

## Concluding remarks and recommendations

1. Community unionism normally means coalitions with local communities such as migrant communities, campaigning within local communities, and a new orientation towards the groups of disenfranchised workers for example: Tattersall, A. (2005). There is Power in Coalition: A framework for assessing how and when union-community coalitions are effective and enhance union power. Labour & Industry: a journal of the social and economic relations of work, 16(2), 97-112; Fine, J. R. (2006). Worker centers: Organizing communities at the edge of the dream. Cornell University Press.

Irrespective of these strategic and political challenges and issues, this aspect of trade union intervention has been one of the most significant in the EU. We have seen how the development of a community facing agenda based on local structures and offices which invite workers in to discuss and seek support has forged a series of debates about the role of union structure. The debate on this dimension is becoming more important in relation to most vulnerable workers. The increasing fragmentation of work and the consequent need to provide an alternative to working places as spaces for the socialization and the representation of workers is becoming important. The provision of representation and defence of rights other than industrial ones (social or citizenship rights for instance) is relevant not only in terms of supporting vulnerable workers but for trade union renewal: it brings to the fore trade union roles as social and political actors (something that is increasingly part of the industrial relations debate)<sup>1</sup>. Therefore, whilst much is to be said about the use of social media, the importance of locally embedded facilities remains important.

Although the current crisis and context has put much pressure on the ability of trade unions and other social organisations to develop these resources, there are still lessons to be learnt. Drawing from the Spanish and Italian cases, with the UK in mind, we propose the following:

**Visibility:** it is important organisations have an accessible and a visible presence in the community be it a local or city wide building that is more accessible points to the workforce

**Reusing traditional spaces:** Using established spaces such as union administrative offices but redefining their use and accessibility which the British trade unions UNITE and the GMB are beginning to do in some cases

**Openness:** These offices need to be available during times when workers can visit and access resources

**Engagement:** They should be a space for communal activity and not just aimed at servicing immediate demands but involve cultural, social and political activities

**Development:** These spaces can engage with the learning needs of workers by linking to unions strategies and resources on education and development.

**Networking:** the spaces should be used for broader organisational activity and meetings with workers and community groups, becoming a resource for the development of a more radical view of participation.



## Further materials, links and references

We are grateful to the Economic and Social Research Council and the Leverhulme Trust for funding many aspects of the research used in this Research Briefing.

The project, titled "Social Inclusion, Unions and Migration", was a comparative project (2008-2012) funded by the Leverhulme Trust and aimed at analysing trade union strategies towards vulnerable and migrant workers in the UK, The Netherlands and Spain. The project was led by Prof. Miguel Martinez Lucio and involved Dr Heather Connolly and Dr Stefania Marino.

The second project, titled "Migration and Trade Union responses: An analysis of the UK in a comparative perspective" is an on-going three year project (2012-2015) funded by the ESRC and aimed at analysing trade union strategies towards migrant workers in the UK, the Netherlands, and Italy. The project is led by Dr Stefania Marino

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Martinez Lucio, M and Perrett, R. (2009). Meanings and dilemmas in community unionism trade union community initiatives and black and minority ethnic groups in the UK. *Work, Employment & Society*, 23(4), 693-710

Martinez Lucio, M., Marino, S., & Connolly, H. (2013). Broadening and reimagining regulation: Trade unions, 'active servicing' and immigration in Spain since the early 1990s. *Journal of Industrial Relations*, 55(2), 190-211.

# Accessing and supporting migrant workers:

## Lessons on community support from trade union innovation in Spain & Italy

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Migrant workers, migration, regulating work, community organisation, trade unions

## Summary

**The briefing draws from various research projects, conducted by the authors, which deal with how trade unions respond to the question of migration and the unprotected position of many migrant workers in different countries.**

**The projects mainly draws on two sets of studies: one on the UK, the Netherlands and Spain funded by Leverhulme Trust; the other on the UK, the Netherlands and Italy funded by the ESRC (Project Number .....).**

**The briefing looks at the role of locally based community information centres which are focused on assisting migrant workers in terms of the representation of their employment and social rights.**

**It looks at the importance of local centres for supporting workers in a way that allows us to appreciate the possibilities and challenges of such developments.**



