

# Trade Unions and Polish Migrants in the United Kingdom: the Benefits and Limitations of Different Inclusion Strategies

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## Abstract

*This article examines how the United Kingdom (UK) trade unions organise Polish migrant workers in the aftermath of post EU enlargement migration, and what forms of inclusion strategies they implement. The benefits and limitations of various inclusionary approaches are scrutinised through the analysis of semi-structured interviews conducted with officers of three different large trade unions. These unions have at times, applied similar and at other times very different strategies, which depend on the unions' structures and decision-making. These approaches vary from equal treatment and the 'level playing field' approach to special treatment. While the first combined approach has resulted in some positive experiences in locating and recruiting Polish members, further inclusion through activism, however, calls for a special treatment approach.*

**Keywords:** trade unions, post-accession Polish migration, inclusion

## Introduction

Trade unions in the UK are faced with the challenges and opportunities of organising a growing amount of Polish migrant workers in the context of post EU enlargement migration. Following EU enlargement in 2004 the numbers of migrant workers

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increased substantially in the UK. Since Poland joined the European Union in 2004, the number of Polish migrants in the UK has risen significantly, exceeding all prior predictions (Galgóczy et al. 2009). In 2011, Poland is the top country of citizenship of foreign citizens with 15.2 per cent and the second country of birth for foreign-born with 8.5 per cent (Rienzo, Vargas-Silva 2012); Polish also advanced to be the second most spoken language in England (Booth 2013). While UK unions have generally taken an inclusionary approach towards these migrants, their strategies of inclusion differed at times. This article focuses on these different inclusion strategies and their benefits and limitations by analysing the experiences of three major UK trade unions. The analysis thereby contributes to the discussion on trade unions and migrant workers and adds a practical insight to the debate on equal versus special treatment. Earlier work has focused on the challenges UK trade unions face in organising Polish workers (Fitzgerald, Hardy 2010), whereas the present paper looks into the different ways these challenges were met, as well as their achievements and weaknesses. The underlying research questions on how diverse strategies of inclusion were implemented, and which successes and shortcomings they demonstrate, are scrutinised through analysing semi-structured expert interviews with trade union officers and activists.

The article, first, provides a short insight into the background of the research topic on EU-enlargement and Polish post-accession migration to the UK. Further background knowledge and an analytical framework on trade unions' responses to migration in general, as well as findings on the specific case of Polish post-accession migration to the UK, follow. After this elaboration I outline the methods of data collection and characterise the three researched UK trade unions. The findings focus on the benefits and limitations of different activities implemented in order to include Polish migrants in these unions.

In pursuing community organising, UK trade unions are looking for broader cooperation with social movements, community organisations and similar groupings in the face of declining union membership and political and economic weakness. This method of organising goes beyond class relationships as a motivator for social action and collectivisation, and looks for new coalitions, showing the intersections of workers' lived experiences and identities (Holgate 2013). In relation to migrant communities, this approach is of special interest to trade unions, because of the potential to reach migrant workers, who are often difficult to locate and access. The empirical analysis shows that while community organising can be a means of reaching and informing Polish migrants in the UK, another goal and challenge is to turn them from members into activists, such as stewards or equality representatives,

who themselves could promote better working conditions and representation for their Polish colleagues. These inclusion strategies, however, are located in the dilemma of equal versus special treatment.

## **1. Background: Polish Post European Union Enlargement Migration to the United Kingdom**

Trade unions face the challenges of changing employment throughout Europe against the background of a general downward trend in union membership, and the challenges emerging from the economic crisis (McKay 2008; Holgate 2013). While migrant workers have been on the radar of Western trade unions for a long time (Castles, Kosack 1973), the enlargement of the EU in 2004 posed new challenges. The European principle of free movement guarantees European citizens the right to move within the European Union and take up employment, while the enlargement processes instituted transitional arrangements, which some Member States adopted (Galgóczi et al. 2009). In this context, trade unions in the UK, however, were calling for free movement and labour market access (Krings 2009; Galgóczi et al. 2009).

The transitional measures of the UK entailed that while citizens of Malta and Cyprus were granted full free movement rights as well as the right to work, citizens from the A8<sup>1</sup> countries were required to register with the Worker Registration Scheme and had restricted access to welfare benefits (Düvell, Garapich 2011). On one hand, this has implemented a new form of regularisation of a previously mainly irregular movement, with many Polish migrants already working in the UK being amongst the first to register after enlargement. On the other hand, the implemented tool for monitoring this migration; the Worker Registration Scheme, had limited success in keeping track of migrants because of the required fees and the perception of the process as being too bureaucratic and not worthwhile for temporary migration (Düvell, Garapich 2011). Although mobile Central and Eastern Europeans now have greater freedom of movement and the UK labour market de facto opened up for citizens of the new member states, their work is often characterised by poor working conditions (Ciupijus 2011; Anderson et al. 2006).

