

How Vulnerable is it up North?

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Introduction

In this paper we will argue that a precise definition of the imprecise term 'vulnerability' is an important starting point for developing positive policies for trade unions in working with and representing those workers. We will suggest that there are four particular problems in defining vulnerability. Firstly it may be defined in a way that effectively vulnerability appears as a personal characteristic. Secondly, it may be done in a way that omits the notion of 'choice' leaving workers who would not regard themselves as vulnerable to appear in the same category as those who clearly are. Thirdly, imprecise definitions cloud the role of employers in creating vulnerability as a deliberate strategy. Finally there is a tendency to omit or underplay the key feature of vulnerability and that is the nature of the relationship of the worker to the labour market and, therefore, their ability to work and earn income. In this sense, the general use of 'precarious' rather than vulnerable in much of the European discussion provides a more pointed focus.

Following from this definitional discussion we explore vulnerable workers campaigns in a particular geographical location and through the activities of the TUC Northern Region and a project led by the General Federation of Trades Unions (GFTU) in a Northern City. In doing so we will draw attention to the need for policies and strategies that focus trade union campaigns and use locality as a key arena of organising.

The main content of the paper is based on author engagement with evolving vulnerable workers strategies. In particular it concerns itself with discussing the TUC strategy in the North East of England and the still unfolding General Federation of Trade Unions (GFTU) vulnerable workers project in the North of England.

The projects are ongoing and therefore the research involves not only discussion of case studies in the North but also action research in implementing strategies. For example the initial phase of the North East strategy is already completed (see Stirling, 2007). The projects themselves have had a differing focus. The North East vulnerable workers project followed on from initial work with migrant workers in the region (see Fitzgerald, 2005 and 2006). It analysed the extent and situation of vulnerable workers in the Northern Region and, more particularly, used interviews with staff of TUC supported Centres to explore notions of community engagement. Following this the project has recently sought to re-launch itself through the TUC national UMF vulnerable workers project. There is also likely to be a steering group to support it in the region which the authors are participating in. With the GFTU, again the authors are a key part of this project.

Defining vulnerable

We would argue, with Pollert and Charlwood, that, vulnerability is the outcome of 'the fundamental asymmetry of the capitalist employment relationship between the *individual worker* and the *employer*' (2009 p 345, emphasis in original). This results in an asymmetrical legal relationship which employers increasingly exploit as they shift

their contractual relationship with individuals and the associated burden of risk to others and, most specifically, to the individual themselves.

The key elements contained in the recent debates about vulnerability have emerged following a restructuring of labour markets and a declining trade union influence beyond the more 'traditional' employment relationship still found in large parts of the public sector. This has led to definitions associated with the concept that generally contain one or all of three key elements. Firstly, access to employment rights, secondly level of income and, thirdly, access to trade unionism in general and collective agreements in particular. Implicit in these definitions are particular groups of people such as migrant workers; particular types of employment such as agency work and particular responses to the problems they face, most obviously extending trade union membership. This debate is encompassed by a broader argument (implied by the use of the word vulnerable itself) that vulnerability is about injustice leading to poverty (TUC 2008, p3 for example) . We do not want to lose sight of any of these features but rather to suggest that because they focus on people in work they neglect the key element of vulnerability which is access to stable employment and the regular income it brings. This is characterised in a legal form by the access to a contract of employment and a relationship, however, 'asymmetrical' between an employee and an employer. Beyond that we move to an informal economy that may be beyond the law and the capacity of enforcement agencies to make any meaningful impact. It is these that trade unions have to find themselves engaged beyond the workplace and in communities if they are to continue to have relevance to the vulnerable.