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## Introduction

The labour market in Europe and the employment relationship is developing in highly problematic ways with many workers increasingly exposed to vulnerable working conditions and employers who do not always recognise employment legislation and rights at work. The question of how trade unions and social organisations reach out to this unprotected workforce and ensure they are informed of their rights is becoming a more challenging task because of the increasingly non-unionised environment and hidden areas of work and groups of workers. The systematic use of undocumented workers in what are called 'hard' jobs, the manner in which the threat of dismissal is used to undermine the capacity of workers to respond to their poor working conditions, and the veil of silence that comes with workers being unable to communicate or follow up on issues such as long working hours, dangerous working environments or management bullying means that the reach of the law and social rights is

limited in many countries such as the UK, Spain or Italy. There have been initiatives to try and organise such workers through campaigns and the targeting of rogue employers. Many trade unions have tried to access such a workforce through meetings, support services for these workers, the printing of materials in various languages, and much more. Yet, reaching such workers and organizing them has always been considered to be difficult. In part this is due to the failure to develop consistent strategies and a focus on specific issues and problems without there being a longer term relationship between these workers and social or trade union organisations. There are issues that many trade unions do not have readily accessible offices or systematic strategies aimed at engaging locally around such groups of workers. Even if there has been a high level of engagement in the UK with the concept of organising in the community, which draws on organising strategies and worker centre strategies in the USA, to date the initiatives are uneven.

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## The Research: reaching out and supporting migrants and vulnerable workers

Our Spanish research covered a selection of cities in the centre and north of Spain (Madrid, Toledo, Valladolid, Ciudad Real, and Oviedo): it consisted of visits to trade union centres and interviews with their staff and the relevant union during 1998-2012. The Spanish research on migration and unions involved over 50 interviews (the overall project on the Netherlands, the UK, and Spain consisted of over 150 interviews with trade unionists and

workers amongst others). Data on the Italian case are drawn from doctoral research carried out in 2005-2009 on Italian and Dutch trade unions and consists of interviews with trade unionists at different levels, plus analysis of trade union documents and participant observation. This data is currently being supplemented by a new set of interviews that are being carried out within an on-going three year ESRC project (2012-2015)

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## Innovations and representation

In Spain and Italy - even before the recession that commenced in 2008 - the nature of economic development has rested on growing levels of immigration in key sectors such as construction and agriculture which were focused on increasingly unstable and vulnerable employment. In both countries, the nature of work and employment in these sectors characterized by seasonal, temporary, short term jobs as well as by a high level of turnover did not allow the development of stable and structured workplace relations typical of other sectors. This required the trade unions to diversify their strategies by focusing not only

on trade union presence in the workplaces but also within specific territorial areas. Trade union structures at territorial levels become, as discussed in more detail below, important reference points for migrant and vulnerable workers in both national contexts.

In Spain, trade unions have developed a network of information offices and centres throughout virtually every major city. These have been developed by unions, especially the CCOO (Comisiones Obreras - Workers Commissions) and the UGT (Union General de Trabajadores - General Workers Unions).

## Innovations and representation continued

They are normally located in local union offices, and their role is to act as a first port of call for immigrants in relation to work and other social related concerns. There are many immigrant centres and law firms focused on these types of activity, but none can compare to the sheer extent and breadth of the union network - something which is unusual in most European nations.

One of the features of this new form of engagement with immigrants is that the state provides a wide range of the funding for such resources. This allows trade unions, who have been identified as being a key part of the provision of such services, to develop trade union-oriented information and a strategy of support centres more generally. Such centres provide a range of information services in relation to employment, citizenship, social rights and housing - amongst others - although it needs to be clear that these are not immigrant-led offices, but they may have trade unionists involved from an immigrant background. The unions, in the main, are expected to keep clear records of such activities. A range of individuals are employed in such centres, and in some cases there can be anything up to half a dozen people working in one capacity or another, although numbers vary between offices.

The problem with these developments - which are much lauded within the official European trade union movement - is that in many cases they tend to be driven as a service and organized around a professional network of trade unionists. These do not always play a dynamic role in linking immigrants into the main body of the trade union - although the realization of this in recent years has been acknowledged and responded to by various trade unionists. However, these initiatives have not consistently served as a basis for a new network of migrant activists (partly because it is not always migrant activists who are involved in them).

In various CCOO's offices (CITEs) some local offices would attend to at least 3000 individuals a year. It is clear that as worker centres they are mainly information-based in their approach to attending to immigrants. They open a file on a worker, which is logged on a main server so people can return for further advice and is uploaded centrally. In comparative terms across Europe the experience of the CCOO's and the UGT's developments in this area were accepted as a leading 'benchmark and good practice' (European Trade Union Congress officer).

The Italian trade unions also present specific structures aimed at defending social rights of migrant workers and provide them with a differentiated range of services. In the case of CGIL (*Confederazione Generale Italiana*

*del Lavoro* - Italian General Confederation of Labour) the most representative Italian Confederation, these offices called *Uffici Immigrati* or *Centri Immigrati* (Immigrant Offices/Immigrants Centres) are located at decentralised levels, within the territorial units of the trade union (the so called *Camere del Lavoro*). These structures started to emerge at the end of the 1980s, as soon as immigration become a relevant phenomenon, and have developed in the course of time both in terms of numbers and of services offered. This development occurred without close central monitoring, and as the outcome of a territorially-based demand for services. Therefore, *Uffici Immigrati* differ across regions and are mainly present in the North of the country where regular immigration tend to be mostly concentrated.

