Indie unions, organizing and labour renewal: learning from precarious migrant workers

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Abstract

This article examines the organizing practices of *indie unions* – the emerging grassroots unions co-led by precarious migrant workers. It draws on an embedded actor-centred approach involving extensive multi-sited ethnography. The article shows how workers normally considered un-organizable by the established unions can build lasting solidarity and associational power and obtain material and non-material rewards in the context of precarity, scarce economic resources and a hostile environment. Here, I argue that the organization of workers into ‘communities of struggles’ geared towards mobilization facilitates their empowerment, effectiveness and social integration. The article contributes to labour mobilization theory by redefining the concept of organizing in inclusionary terms, so that the collective industrial agency of precarious and migrant workers organizing outside the established unions can be adequately recognised and accounted for.

Keywords: grassroots and community unionism, precarious migrant workers, organizing, labour renewal, communities of struggle, IWGB, UVW, CAIWU, mobilization theory, gig economy.

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1. Introduction

On the 8th of June 2017 the London School of Economics announced an end to the decades-long outsourcing of its cleaning services. This was a victory for the migrant and minority cleaners who had been campaigning for equal terms and conditions with the in-house workers of the university. The cleaners were organised into the small and unrecognised independent union United Voices of the World (UVW). In pursuing parity for sick pay, annual leave, maternity/paternity pay and pension, they staged an unprecedented period of industrial unrest that not only achieved parity but reversed the seemingly unstoppable trend of outsourcing at a time of union decline and stigmatization of migrant workers.

This event is not an isolated episode but part of a long string of successes that precarious migrant workers have achieved since they started to organise themselves into small independent unions such as UVW, the Industrial Workers of Great Britain (IWGB) and the Cleaners and Allied Independent Workers Union (CAIWU). It illustrates an emerging trend, whereby workers employed in sectors characterised by high precarity and subcontracting are taking it upon themselves to represent their interests using unconventional practices in a very effective way.

This article examines how precarious migrant workers, organizing into independent unions, can achieve these kinds of results, despite lacking economic resources and the backing of established labour organizations. Examining *indie unions* (independent grassroots unions co-led by precarious migrant workers), and in particular how they organize and build solidarity and workers' power, is sociologically important for two reasons. First, they are beginning to offer effective representation to the precariat, a growing sector that large established unions have been unable or unwilling to represent (Standing 2011). This is a phenomenon that the existing literature on labour organizing – with its focus on large unions representing workers

in standard employment – has not yet addressed. In fact, this literature has primarily focused on how such unions have sought to renew themselves in order to stop their decline in a fast-changing economic and social environment (Carter 2006; Heery et al 2003; Simms et al 2013; Simms and Holgate 2010). This focus has offered important critical insights into the limitations of such efforts with regard to migrants and minorities (Martinez Lucio et al 2017; Hetland 2015). However, it has overlooked the grassroots labour initiatives of such workers outside large organisations (see Sullivant 2010; Lopes and Hall 2015; Alberti and Però 2018; Atzeni and Grigera 2019). Second, this examination can extend labour mobilization theory. Despite its crucial insights into how individuals can transform into collective actors, this theory (Kelly 1998, 2018; McAlevey 2016; Holgate et al 2018) offers limited help in accounting for how associational power can be built and deployed effectively by workers in conditions of high precarity, who are not strongly rooted in specific workplaces and residential communities and who do not enjoy the support of established unions.

Drawing on extensive, multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork, the article argues that precarious migrant workers are organized into ‘communities of struggle’ geared towards mutual support but also, crucially, towards campaigning, mobilization and informal bargaining. This contributes to workers’ empowerment, social integration and the effective representation of their material and non-material needs, in ways that alleviates both the ‘subjective’ and ‘objective’ dimensions of workers’ precarity (Alberti et al 2018). Grounded in this ethnographic experience, the article also argues that we need to re-think how organizing is conceptualized and approached in labour mobilization theory. In particular, it suggests that we need to broaden the current institutionalist conceptualization of organizing that is centred on large established unions; instead, a more inclusionary approach might be helpful, encompassing grassroots, informal and autonomous workers’ practices.

The article is organised as follows. Section two reviews the advances in labour mobilization theory in relation to organizing, as this is central to how labour renewal strategies are examined. Section three outlines the article's methodological approach, while section four discusses the emergence and basic features of indie unions. Section five analytically describes the key elements of these unions' organizing practices. The Discussion section will review the findings and establish the article's empirical and theoretical contribution to mobilization theory, which is centred around the concepts of 'communities of struggle' and inclusive ideas of organizing, while the Conclusion will outline their significance for labour renewal debates and practice.

2. The representation of precarious migrant workers and mobilization theory

Structural transformations such as outsourcing, fragmentation, decentralisation, tertiarization and financialization have resulted in job degradation and increased precarity for a growing number of workers - especially if migrant (Anderson 2010; Grady and Simms 2018; Standing 2011; Wills et al 2010; Alberti et al 2018; Woodcock 2014). For low-paid precarious migrant workers this situation has been made even worse by the development of a hostile immigration environment (see Virdee and McGeever 2017; Però 2013; Zontini and Però 2019).