Pay and rights, and vulnerability

The conceptual 'flexibility' of vulnerability is illustrated by the difficulty in estimating the number of vulnerable workers leading to generalised estimates varying between two million (TUC 2008) and 5.3 million (PSI 2006). The exact numbers are not the issue in themselves but rather what the figures contain. Two definitions opt to include pay as part of the definition of vulnerability:

'those who are in the bottom third of the hourly income distribution and who do not have their pay and conditions determined by a trade union agreement (PSI 2006)

Or

'All workers without collective organization are vulnerable, but we narrow this characterization in terms of the added disadvantage of labour market weakness to the lower paid half of the workforce earning below the median' Pollert & Charlwood (2009, p345)

Low pay clearly leads to vulnerability in relation to social exclusion and poverty but there is not necessarily a causal connection with the denial of employment rights. Low pay may even be associated with access to a right - the inimum wage. It may

also be associated with those in the public sector which is relatively well organised and more likely to respect other employment rights. This leads us to the second point that all unorganised workers are vulnerable or at least those not covered by a collective agreement. Again, we would hardly want to deny the significance of unions and collective agreements in protecting workers but, inevitably, there are highly paid workers guaranteed their rights in the large sectors of the economy that are no longer unionised. This leaves us with the third point about accessing rights and this is at the heart of the discussion of vulnerability and is summed up in the DTI definition of a vulnerable worker as someone working where

'the risk of being denied employment rights is high and who does not have the capacity or means to protect themselves from that abuse' (DTI, 2006, 25a).

Clearly, as Pollert and Charlwood draw attention to (2009, p349) there is substantial evidence of workers feeling they have had problems at work that have infringed their rights. BERR records that over a third of all workers regard themselves as 'not very well informed' about their rights (2008, p15). What the evidence is less clear about is what rights were infringed and whether they were real or imagined. Further evidence could be drawn from Employment Tribunal data or Citizens Advice bureau statistics but this would be the tip of an iceberg and not germane to our key point the likelihood of workers being denied access to their rights is related directly to their employment relationship and, in particular whether it is precarious in the sense of vulnerable to being lost by arbitrary management decisions rather than individual choice. As we suggested at the outset, the ability of workers rather than employers to 'choose' is also a defining characteristic of vulnerability or the lack of it. It is clear that workers in what are objectively the same employment relationships may have very different levels of vulnerability. For examples professionals who take agency work because it pays better and who are well aware that they will have to cope with their own holiday and sickness arrangements are in marked contrast with those who take agency employment because there is no alternative. Similarly, individuals might choose part time work as well as being forced to do two or three part time jobs to generate enough income to support themselves and their families.

However, our argument is not so much about the particular choices of individual workers but the strategy of employers in marginalising workers and reducing their costs. Employers have a vested interest in vulnerability it is not simply an unfortunate accident that can be resolved by the effective implementation of inadequate legislation. We can illustrate this through returning to the well known 'flexible firm' model and leaving aside the criticisms for the moment but taking the key points about core and peripheral employment. In doing so we will argue that vulnerability is not best measured by low pay or access to rights that may be ineffectual in any case but by a withering away of the formal contractual employment relationship.

In brief, (see Castree et al 2004 for a summary) the model identifies three key labour markets. The first is the 'core' which is characterised by a stable, contractual,

employment relationship. The 'secondary labour force' is associated with numerical flexibility in relation to workers who are, for example, on short term or zero hours contracts or publicly subsidised trainees. The third part of the peripheral workforce in relation to the core is those that do work that is outsourced to agencies, through subcontracting or through bogus self employment. In effect, vulnerability increases the further the worker is from a core contract and the nearer they come to the informal economy and bogus self employment. For the employer, this is of course a conscious strategy that shifts costs and risks to others and is most sharply illustrated by the global supply chains and multinational corporations in textiles and clothing for example. Such a comparison is not far fetched but an exemplar of vulnerability.

In the context of the shift to informality the question for the State then becomes not access to rights but the denial of income from taxation and expenditure on benefits. For example, the BERR report on vulnerability notes the growth of informality as of 'particular interest to the tax and benefit authorities, (2008, p19). In effect a particular approach to vulnerability leads to a particular conclusion about vulnerability – that it leads to fraud – and a particular way of dealing with it – through the tax and benefit offices rather than an extension of rights to workers.

Unions and vulnerability

Thus far we have left two questions hanging. Firstly, vulnerability to what and secondly what might unions do about it? It is clear that workers are vulnerable if they are not able to access basic rights either because they don't know about them, because they are not effectively represented or because an employer is hostile to their exercise. However, for workers in the contractual relationships we have highlighted, access is often denied in the first place because of restrictions on length of qualifying service and, even where they are exercised the outcomes may be minimal (eg redundancy pay or compensation in a discrimination case). The vulnerability is in the loss of job and income rather than the lack of compensation for that. Not only is employment precarious but life is too.

