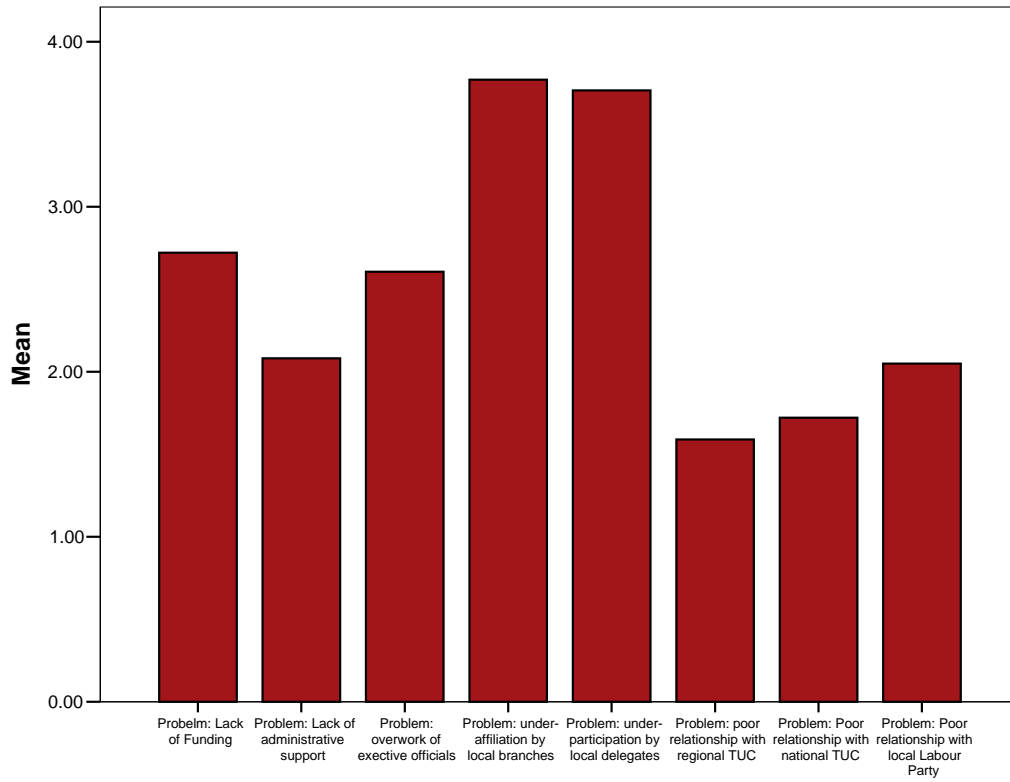


Figure 13: Main problems facing Trade Union Councils