The labour movement has struggled to navigate these transformations, and large unions have lost their ability to retain members and protect their deteriorating conditions. A number of scholars (e.g. Heery et. al 2003, Mrozowicki et al.2010) have documented the efforts undertaken by such unions in response to their decline, and have identified *organizing* as crucial. This is an approach that has attempted 'to rediscover the "social movement" origins of labour, essentially by redefining the

union as a mobilizing structure which seeks to stimulate activism among its members' (Simms et al 2013: 8). However, this literature suggests that despite the adoption of some movementist rhetoric and tactics, the organizing approach has been implemented top-down in an instrumental and depoliticized manner, featuring close 'bureaucratic' control that leaves little room for bottom-up initiatives led by workers (McAlevey 2016; Simms et al. 2013; Tapia 2013). Even the so-called community and social movement unionism that frequently accompanies the adoption of organizing reflects this top-down approach, as it often entails the formation of coalitions/alliances between such ('institutionalized') unions and civic and community organisations, many of which (e.g. churches) are often quite hierarchical themselves. Alongside these shortcomings is an apparent inability to accommodate new types of workers, as confirmed by a number of recent studies that have looked at the attempts of precarious migrant workers to organise within large unions (see Alberti and Però 2018; Moyers-Lee 2017; Lagnado 2016; Kirkpatrick 2014). Taken together these studies suggest that the critique of institutionalism that Kelly (1998) moved to unionism and industrial relations over twenty years ago is still relevant today as is his invitation to re-centre our focus on workers' mobilization, power and social justice.

Labour mobilization theory (Kelly 1998, 2018) constitutes a key framework for the analysis of collective practices to improve workers' conditions (see Gall and Holgate 2018; Lopes and Hall 2015). If Wright (2000) highlights the strategic importance of *associational power* for representing workers' interest, drawing on social movements studies, Kelly (1998) offers a comprehensive framework for examining *how* such power is mobilized against injustice. This is very useful in making sense of the organizing practices of precarious migrant workers. Central to mobilization theory is 'the fundamental question of how individuals are transformed into collective actors willing and able to create and sustain collective organization and engage in collective action against their employers' (Kelly 1998:38). At the heart of this power-building

process lies the idea of the perception of injustice, with mobilization crucially depending upon workers framing their employment relations as unjust due to exploitative and oppressive managerial practices. In Kelly's description, the process of workers' collective action has three stages. First, the workers' leaders would frame a specific situation as unjust and unacceptable, attributing responsibility to their managerial counterpart. Then workers would embrace such framing and form a collective identity around it, starting to organize and assess the opportunities and resources available for effective action. Finally, they would mobilize, undertaking collective action.

While still regarded as broadly relevant (see Gall and Holgate 2018), Kelly's framework has been criticised for under-theorizing the *organizing* dimension of collective initiatives, especially in relation to mobilizing. Drawing on McAleve (2016; 2015) who highlights how mobilizing and organizing are often confused and conflated (usually at the expense of the latter), Holgate et al (2018) have recently argued that it is crucial to differentiate conceptually between the two in order to sharpen the analysis of labour initiatives and facilitate more effective outcomes. In particular, *mobilizing* refers to the activation of an existing base of support, whereas *organizing* entails 'engaging and activating people who [...] through a process of collective organizing and the development of grassroots leaders, begin to self-identify as part of a community with a shared objective in seeking to challenge injustice' (Holgate et al 2018:600). Their critique is relevant here because in the case of precarious migrant workers, there is no pre-existing base of support to be activated. In fact, these workers are scattered, isolated and numerically few, both in the workplaces and in their residential areas, and their power and effectiveness crucially depends on the organizing practices that are adopted. Holgate et al (2018) explain that whereas mobilizing involves short-term activity (a strike, a protest etc.), organizing entails a deeper and longer-term process, namely that of building workers' capacity to act and

represent themselves on a more permanent basis (ibid.), what Wright (2000) would refer to as associational power. They also explain that while *mobilizing* revolves heavily on union professional staff and activists and is primarily about campaigning, *organizing* is more centred on working members' involvement, conscientization, formation and empowerment.

In terms of implementation, organizing has been described as requiring the following steps. Firstly, there needs to be a highly detailed analysis of the power structures within the workplace and community, in order to identify their vulnerabilities.

Simultaneously, a similar approach should be deployed to work out the networks and ties of potential allies in the community to involve them in the fight of the workers and their unions (McAlevey 2016). These preliminary steps should then be followed by the building of a supermajority of engaged, unionized workers who also organize their residential community and conduct mass negotiations, rather than 'the closed-door deal making typical of [...] mobilizing' (McAlevey 2016: 10) and by the development of an action strategy that focuses on any vulnerabilities that were identified. Overall, according to McAlevey (2016), organizing is a long and demanding process for which there are 'no shortcuts'.