How then might unions respond? Clearly, organising at work rather than simply recruiting members, is the easy answer but the difficult solution. We do not intend to enter that debate here because our definitional analysis leads us to another direction. Vulnerability is multi-faceted and experienced in our daily lives not just our working lives. It is experienced as workers slip in and out of employment and become dependent on State benefits, their families and communities rather than being in work. Trade unions can simply cut themselves off from these relationships as being organisations that represent people at work. However, As Wilson (2007) records, unions have a role as a 'sword of justice' that goes well beyond the workplace. Most recently this has been exemplified by a re-engagement with concepts of place in both the academic community and trade union practice. Community unionism has been particularly focussed on the development of a trade union role beyond the workplace. In what follows we explore how the Northern TUC

and the GFTU have sought to identify and work with vulnerable workers beyond the workplace.

Methodology

Our approach in this paper is to draw on a diverse set of resources and engagements that will enable us to evaluate the development of policy in one region of the TUC and in the lesser researched General Federation of Trade Unions. The resources included our own research in relation to the northern region TUC (Fitzgerald, 2005, 2006, & 2007 and Stirling, 2007). and the policy documents emerging from that. Three of these involved a research interview approach whilst Fitzgerald (2006) was more an action research approach lasting approximately six months and directly involving a TUC affiliate (Ucatt). Fitzgerald's work had focussed on Polish workers following earlier research on unions and BME communities (Fitzgerald and Stirling 2004) whilst the research by Stirling mapped vulnerability in the region and identified practical engagement strategies with the varying communities in the North East. This included interviews with workers in community organisations in Middlesbrough, central Newcastle and Wallsend. In addition one of the authors conducted a lengthy interview with the Regional TUC project leader on vulnerable workers.

Research on the GFTU drew on one author's practical engagement with the organisation and involvement in the development of its policy; participant observation of vulnerable workers conferences and training events and the utilisation of data from a Thompsons solicitor's led project in a Northern city.

Adopting this approach has given us a rich and diverse data base from policy officers through to activists including those working in migrant communities in particular. The outcome is that we are focussing on central organisations (the TUC and GFTU) rather than affiliates and this shapes our empirical data which highlights the importance of this relationship. As well as drawing conclusions about the development of vulnerable worker policy we inevitably are drawn to analysing its implementation which brings us to a discussion of the relationship between the central confederations and their affiliates.

Whilst it is not necessary to describe in any detail the nature and work of the TUC it will be useful to present some basic information about the lesser known GFTU before proceeding to our analysis.

The General Federation of Trade Unions (GFTU) was established by the TUC in 1899. The principal objective was to set up a national organisation with a strike fund which could be drawn upon by affiliated trade unions. In more modern times the GFTU has become the federal body for the small, specialist trade unions and professional associations. Membership is varied and stretches from the National Union of Journalists (NUJ) to the Professional Footballers' Association (PFA). Affiliates of the GFTU which, like the TUC, is not a trade union, and does not directly recruit

members, receive a number of services, the principal of which is access to its education and project management services.

One of its key strategic goals is to fund initiatives that add capacity and value to the work of affiliate's workplace representatives and officers. As a result externally funded initiatives tend to have an education or training-dominant theme. Similarly, the GFTU tends to customise courses developed under funded projects for delivery directly to specific affiliates. This has the benefit of enabling the GFTU as a very small trade union confederation to test and pilot new educational concepts, within projects, before delivering definitive versions directly to affiliates.

The developing community strategy

The Northern Region TUC strategy was driven by national policy initiatives such as the Commission on Vulnerable Employment; initiatives from its affiliates (for example, UCATT); funding opportunities and its own internal impetus to engage with vulnerable workers and link that with developing relationships with communities. In addition, the commissioned research work supported activity in relation to the high profile public attention given to Polish migrants.

When the vulnerable workers project (VWP) began in late 2007 NTUC affiliates were reporting a growth of Polish members in regional workplaces leading to an initial focus on supporting the establishment of a Polish 'reps' network. However, what was found to be needed was 'a little bit of union spin' due to two main things (1) needing to show that they were doing something as unions and (2) wanting to show that unions in this region had done as well as those elsewhere. The reality in the North was Polish members who were scattered in different workplaces and with no real trade union representation for these communities. Given this it was decided that the best method of approach was to engage with the Poles through their community activists. One of the first was a Polish web administrator who 'owned' a Polish language website based on Newcastle upon Tyne. Through this website and via the Polish administrator links were extended into the local Polish community. This was further developed via another Polish association - the North East Polish Community Organisation - although it was found that they mainly represented students.