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<sup>1</sup> The A8 include the accession countries the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia.

## 1.1. Trade Unions' Responses to Migration

Trade unions have to decide whether to object to migration on the ground of protecting members and arguing for quotas, or to cooperate with the state and employers to try to influence policies. Furthermore, there is the question of inclusion or exclusion within trade union structures and subsequently, the form of integration by equal or special treatment (Penninx, Roosblad 2000).

Despite the idea of international solidarity, trade unions have developed in their national contexts and represented mainly the interests of their national members. Because of the anticipated downward effects of a larger supply of labour on wages, unions have historically been hostile towards migration (Krings 2009). Additionally, the workforce became more fragmented with language and other differences, and unions experienced difficulties with racism. Following a phase of hostility towards immigration, after the Second World War, the UK Trade Union Congress, TUC, reacted to migration in the 1960s with rhetoric against discrimination, but at the same time with a lack of policies (Castles, Kosack 1973). During the 1970s, a more positive approach towards equality and opposition to racism influenced the TUC (Fitzgerald, Hardy 2010). Trade unions started to respond to immigration by demanding the same pay and working conditions for migrants (Castles, Kosack 1973).

As argued by Krings (2009: 50), 'in the light of globalization and the transnationalization of labour markets, unions are not necessarily predisposed towards restrictionism' (Krings 2009: 50). Penninx, Roosblad (2000) describe factors, which can shape trade unions' responses towards migration. One is the macro-economic situation at the time, which in relation to post-accession, Polish migrants were certainly influential with low unemployment rates, and a labour shortage in the UK around 2004 (Krings 2009). However, when comparing this to other EU member states' union responses, it becomes apparent that the economic and labour market situation alone is not sufficient to explain union responses (Krings 2009).

Another factor identified by the literature is the social and institutional position of trade unions, and the trade union movement's power and structure (Penninx, Roosblad 2000). Following the weakening of the trade union movement under Margaret Thatcher, the necessity of inclusive strategies for the future of trade unionism in the face of a decline, in membership and power was pointed out (Wrench 2004). Losses in union density and bargaining power led the TUC and individual unions to develop models of organising unionism in order to reach a broader spectrum of

people such as migrants (Heery et al. 2000). The labour relations indicators highlight this loss in trade union density over time from 51 per cent in 1980 to 26 per cent in 2013, as well as the loss in collective bargaining coverage from 70 per cent in 1980 to a mere 29 per cent in 2013 (Krings 2009: 61; Fulton 2013). The power of unions depends more on their strength in organising after losing in collective bargaining coverage (Frege, Kelly 2003).

The other factors referred to in the literature, which may account for trade union responses to migration, are the broader social context, national ideologies and broader perception of immigration in society, as well as characteristics of migrants (Penninx, Roosblad 2000). However, trade unions are not solely influenced by external variables and the unions' own structures, and framing processes are crucial for understanding their acts upon changes (Frege, Kelly 2003; Marino et al. 2015).

Against the background of EU enlargement and large-scale immigration trade unions in the UK faced the challenge of how to respond to these developments. UK trade unions from the early stages of the enlargement process were in favour of opening up the labour market on one hand because of labour shortages and low unemployment; on the other hand, because of long established anti-discrimination policies (Fitzgerald 2012). Although nobody expected the scale of immigration that occurred, the trade unions' main concerns appear to be to enforce established labour standards and oppose the exploitation and discrimination of migrant workers (Galgóczy et al. 2009). While these measures were mainly set up for new immigrants, the enlargement provided a *de facto* amnesty (Drinkwater et al. 2006), as well as the freedom of change of employer and sector, for workers from Central and Eastern European countries who were working in the UK prior to enlargement (Anderson et al. 2006).

The trade union responses to post-accession Polish migration therefore have been shaped in favour of a supporting attitude towards immigration and an inclusionary approach, which form this inclusion of Polish migrants into trade union structures will take, lies within the union decision-making. Wrench (2004) specifies the four distinct approaches:

1. The equal treatment approach: equal opportunities simply involve making sure that all are treated the same, regardless of ethnicity or colour. This is the classic 'colour-blind' approach.
2. The 'level playing field' approach which recognizes the need to remove some unfair barriers (for example, racism or discrimination), which operate in the labour market, so that all have a fair chance.

3. The equal opportunities approach which aims for longer-term proportional representation of minorities through a range of organizational measures, such as ethnic monitoring and targets, and elements of 'positive action' to overcome the effects of past inequalities.
4. The equal outcome approach which uses quotas and 'positive discrimination' to achieve a much shorter-term proportional representation of minorities. It is the most controversial type, seen by many to be in breach of natural justice (Wrench 2004: 10).