However, meeting some of the above requisites of organizing may prove too difficult or unrealistic in some circumstances. For instance, creating 'supermajorities' (of 65% to 90%) of workers organized in unions in large workplaces, accompanied by high numbers of committed members of the local communities prior to undertaking collective action, may be extremely difficult, unnecessary or even counterproductive. This approach would require significant resources and commitment from many workers well in advance of any tangible improvement of their conditions. Also, while calling for a greater and more meaningful participation of workers, it is clear that the

organizing process envisaged above (as for Kelly's approach) crucially presupposes large established unions, which are considered an essential conduit for any initiative.

Thus, this discussion of labour mobilization theory indicates a gap around how we can make sense of the ways in which precarious migrant workers build power, organize and mobilize autonomously, without support from the mainstream unions. Accordingly, the main question addressed in this article is how can effective organizing and power-building occur when some of the key requisites of organizing mentioned above are absent - for example, when workers are few and not represented by an established trade union in their workplace, have little material resources, and live scattered across different residential communities or geographical areas? These insights will form the basis for grounding a re-definition of the concept of organizing in labour mobilization theory so as to make it applicable to a wider range of experiences.

3. Approach and methodology

In studying indie unions this article is informed by an embedded actor-centred sociological framework (Alberti and Però 2018). This entails foregrounding migrant workers as typical incarnations of the transient and precarious workforce around which current employment dynamics increasingly revolve. It also entails decoupling these workers from ethnic majority (and minority) workers in permanent employment. They are considered here as relational actors with specific subjectivities and needs, both material and non-material, that are embedded in specific social and industrial fields. The article draws on an on-going, long-standing multi-sited ethnography on migrant workers' engagements that began in 2004. However, most of the data underpinning this article originates from fieldwork conducted since 2015.

The fieldwork entailed participant observation, conversations, semi-structured interviews and document examination. In particular, fieldwork included participant observation conducted at over 110 events/venues and 59 recorded semi-structured interviews lasting over one hour. Participant observation was conducted at meetings, training sessions, demonstrations, protests, strikes, marches, round tables, barbeques, pubs, workshops and festive parties organised by indie unions or featuring indie unions, as well as other actors such as civic and community organizations and mainstream unions. Interviews and conversations involved indie unions' migrant and non-migrant members and activists, as well as mainstream union and community organizations' members and activists. Fieldwork also involved examining some of the texts that the participants and their organizations had produced in hard copies and online, as well as the texts that others (e.g. journalists and bloggers) had produced on them. Data was analysed thematically through a qualitative approach, using the funnel approach outlined by Agar (1996) and Okely (2012) to develop and examine emerging themes.

4. The emergence of indie unions

Indie unions are recently formed grassroots British labour organisations led or co-led by precarious migrant workers. These are the Independent Workers of Great Britain (IWGB), the United Voices of the World (UWW) and the Cleaners and Allied Independent Workers Union (CAIWU). They are all legally registered trade unions but possess several features (see below) normally attributed to social movements and community organizations. Indie unions developed with the firm intent to represent, organize and bargain for (and with) a majority of low-paid, precarious migrant workers largely employed in the service sector (e.g. cleaners, security guards, riders) mainly in the London area. However, they have also started to represent non-migrant sectors of the precariat and expand nationally - for example,

IWGB among foster carers in Scotland and British-Asian private hire drivers in Nottingham. They have also begun to experiment with coordinated strike action, for example UVW at the Ministry of Justice with PCS at the Department for Energy and Industrial strategy, demonstrating that their approach can travel and scale up.

Similar to the Workers Centers of North America (Fine 2006; Choudry et al 2009), indie unions emerged to compensate for the inadequate support that established unions - despite an inclusive rhetoric - offered to migrant workers in conditions of high precarity, exploitation, exclusion and oppression. As one of the UVW leaders stated: '*United Voices* was born ... due to a massive gap in the labour movement that simply wasn't addressing the needs of migrants ... We are responding to a need...we are demand- driven' (Louis, UVW).¹

In addition to providing individual and collective representation on work-related issues (including pay and conditions, harassment, victimization and dismissals) to over 5,000 members, indie unions offer a range of accessible services and opportunities that include English language classes, as well as labour, housing and benefits rights workshops. They are strongly connected to the London Latin American migrant community, from which they emerged, but they are increasingly representing precarious migrant workers also from other backgrounds, such as the West Indies, Africa, the Indian sub-continent, and Eastern Europe, as well as British ethnic minority and White British workers. For instance, in a 2018 count, UVW featured members from 67 different countries. Table 1 summarizes some of the key features of the indie unions.