Significantly, though they staged a prestigious annual week of celebration called 'Made in Poland' where all types of art, film and other events were undertaken. At the first 'Made in Poland' a session was organised in a Newcastle night club with a Labour Euro MP, on agency working. Engagements also lead to involvement with the Sunderland Polish Association and this allowed a regular opportunity to organise the types of events highlighted by Martínez Lucio and Perrett (2007). One of the first that was typical of these engagements involved the participation of Thompsons solicitors. Here a 'productive exchange' took place between the VWP worker and Polish migrants and issues discussed included how trade unions were organised in the UK and how people viewed them in Poland. Thompsons dealt with a range of questions with regard to driving licences, contracts of employment etc., and the

solicitor present adjourning to a private room for one-to-one assistance. One of the key issues was clearly that migrant worker problems were often focused not just on workplace issues but on non-workplace housing and legal issues. This meant that afflicts were often slow to take up organising and recruitment opportunities.

There were also issues with some unions when they did take this new migrant group into membership. A new GMB Polish representative, who was to play an important part in the TUC strategy when he was later employed as a project worker for the VWP, identified two key, but potentially contradictory, issues with regard to regional Polish workers. Firstly, poor support from unions to move these workers into active participation, in contrast to the experience of the effective and evolving GMB Polish migrant branch in Southampton (see Fitzgerald and Hardy, 2010 for further discussion). Secondly, Poles joining initially for protection but not for participation. Although, there is an obvious role here for union reps/officials to facilitate an awareness of avenues to become involved.

Six months into the project an opportunity presented itself for broadening community engagement and moving beyond the focus of engagement with Polish workers. Due to the profile that the TUC had gained with initial Polish community engagement representatives of the North East Refugee Service and the Regional Refugee Forum North East approached the project worker. Events were again organised on the same basis as with the Poles which revolved around a project worker speaking to large groupings on what trade unions were and how they could assist people. Unlike with a number of the Polish events the project worker asked groups to identify three key issues and as engagement developed three main themes became evident: (1) The need for a right to work for asylum seekers; (2) The underemployment of many refugees as many had high level qualifications which were not recognised in this country; (3) The need for ESOL classes. Underlying this was also the event participants view of the increasingly 'aggressive' stance of the Border Agency as deportations were reported.

This need for learning progression and ESOL laid the path for further funding for the Regional VWP as a project proposal was designed based around ESOL outputs. Just as significant was the first right to work theme. Here a campaign was orchestrated which was linked to the Refugee Council and national TUC 'let them work' campaign³. As reported by the VWP officer:

'...we just flew with this and even though this was London based and policy in nature, it was essentially a protocol agreement signed between the Refugee Council and the TUC. All types of things in the North East flowed from the campaign and we began to identify what work people could actually get when they were refugees. From this [emerged]importantly how Unison could help people coming out of this campaign, so it was also issues at work and not just a policy campaign'.

³ See http://www.refugeevoices.org.uk/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=92 for further information.

Unison's involvement in the campaign was facilitated by the union having its own vulnerable workers project. Here significant links with both African and BME communities had been established

'They (Unison) had some important links with the African communities and had been working with certain groups. There was a Zimbabwean trade unionist who worked closely on the 'let them work' campaign and we identified some really good community activist, often African, who put in the work on the campaign'.

Unlike with many of the opportunities offered through the Polish work affiliates more clearly engaged with this campaign. Another example is that of the PCS who got involved because their members in the Border Agency were very unhappy about the number and manner of deportations that they were currently being asked to perform.

'They heard about the campaign and someone came up from Leeds and met with us and said they would be interested in participating in terms of solidarity'.

Overall the campaign itself became very high profile

'...it started to be talked about in a positive way in other parts of the country....The Refugee Council were saying all types of nice things about us. So we developed this really high profile campaign out of nothing really and I believe that the Northern region began to lead the way'.