The *Uffici Immigrati* are part of the CGIL's services system; that is a group of structures working on the provision of guidance and support on several welfare related matters. They provide free services to migrants, not only to migrant members or workers, in several fields such as assistance with applications for work permits and entry visas, renewal and duplication of residence permits, family reunification, asylum applications and mediation with local authorities and the police. Following the 2002 amnesty for irregular migrants, CGIL worked on the regularization of foreigners, handling bureaucratic requirements and offering legal services to migrants when employers refused to regularize them.

In 2006, an agreement between the Ministry of the Interior and the trade union devolved responsibility for the regularization procedure and defence of migrants' social rights to the INCA (Nazional Confederal Institute of Welfare Care) of the CGIL. From then on, the work of these offices increased progressively. In 2006, 27,200 legal cases were initiated by the *Camera del lavoro* in Milan (which had the time had a foreign population of 170,000 residents); 37 per cent concerned work permits; 22 per cent residence permit renewals, family reunification and asylum applications; 6 per cent concerned individual problems and were resolved with the help of a lawyer; 15 per cent involved mediation with municipal offices; and 20 per cent the provision of general information. The *Uffici Immigrati*, and in general the territorial units, the *Camere del lavoro*, constituted the first contact point between the trade union and migrant residents. Although service provision was free and did not require membership, territorial structures became an important channel for migrant unionization that in the Italian case is quite high (about 17% out of the total membership in 2010).

## Challenges

There were concerns within the CCOO locally that there was a need to connect traditional CCOO work into the CITE and the workers they were representing. The CITEs of the CCOO for example do not always organize in themselves broader social activity, coalition building or communication strategies with the local immigrant groups. This is driven mainly by the immigration departments of the unions themselves and those co-ordinating some of the offices in question. Hence, one sees that the actual service provision element is divided from the broader immigration-related strategies of the unions. This means that as centres for bringing into the trade union movement workers who are from an immigrant background, there may be less of a role than at first anticipated.

In the geographic areas researched, links with organized immigrant groups were sporadic, as far as the unions were concerned, due to the problems of sustainability that such groups had. This varied according to the extent and politics of different immigrant communities. In the case of the UGT in Oviedo, there was an acknowledgement that the service had become more detached, and that there was a need to rethink such service provision. In 2009 the CCOO began to fuse its immigration section into its employment section, which led to a joint department at the national and regional levels - although this mirrored developments in certain state departments. This was seen as a vital step for integrating the issue of immigration into the mainstream of the union's work.

There were also discussions around building a more proactive network of CITE activists throughout the country with the aim of using it for information gathering, and as a link into the immigrant population. This question of fusing the community dynamic into broader strategies around social inclusion and union activism is therefore a challenge, even if the experience of information centres such as Spain's is one of the most elaborate in Europe. For the UGT this was a greater problem, with their migrant worker offices being considered to be part of the servicing logic of the union. Relevant activists in the specific regional union structures were, for example, concerned with the way local regional leaderships were increasingly

disconnected from the local dimension and community dimension of the union, where once they would have visited local sites more often. In this instance, it was recalled how union officers in the regional union would visit the local town and city offices more regularly and be more connected to the local dynamic - instead, now the interviewees felt that it was only during the trade union elections every four years that people from the union offices, and even the larger workplaces, visited local communities and small to medium-sized employers.

In the Italian case, although the importance of such structures for the defence of migrants' social rights was recognised across the entire union, the emphasis on service provisions was often a source of concern by some parts of the union. The most radical critics considered these bodies as service providers unable to carry out any representative function for migrant workers and likely to hinder their active participation in the trade union as well as an identity-based adhesion. Some interviewees declared that the people working in such offices were regarded, not as trade unionists, but more as civil servants who viewed migrants as customers rather than workers.

Furthermore, concerns were raised in relation to the fact that these bodies were the only ones dealing with migration issues, resulting in a general disinterest and lack of commitment on these themes by other structure within the trade unions. This concern was especially expressed by those who had considered these offices as provisional structures to be mainstreamed once the migrant issues had been fully included in trade union culture and everyday work.

In both national cases the economic crisis caused by the financial meltdown since 2008 and the worsening of labour market conditions is creating more difficulties for trade unions in relation to the provision of special services. The amount of resources spent on migrant workers issues might become very difficult to justify in a moment of decreasing resources and worsening of the social and economic climate.