[TABLE 1 here]

Indie unions are largely funded by their members. Despite very limited material resources and infrastructures, this income has allowed them to be independent and ‘political’ - unlike many community and civic organizations whose charitable status and public funding anchors them to a ‘non-political’ role. Indie unions have been able to deploy a repertoire of collective action that, given their modest numbers and material resources, has been quite remarkable for its visibility, creativity and impact. Indie unions have consistently been punching above their weight, taking on hundreds of employers including high profile names such as Sotheby’s, 100 Wood Street, the Barbican Centre, Harrods, the Daily Mail, and the University of London (see Acciari and Però 2017; Alberti and Però 2018; Shalmy 2018; Schenker 2019).

Indie unions have not emerged suddenly because of an a priori strong ideological difference to mainstream unions (like those of syndicalist unions – see Hyman 1997). Rather, their gestation, emergence and growth is directly linked to first-hand, negative experiences with mainstream unions, especially on issues of representation, autonomy, co-optation, bureaucracy and the development of policy and collective initiatives. This can be seen from the involvement in T&G-Unite of the precursor of indie unions – the Latin American Workers Association – many of whose activists are now found in indie unions (Alberti and Però 2018; Però 2014; Lagnado 2014). Similarly, some members of Unison-University of London eventually formed IWGB (see Alberti and Però 2018; Moyer-Lee and Lopez 2017), including Juana, who recalled that: ‘ “we have to get out of there! Because why are we paying a fee for a union that is useless?!?” ’.

Since then the overall relationship between mainstream and indie unionism has not been very collaborative. While there are some informal collaborations between indie unions and large union organizers, the large unions, on the whole, seem to resent the new actors’ arrival. For example, in some instances indie unions have taken up

the representation of exploited workers in workplaces that were effectively 'greenfields' (where large recognised unions were not representing workers), and were then antagonized by the large unions which in some cases would even side with the exploitative employers (see also Hughes and Campanile 2018; Petrini 2019).

5. Key features of indie unions organizing

The effectiveness of precarious workers organizing into indie unions is based on three key components. One is their ability to represent their disputes to the outside world in term of *morally undisputable demands* – such as a living wage, decent pensions, sick pay, holiday, and parental leave – that are difficult for employers to deny without negatively tainting their image and reputation. Indeed, the representation of employers as illegitimately perpetrating unjust and immoral employment practices, conveyed through their web and Facebook pages, tends to be adopted and amplified by mainstream media, which often present their disputes favourably (Però and Downey 2019). Another is the ability to *form alliances beyond the workplace* and to *scale-up the protest* incrementally by *mobilizing* members and allies, both in the streets and online, generating platforms involving migrant community organizations, civic, political and industrial organizations (including the other indie unions) as well as bloggers and prominent journalists (see Acciari and Però 2017; Petrini 2019). The third component is addressed here and concerns the indie unions *organizing*, and in particular their ability to appeal to and engage precarious migrant workers in/through the construction of cohesive and effective 'communities of struggle'. Below are the main features of indie unions' organizing and power-building practices that enable them to organize the 'unorganizable' (Jiang and Korczynski 2016).

5.1. Sensitivity to and centrality of low-paid migrant workers

One of the main ways in which indie unions appeal to precarious migrant workers is through their commitment to represent carefully their interests and condition of 'high precarity'. This commitment is a foundational feature of their approach that contrasts with the 'shallow mobilizing' for which mainstream unions have been criticized in recent labour mobilization theory (see McAlevey 2016; Holgate et al. 2018; Simms and Holgate 2010). In addition to *economic* precarity (job insecurity, temporary contracts, agency work, zero-hours, low pay – see Wills et al 2010), these workers often embody *legal* precarity (insecure and unstable immigration status Anderson 2010), *social* precarity (limited integration in the social fabric of the city, neighbourhood and local community, see Hickman et al 2012) and *cultural* precarity (e.g. *linguistic* with often a limited command of the English language together with a similarly limited knowledge of laws, rules, regulations, rights – see McIlwaine 2005). Indie unions' inclusiveness and sensitivity to these intersecting and cumulative forms of precarity becomes especially significant in the current anti-immigration climate (Virdee and McGeever 2017; Però 2013; Zontini and Però 2019).

While mainstream unions primarily voice the interest of workers with a 'secure' work status and who are mostly native, indie unions came into being to represent migrant workers at the low end of the socio-economic ladder, after these workers had failed to find adequate representation in mainstream organisations (see above). Indie unions' sensitivity to migrant workers is expressed through their strong attention to workers' linguistic and cultural specificities and characterized by systematic inclusionary practices. For example, translations are ordinary at meetings and in social media communications. This is facilitated by the fact that non-migrant leaders and activists are generally very proficient in one or more foreign languages. Many of them have also strong 'cultural competences' developed through living in some of the countries of origin of the migrant members for extensive periods of time. This kind of

support is also facilitated by the fact that several leaders and activists have direct experience with precarious and exploitative working conditions in Britain, having done similar jobs themselves.