Significant for the VWP officer this included being able to obtain the support, and involve, regional MPs.

'One key asylum seeker working for the campaign was invited to speak in parliament and was in the media and he was very high profile. So it was a very positive thing for him and he has not got his status'.

This positive engagement which led to a rise in confidence levels among asylum and refugee communities was highlighted as one of the central achievements of the campaign.

'The main outcome of this campaign was that due to the Regional TUC supporting the campaign through leaflets and engagement it gave communities so much confidence. They said the TUC had status and that this gave them some protection against people being snatched off the street which was a real worry for the communities we worked with. Many of the other NGO campaign groups around this were marginalised, with members deported but in our campaign we did not find this, not one campaign member was deported'.

This last comment highlights the significant vulnerability of many people, not only unable to lead normal working lives but denied any access to civil or democratic voice and rights. In short, as with some campaigns in other parts of the country, as asylum seekers have found voice the Boarder Agency have stepped in and deported

people. To counteract this, initially key speakers from the Refugee Council and Refugee Forum were invited from London to the North East to talk to people about what rights they had as an asylum seeker/refugee to campaign. This was importantly bolstered by an opportunity that had presented itself. The Border Agency had approached the Northern TUC to become a 'partner' of a local immigration board. The NTUC used this opportunity to argue that if the Agency wanted their participation they had to adopt a less aggressive stance with regard to deportations.

A change in emphasis?

Thus far the discussion has detailed how the Northern TUC VWP followed a community path which involved it with new and older ethnic communities in the North East. This was to change in early 2009. The project itself was funded until March 2009 but as it had become an LSC project the outcomes were learning based around ESOL. The issue for the project was that, due to lack of affiliate engagement with the project, ESOL targets were difficult to reach as these were based in union workplaces. In addition as the project was about engagement with asylum and refugees this type of progression was mostly out of reach. A new revised deadline was initially negotiated to include community learning. However,

'the real crunch came when the government changed policy to employers paying £400 per learner for ESOL. That killed it as we were now strongly engaging with employers but no employer wanted to know. Until this is changed we are going to have more and more migrant workers not learning English unless they go to night classes, migrant workers are being pushed out of ESOL provision'.

Following discussion with the LSC it was agreed that the project could be broadened to include worklessness

'...this then allowed us to include contract status, agency workers, shift workers and the disabled for example'.

Essentially this has allowed workshop activity with union learning reps, although

'...I did have a concern though that this was becoming so broad that we would lose our campaigning edge. I saw my project as being about those who were really on the margins and excluded, so I made sure we balanced this needed workplace angle but also the community engagement that had been developed'.

To secure this community engagement the national Active Unions, Active Communities (AUAC) TUC fund was accessed and three main initiatives were funded to varying degrees: the Wallsend Peoples Centre for community learning, Berwick Trades Council and finally the Right to Work campaign for Asylum Seekers.

'What we really want to do here is for the community centres to do training for union reps, so there is that communication between community activists and trade union activists. So to use some of the models we have around community organising with TU reps and give some of the community activists the benefits of trade union training'.

It is significant that this would involve campaigning around anti-racism issues and discrimination. Interestingly this further means supporting current campaigns against poverty in these centres, for example 'food for kids' which is about the withdrawal of free breakfast clubs for school children. Overall the key objective was and is to engage and support small scale organising projects. But a broader approach is important here because

'...everyone is now talking about community organising. But there are so many differing versions of it with even the Tories starting to talk about it as a positive thing! We need to make sure that trade unions and progressive movements are at the heart of this, if we don't get involved the agenda will be co-opted'.

The trade union agenda has, as we have suggested, now been broadened not only through the above examples but also the inclusion of projects such as 'working students' and a steering group has been convened to keep pace with vulnerability as it emerges and changes but also involves committed academics to assist and support campaigns.

The TUC can only facilitate

We have briefly discussed the evolving Northern TUC VWP but even though the TUC has been successful with policy campaigning and providing seed funding for organising projects in the Region around key labour market issues, that does not necessarily translate into new members. Instead the projects facilitate and encourage NTUC affiliates to respond and support the opportunities that arise. This is done via emails and meetings; through a regular equalities forum; regular report back at TUC regional council and through regional secretaries. However, whilst there has been support for the project and its objectives there is often no one responsible within affiliated unions to take forward membership opportunities from the project.