This situation favours a strong participatory and multicultural attitude and, conversely, hinders ethnocentrism and paternalism. Indie unions' sensitivity to precarious migrant workers can also be seen in the way they actively involve and encourage direct, first-person participation in the struggles and life of the union. Decisions, protests, campaigns, strikes and negotiations feature migrant workers very prominently, as do working groups, committees and so forth. Unlike large established unions that many authors consider bureaucratic (see section 2), indie unions actively seek to avoid delegating the representation of members to professional negotiators, so as not to repeat past experiences of misrepresentation and watering-down of claims (Alberti and Però 2018). Workers take responsibility and carry out actions and decisions themselves, while the union closely supports and assists them in order to prevent employers' exploiting their lack of experience and legislative knowledge. Thus, on the whole, apart from the legal side of negotiations, workers largely self-determine the content and strategies of their struggles. This illustrates how indie unions have, since the outset, embodied crucial elements of the 'deep organizing' approach advocated in recent labour mobilization theory (e.g. McAlevey 2016 and Holgate et al. 2018).

This direct involvement and self-representation is something that indie unions are proud of and use to present themselves to outsiders. As Ernesto, one the leaders of CAIWU said: 'We are the first cleaners unions in the UK...CAIWU is led by workers for workers but in practice, really. Many claim to be doing that...We really mean it'. A similar situation is described by Teresa, one of the younger founders and former president of IWGB and cleaner:

‘Our union is run by workers, we take decisions with everyone ...we have meetings we consult everyone...the worker has to have a voice and a vote... workers gives us ideas on how to do things, how to help... We ensure members participate. For instance, I’m the president, in the Unison branch this wouldn't be possible for someone like me who doesn’t speak English [very well], a foreigner’

Finally, we can also see indie unions’ sensitivity to migrant workers in the clear precedence placed on the representation of their interests over matters such as fund-raising, applying for grants, or seeking recognition from employers.

5.2. A positive outlook and a bold approach

Another important feature of indie unions organizing concerns their positive outlook on protest and industrial action, as Louis from UVW illustrates: ‘Yes there is a belief that we can win... No risk adverse, not a cautious approach’. Partly this stems from the combative industrial cultures, collective memories and experiences that a minority of members bring with them. However, in the most part indie union members, especially the young, have limited or no experience of industrial or political action when they join. Also, when a new member joins an indie union to bring their own case against an employer, the quality of treatment and the usually positive outcome tend to promote a favourable disposition towards collective disputes.

At an organizational level, indie unions’ positive outlook is grounded in a large catalogue of consecutive collective and individual achievements; this renders their framing of working conditions as unjust and in need of industrial action very authoritative. As Martin, one of the IWGB leaders put it: ‘We normally win campaigns and tend to win at Employment Tribunals’. Examples of remarkable wins include:

Sotheby (UVW); *CitySprint* (IWGB); *100 Wood Street* (UVW); *Mach1/GThompson* (IWGB); *Royal Opera House* (CAIWU); *Harrods* (UVW); *The 3 Cosas Campaign* (IWGB); *the LSE* (UVW); *Uber* (IWGB); *the Daily Mail* (UVW)². On UVW's collective achievements Louis commented as follows.

'In a campaign it [success] is about winning our demands to put it simply. But also [...] we measure success by the number of activists that we get from the disputes, the number of leaders that develop in the course of the dispute [...], the amount of participation of those workers in the union [...] also the amount of publicity that we get not for the sake of publicity but [...] to shine a light on these practices as much as possible, and how many new people we meet and work with in the course of a dispute as well. And how well workers are organized at the end of a dispute ... achieving a sustainable structure'

According to Manuel from IWGB, success means the achievement of 'Better terms and conditions for workers both at individual and collective level [and] seeing someone becoming a competent representative or organizer'.

This approach indicates a more complex if not inverse approach to that advocated in recent labour mobilization theory, where the identification and recruiting of leaders appears to be preliminary to the planning and undertaking of collective action (see McAlevey 2015). This is in contrast to an indie union approach, where industrial disputes tend to be integral to the ways in which leaders are identified and members, activists and organizers are recruited, and their long-term engagement in the life and organization of the union is secured.

Indie unions see their workers-centred approach as different from mainstream unions as one of the UVW leaders pointed out with reference to a dispute involving outsourced cleaners at the LSE:

‘[mainstream unions] don’t care and they don’t have any sort of interest in seeing a group of well organised autonomous determined cleaners that are capable of having their own branch, having their own say, making their own decisions, taking actions if and when they want and not when some bureaucrats want. They are inimical to that prospect.’ (Louis)

Indie union members tend to consider the mainstream unions as ‘too polite and non confrontational which is a completely impossible approach in the low-paid sector’ (Louis, UVW). This view is consistent with that of one of the IWGB’s leaders: ‘Cleaning companies are cowboys, to deal with them you need a bold approach which big trade unions don’t provide’ (Martin 2016).

5.3. Agility and speed of action

A further feature of indie unions’ organizing is the rapidity with which they can undertake both individual representation and collective campaigns. This speed of action often surprises exploitative employers, who are accustomed to workers’ quiescence and/or to the often slow and ritualized behaviours of large recognised unions. This feature appears at odd with the ‘no shortcut’ organizing approach highlighted in McAlevey (2016) which requires a much longer period of preparation and higher number of participants.

Like their bold approach, this speed of action is integral to the irreverence held towards received wisdoms and settled ways of conducting industrial relations. When conventions are seen as hindering the improvement of their workers’ conditions,

indie unions have little time for them. It is in this context that we need to understand their lack of enthusiasm for formal employers' recognition, which is generally seen as a pillar of the industrial employment relations system. While not ideologically opposed to it, they regard recognition as something preferable but not necessary, especially as a starting condition. If indie unions sought recognition first, many of their initiatives would soon be killed off by the bureaucratic process that recognition entails. In addition, the fact that sometimes workplaces already have a recognized union (never mind how idle or unrepresentative) makes indie unions' recognition technically impossible, as only one union can be recognized in a given workplace. Thus, the absence of employers' recognition does not prevent action but, on the contrary, can allow for greater agility and speed of action. Moreover – as was once patiently explained to me by one of the UVW leaders – employers do recognize indie unions in practice, and this is because they are made to through industrial action or the threat of it. The following quote from Louis illustrates how indie unions navigate the existing legal framework on collective bargaining as unrecognised unions.

'Recognition is not a pre-requisite to collectively bargaining, a collective bargaining agreement with another trade union can exclude us from formally bargaining with an employer but if there is no recognition agreement with another trade union we are not excluded from that. [However...] We don't pursue recognition agreements generally, that doesn't mean that we are against them either. [...] Only in the most prestigious and bigger institutions are they [recognized unions] there, but most of our members work across many small workplaces that don't recognise trade unions. Also most of our demands are non-negotiable and so the issue of collective bargaining isn't an interesting one if you don't intend to negotiate the terms in which the demands are made [...] And because of the outsourcing dynamic [...] you'll find that the collective bargaining ceases to be relevant because you are not

actually bargaining with the employer [...] but you are indirectly bargaining with the client [...]. Also there's another reason why we don't bargain, you actually need significant leverage to bargain, and actually the only leverage that we have [...] is a disruptive high profile direct action [...] so when action is taken it changes the whole relationship with the employer or client.'

Agility and rapidity of action also characterise indie unions' engagement in terms of individual representation. This is fast, thorough and occurs with equal intensity across the spectrum of abuses and malpractices, from matters of pay and conditions to homophobia. I have collected numerous stories of oppressed workers getting in touch with the indie unions and having someone on their case the following day. This rapidity has little to do with a competitive recruitment strategy, as indie unions do not operate first and foremost in pursuit of growth in membership, and has more to do with a committed pursuit of justice for workers. Moreover, members have often contrasted the quality and rapidity of support found in indie unions with their previous disappointing experiences with mainstream unions, described as ineffective, bureaucratic, uncommitted, instrumental, and 'after their money'.

'Unison...has lots of money but they don't represent... there are companeros that have told me: "I have filed a complaint with Unison three months ago and until now I have had no reply". On the other hand, here we don't have many people who pay us [membership] or that work for us but we provide good representation. The cases we take we solve so that people are happy'
(Teresa, IWGB)

This thorough and rapid support, and the trust it generates, is often mentioned as one of the key reasons for starting to become involved in the union and its collective initiatives.

5.4. Formation, personal growth and empowerment

Empowerment, formation and personal growth constitute another key feature of indie unions' organizing and one that is broadly consistent with the vision of organizing advocated by McAlevey (2016) and Holgate et al. (2018). Indie unions are strongly focused on benefitting the workers as whole people and not merely on improving their pay and conditions. Indie unions seem deeply aware that not only material gains but emotional rewards too, such as being treated with respect, are central to workers, as Cesar from IWGB illustrates:

'We began because people were living without hope, in resignation, with very low expectations...and it is easy to dominate people in these conditions. What's lacking here is respect. We said "let's go recovering respect, self-esteem and dignity" '

Many of my interviews, conversations and observations have revealed how workers' participation in indie unions has crucially helped them to overcome fear, build self-esteem and confidence, and take pride in who they are and what they can do at work and beyond. For instance, Ramon revealed how he was initially enduring daily abuse for fear of speaking up, but through his involvement with IWGB he progressively lost much of this fear.

'it would have been unthinkable before I started getting involved... and the first time I was really afraid, now it has become almost ordinary to defend colleagues at the Employment Tribunal against my manager and my manager's manager'

Now Ramon regularly acts as an IWGB organizer, spokesperson at public events and protests and in executive roles.