'I had a real struggle here in certain important regional unions with getting someone in each union to take responsibility'.

This has meant that real opportunities were lost with some of the Polish engagement when these workers had come to the VWP officer asking for union help and advice. This frustration was mirrored by the Polish VWP officer who had recently been employed and had effectively engaged with the Polish community. His anger was apparent at interview:

'...remember I can't sign anybody up, I can't support them, I can't get them onto trade union courses, reps courses, things like that. I bombarded the unions with

phone calls with emails I was saying this is a real opportunity for you ...in the end a regional official of a particularly important union did agree that an officer should take responsibility and I went to see her and explained about migrant workers and the potential. But she said this is great but I have been given no extra time to undertake this work. People can email or phone me but ultimately this is on top of my massive workload'.

Interestingly (and worryingly) he noted that by May 2008, as the recession was beginning to bite regionally, he was starting to get a number of enquires from both Poles and other vulnerable ethnic groups but what union enthusiasm was present but dwindling.

'I don't know if in those six months it had shifted....the recession was perhaps starting to bite....I could see that this was just the start and we could get much more out of this'.

Constraints and opportunities of short-term funding

A further significant issue that has to be addressed with this agenda and indeed within the movement as a whole is the union acceptance of vulnerability and vulnerable workers within their own organisational structures. With the TUC Northern VWP the key project officer has been employed and is currently employed on a series of short-term contracts.

'I have been a vulnerable worker throughout this project. Past 2010 I am not sure where the funding will come from....my contract was going to end in October 2008 so it was a bit nerve racking until our Union Learn project proposal around ESOL came off in the June'.

An example of the vulnerable position of the project officers was provided by the case of the Polish VWP officer who did not have his one year short-term contract extended.

There is also the potential for 'strategy fracture' if key short-term funding streams shape and drive an agenda although we are not arguing that this is the case here. What we have however, is the regular change of the short-term funding from provision by the TUC organising department, through to Union Learn and the LSC and then back again to the TUC organising department. All of this provided an excellent opportunity to extend the project from its successful engagement with new and marginalised ethnic communities to encompass a broader range of vulnerable people through learning. Now the opportunity is there to develop this in specific community locations which have good engagement not only with vulnerable groups but the affiliates who might be representing them. What follows is a brief discussion of another union federation, the GFTU, that has taken the same community approach but at the very heart of this project is an emphasis on affiliate education. It is also distinctive in that the project does not rely on short-term project officers but instead having a number of important co-applicants who support

the project through a regular steering group and employment fairs around the country.

The GFTU vulnerable workers approach

The GFTU vulnerable workers approach was based on key goals within its current strategic plan. In particular the central aim is to ally trends in employment practices and labour markets with the broad needs of affiliate trade unions. This is done firstly through core and customised national education programmes and secondly through externally funded initiatives. The GFTU was seeking to maintain the momentum of a successful Union Modernisation Fund (UMF) funded project which created a national cohort of equality representatives. The feedback from the UMF team in the Government Department was highly positive. In seeking, therefore, to meet strategic goals and maintain a focus on the frontline protection of worker's need in employment, the GFTU went on to adopt (in round 3 of the UMF) a vulnerable worker theme as the basis for its proposal for funding. In particular this involved a rights-based focus. It was believed that in pursuing a strategy of achieving the most significant impact possible with vulnerable workers a series of workers' information fairs (WIF) would be staged. To achieve this it was essential to work with locally-based, community organisations in hosting open, free events where workers could obtain expert, impartial information on a range of employment-related issues. To support the newly created cohort of equality representatives a series of training course were planned which would not only assist reps in meeting the individual needs of vulnerable members/workers but also identify long-term bargaining goals that would seek to minimise degrees of vulnerability/exploitation.

What is central to the project is that it has utilised the GFTU's long-standing and close working, relationship with Thompsons who will be providing employment rights advice at the planned series of WIFs. The input of Thompsons was boosted by the prior research undertaken by one of its solicitors around the provision of employment rights surgeries in community settings in South Yorkshire. Also significant is the involvement of of an employer's organisation the Recruitment and Employment Confederation (REC) who was approached to be a partner primarily as they were seen as critical to enabling the project to have a secondary impact on improving employment practices in employment agencies through the promotion of the work of the REC. This engagement with employers as key partners in the project was pragmatic in helping to secure funding but also introduced a different dimension to the GFTU work compared to the NTUC.