Engagement with indie unions' initiatives also entails concrete opportunities for members to learn about their employment rights and aspects of employment law as well as about welfare entitlements and tenants' rights (e.g. through workshops). It is not difficult to see how acquiring this knowledge and awareness can generate a sense of security and peace of mind. This is facilitated by free English classes and exchanges (e.g. Spanish/English) that enable migrant workers to take on additional roles, such as that of Spanish language and culture teachers. These initiatives have helped to build rapport and trust and are being strengthened further through social events (e.g. *fiestas*) where people can socialize, have food and dance together, all moments when precarious workers can be recognized and appreciated as whole people. This concern for workers' formation, growth and empowerment provides further evidence of the substantive commitment to workers, in a way that clearly differentiates indie unions from mainstream unions whose organizing strategies have disappointed the workers interviewed here and have been portrayed as shallow, inconsistent and instrumental in the literature (see Simms and Holgate 2010; see also McAlevey 2016 and Holgate et al. 2018).

5.5. '*Community*'

In indie unions migrant workers can find supportive relations as well as a welcoming and understanding environment. It is a space where people share experiences and socio-economic, ethno-cultural and political identities. As Teresa from IWGB pointed out:

‘There are many people that don’t have a family here and for not speaking English have a lot of problems, with housing, at work... They come to our *sindicato* and we talk to them, we try to help them, to advise them... There is for example an older member of the union... who is here alone and who is always sad ... but we are always helping him, motivating him, doing something that make him feel good’

It is a trustworthy and horizontal circuit/web of solidarity where remarks such as ‘It’s like a family to me’ or ‘if you join a big union you are a number, if you join IWGB you are joining a community, you are making friends’ are common. On these grounds it is possible to consider indie unions as communities of coping (Jiang and Korczynski 2016). Crucially, however, the ‘community’ aspect in indie unionism is not limited to coping but is an essential feature of their organizing approach, being intrinsically connected to transformative collective action.

Importantly, indie unions also constitute also a site where *collective combative identities* are generated and successfully performed in industrial actions and direct bargaining with employers. For instance, an industrial dispute targeting a particular workplace will actively feature not only the union’s members from that workplace but also those from other workplaces, together with a range of activists and allied organizations and whenever possible also some of the employers’ clients, such as students as in the UVW’s campaign at the LSE. Furthermore, indie unions are a site where some of the harshest effects of living under conditions of multiple precarity and exclusion can be mitigated by members’ drawing on each other for the emotional and material support needed for ‘coping’ with such condition as well as for ‘struggling’ to change it. This community condition is actively promoted by the indie union organizers who are keen to make the union into an inclusive and ‘safe’ space. Indeed, these two dimensions (coping and struggle) of indie unions tend to

progressively reinforce each other. Struggling is 'easier' when you have a strong community of members that trust and support each other, while coping (at work and in society more generally) is facilitated by the trust, informality and camaraderie that gets generated by struggling side-by-side.

Indie union organisers understand the significance of this mutuality and bonding and they try to foster its organic emergence in such a way as to enhance members' general wellbeing, empowerment and participation – it is not merely instrumental to recruitment or to short-term initiatives. Thus, in relation to labour mobilization theory, the communities of struggle represent the specific way in which precarious migrant workers have built, structured and deployed associational power in absence of material resources and support from established unions.

'The only way to seek lasting changes in the labour market is obviously through workers organising themselves, but [...] for that happening there need to be another approach [...] so we would consider ourselves [...] as somewhat of a community union or at least going in that direction so we receive a huge amount of support from people at our actions' (Louis, UVW)

When compared to community organizations that constitute the backbone of broad-based community coalitions (such as Citizens UK for instance) indie unions – while less territorially grounded in a specific neighbourhood – still have a very strong face-to-face dimension, whereby members frequently come together to socialise, get advice and training, or plan and conduct industrial action. Their allies, however, tend to be different as they often involve more 'political' organizations than those forming Citizens UK, which have mostly a charity status.

Thus, it seems possible to describe indie unions as ‘post-workplace’ and ‘post-neighbourhood’ workers’ communities of struggle, i.e. collective action-oriented communities that are not so much rooted in a workplace or a neighbourhood (where they have low density) as in the strong social bonds of solidarity and support they forge and sustain face-to-face in a range of initiatives and activities by and for workers. In this respect, indie unions’ approach differs from those in which organizing is rooted in the workplace (Kelly 1998), the neighbourhood (Banks 1991) or both (McAlevey 2016; Holgate et al 2018) and achieve high density. The sense of community, together with the collective action-oriented solidarity found in indie unions, is something that members recurrently say they have not found in their previous experiences with mainstream unions.

6. Discussion: Towards a new concept of organizing

This article set out to examine how precarious migrant workers organizing themselves into small independent unions with no economic resources have been able to build solidarity and associational power and repeatedly obtain significant material concessions from employers as well as ‘non-material’ rewards. Through an embedded, actor-centred sociological approach focusing on the workers’ views, experiences, relations and practices (Alberti and Però 2018), the article found that effective and sustained organizing has been achieved through the building of ‘communities of struggle’. These are action-oriented collectives genuinely tailored around the specific identities of their members that have proved capable of rapidly negotiating concrete improvements in their working and general conditions via collective and individual initiatives. They are also a space that provides real opportunities for personal growth, training and empowerment, positive collective identification as well as a membership of a group of trustworthy people with whom to socialize, exchange emotional and material support, and where the ‘subjective

feeling of precarity' (Alberti et al 2018) can be alleviated. In other words, it is an inclusive space where often isolated, quiescent and subdued workers (normally considered 'unorganizable') build associational power and turn into combative collectives made of determined, resilient, imaginative, integrated and supportive industrial actors, as well as into active and socially integrated citizens.

At a theoretical level these ethnographic findings illustrate, in the contemporary context of precarity, the continued relevance of Kelly's (1998) concern with how workers can build power and transform into collective actors willing to fight against their employers to obtain material and non-material rewards (see also Lopes and Hall 2015). In particular, extending Kelly's work, this article has contributed specific insights into how power can be effectively built among highly precarious and diverse workers who work and live scattered around different workplaces and residential areas. As we have seen, this organizing and power-building process in indie unions entailed the direct members' involvement, their empowerment, an 'anti-bureaucratic' and participatory culture, and timely intervention (which is not to be confused with the short-termism of mobilizing approaches highlighted by Holgate et al. 2018). However, at the same time, in examining the organizing practices of precarious migrant workers of indie unions, this article has also identified some significant shortcomings in the existing labour mobilization theory. These concern its ability to account for how workers can build power in absence of some of the features deemed crucial in the 'no shortcuts' approach to organizing advocated by McAlevey (2016, 2015; see also Holgate et al 2018), such as the central presence of established unions, carrying out large-scale structural power analysis and the building of supermajorities in the workplace and in the community prior to action. In light of the empirical findings, the 'no shortcuts' approach, in fact, would seem dysfunctional to the timely development of rapid and agile initiatives by and for aggrieved workers and to the delivering of tangible and rewarding material and non-material outcomes in the short-term.

Thus, given the inadequacy of the current concept of organizing in accounting for collective power-building practices among precarious and migrant workers, this article proposes a new concept of organizing. This concept inclusively defines labour organizing as the sustained collective practices of workers and their allies that are intended to build associational power within and/or outside their workplaces and residential areas in order to alter unjust work relationships and deliver material and non-material rewards. Encompassing the development of 'communities of struggle', this concept is different (broader) from that of current labour mobilization theory (McAlevey 2016; Holgate et al 2018) that are centred on established unions, high density in workplaces and residential areas, laborious power-structure analysis and long-term preparation prior to industrial action as well as by a prescriptive ethos. It also differs from Scott's (1985) concept of resistance that is intended to capture the undeclared and individual practices that workers perform to contain their employers' domination without triggering an open conflict.

7. Conclusions

Through an organizing approach centred on the development of 'communities of struggle' combined with a shrewd use of social media and allied organizations (see Però and Downey 2019), indie unions have transformed participants' lives in significant ways both at work and more generally. For example, in addition to improved pay and conditions they have often helped to develop more respectful relationships at work and better social integration. They have transformed numerous workplaces, vis-à-vis the living wage, pension, annual leave, parental leave and even outsourcing, and sectors (cleaning, security, logistics). Indie unions have had a remarkable impact on public awareness and debate, e.g. on exploitation in the gig

economy, bogus self-employment, the living wage and outsourcing, often in more significant ways than established unions.

This organizing experience suggests that labour renewal can come from a broad variety of sources, directions and formats, including from workers normally considered 'unorganizable'. Rather than focusing on established unions as the sole repository of change, researchers and practitioners alike should foster understanding, collaborations and synergies between established and emerging labour actors that are engaged in advancing workers' interests.

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Tables

Table 1. Indie Unions' Basic Information³.

INDIE UNIONS	IWGB	UVW	CAIWU
Created	Aug 2012	Jan 2014	2016
Members	Over 3000	Over 2000	Over 800
Status	2/3 Migrant (mostly Latin Americans) 1/3 BAME & White British	Approx. 90% Migrant (mostly from Latin America, Africa, West Indies)	Over 90% Migrant (mostly from Latin America)
Key groups/sectors	Cleaners Foster Carers Private Hire Drivers Security Guards Couriers	Cleaners Security Guards Sex workers	Cleaners
Recognition Agreements with Employers	No	No	No
Geographic Area	40% London 60% Outside	London	London
Structure	Branch-based (with high autonomy and representation)	Horizontal (No branches)	Horizontal – (No Branches)

¹ All the names of the research participants are pseudonyms.

² Examples include the LSE campaign where UVW (that at the time was operating on a yearly budget of about £50,000) induced the termination of a £5,000,000 outsourcing contract and the Daily Mail campaign where without incurring any costs it produced a £500,000 wage increase for the cleaners.

³ This data is updated to November 2018.