There is a clear understanding that in rolling out the fairs the key to success is that these are hosted by well-established, trusted, locally-based organisations in locations where vulnerable employment is a feature of local labour markets. This is paralleled by the NTUC's decision as its policy progressed to develop it's existing relationship with the Wallsend people's centre.. In looking for a base for a fair in the north west of the UK. Pennine Regeneration (PR) was approached as it was an organisation already known to the GFTU because of its work in labour market interventions with young workers, particularly of Asian descent. PR 'ticked all the

boxes' on a strategic front but also, just as pragmatically, was known to be able to 'deliver' from the funder's perspective.

The initial stages of the GFTU campaign as measured by 'footfall' suggests a measure of success but it is faced with the same issue as the NTUC in relation to affiliates – how might they be engaged in implementing policy rather than simply developing it?

Discussion and conclusions

Our evidence and analysis draws attention to the critical question of policy implementation and the consequent point of the relationships between central union confederations and their affiliates and then between unions and communities. This returns us to our original argument that vulnerability as it is currently approached leaves aside the question of precariousness and thus focuses attention on the workplace rather than the community. We suggest that shifting the focus conceptually coincides with what we have found empirically – that vulnerable workers experience that vulnerability in their whole lives not just in their workplaces.

As we said in our methodology, our data is restricted largely to the work of two confederations rather than to individual trade unions. In both cases the confederations have sought to develop and implement vulnerable workers projects. How far can we say that the development is strategic or simply opportunistic – not forgetting that strategies need to take advantage of opportunities? In the NTUC case it is clear that an emerging strategy was shaped by its own initiatives but also constrained by funding opportunities. It's initial approach was to develop a strategy for engaging with Polish workers and it backed this with commissioned research and an active project that worked with an important affiliate (UCATT). This coincided with the work of another affiliate (the GMB) who were working with a Polish organiser. Our evidence suggests a high level of activity, opportunities for recruitment that were sometimes taken and a genuine engagement with community. However, the 'pay off' for affiliates is often a short term need for membership gain or, bluntly, a recruitment strategy rather than an organising strategy as illustrated by the loss of the Polish worker. The TUC can only, in these circumstances, provide a policy and project framework not directly recruit members. The evolving strategy was shaped by the opportunity for project funding that then moved from organising to education that specifically excluded organising. At the same time this provided an opportunity for NTUC to move into a new field – refugees and asylum seekers – that needed support but was unlikely to provide members. Engagement with affiliates was more likely to be on a campaigning basis that would inevitably be stretched by scarce resources. The return of the project to funding for organising is too early to assess but it remains insecure and the project worker remains a vulnerable worker too.

As we suggested, the GFTU is not pressurised in the same way by affiliates who are less likely to be demanding of membership pay offs and more likely to seek support, advice and, particularly, educational materials and delivery. Nevertheless, it is clear

that, while the WIFs were an important strategy embedded in communities the engagement by affiliates at the fairs was still sporadic.

Our conclusion in relation to this first point is that relationships between confederations and affiliates need to be clear and to have shared objectives that reflects the strength and weaknesses of both organisations. While the GFTU approach may of necessity be more limited it can also be successful in delivering outcomes in a way that is more difficult for the NTUC in working with powerful affiliates. Our conclusion in relation to the driver of strategies is that they are not simply driven by funding. The GFTU was able to make a bid that was successful and reflected an existing strategy. The NTUC worked with a more varied provision of funding but was equally able to develop its overall vulnerable workers strategy.

Our final conclusion is, as we have argued throughout, that a vulnerable workers strategy is a precarious workers strategy. There can be no doubt whatsoever that current socio-economic policies in the UK and in the context of a global recession will increase the numbers of vulnerable and precarious workers and expand the informal economy in the industrialised economies of the North. Unions can seek to work with communities in continuing to fulfil their 'sword of justice' role or they can look inwards to servicing those who remain in membership in core employment. We would suggest the former strategy is 'messier' and more challenging but inevitably the right one.

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