A specific form of engaging with migrant workers in the UK is based on the community organising approach (Fitzgerald, Hardy 2010). Acknowledging the need for new organisational forms to address issues of migrant workers, often concentrated at the lower end of the labour market, these campaigns go beyond the workplace and class politics and include diverse actors such as trade unions and community organisations (Wills 2008). The idea that cooperation between unions and community-based organisations can succeed in fighting injustices faced by migrant workers, is derived from the United States experience of the Industrial Area Foundation IAF; this was developed by Saul Alinsky in the 1930s, and has achieved successes as a community organising network (Fitzgerald, Hardy 2010; Holgate 2013).

However, community organising of migrant workers must not necessarily be driven by trade unions as Fine (2007) has shown with the example of worker centres in the US. The failure of unions to organise this group, on one hand, has led to this specific form of community organising and the differences in structures, ideologies and cultures of unions and worker centres; on the other hand, initially impeded cooperation (Fine 2007). However, in the subsequent developmental phase of the centres, they showed institutional resilience and started partnerships with unions and governments (Fine 2011). Datta et al. (2007) argue for the advantages of community-based approaches for the UK. The TUC has also implemented a focus on community approaches and in 2003 held a conference on community unionism followed by numerous discussions and round-tables. These initiatives have recognised that union activists would often also be active outside of their workplace and that joint actions could lead to active citizenship and support in campaigning against cuts in public services.

## 1.2. Challenges to Organising Polish Migrant Workers in the United Kingdom

Trade unions' approaches to Polish workers in the UK is a growing field of research (Anderson et al. 2007; Woolfson, Sommers 2008; Krings 2009; Fitzgerald, Hardy 2010; Fitzgerald 2012). Fitzgerald, Hardy (2010) identify innovative recruitment and organisation activities focusing on inclusion, as well as new local, regional, national and international linkages as the response strategies of trade unions to Polish workers after 2004. Their findings on inclusion are especially interesting, when they point to the willingness of trade unions to react creatively to the challenges posed by the changes in the labour market and migration (Fitzgerald, Hardy 2010).

In relation to trade union decisions to include or exclude migrant workers, Fitzgerald, Hardy (2010) refer to crucial aspects of the unions' discourse. In this approach, current challenges were seen as linked to previous migrations and it was highlighted that the trade union movement has developed a strong support for diversity and for the importance of anti-racism (Fitzgerald, Hardy 2010). However, while the general national approach to migrant workers was characterised by the promotion of inclusion, there are certain differences in the level of equal versus special treatment (Fitzgerald, Hardy 2010; Wrench 2004). The TUC for example started out with a special treatment approach by implementing a separate migrant workers strategy, which later on was turned into an equal treatment policy, where migrant workers were conceptualised in the broader vulnerable workers strategy (Fitzgerald, Hardy 2010). Another such approach by individual trade unions consisted of Polish workers in a community organising approach (Fitzgerald 2012).

Different challenges faced by UK unions in organising Polish workers were identified. Locating and recruiting migrant workers represented the first challenge often complicated by migrants being employed in non-unionised workplaces or by temporary work agencies. The next challenge is to formulate attractive strategies for migrant workers to join. Activating passive members and achieving sustainability in their membership and activism can be difficult. Finally, the last challenge is the need to develop policies that can meet the specific needs of migrant workers (Fitzgerald, Hardy 2010).

In regards to community-based approaches, there were numerous new networks with Polish communities established through parishes, churches, Polish clubs and

other NGOs (Fitzgerald 2012). These multi-agency activities were the consequence of hostile employers and frightened Polish workers, as well as issues outside of the workplace that Polish workers were experiencing and needed support for, such as accommodation, health care and legal support (Fitzgerald 2012). Fitzgerald (2012: 3) characterises some of these initiatives as ‘marriages of convenience’, which unions had to engage with to be able to address the problems Polish workers were experiencing; unions of course, generally did not deal with this. While these activities have the potential of reaching a broader set of people, there have been problems resulting from these networks such as services being expected and which organisation acquires membership in the end (Fitzgerald 2012). Holgate (2013) describes the difficulties of labour and community organisations’ cooperation with ideological and non-ideological differences in conceptualising power, politics, democracy and self-organisation. Despite these difficulties, for example, the living wage campaign of London Citizens included a wide range of actors with special support from a union and was able to achieve considerable success (Holgate 2013).

## 2. Methods

For this paper, semi-structured expert interviews were conducted with trade union officers of three different, large UK trade unions. An initial emphasis was taken on a specific union that mainly organises members in the public services employed in the public and private sector. This focus entailed a broader set of interviews also beyond activities specifically relating to Polish migrants and going more in-depth in this union’s understanding of community organising.

Following the privatisation of many public services and fragmentation of the workforce, the formerly mainly public sector union has to deal with a growing number of private employers (Fulton 2013). While only 26 per cent of employees are trade union members in the UK, the public sector has a much higher density with 56 per cent compared to the private sector with 14 per cent (LMS 2013). Whereas UK nationals are still more concentrated in the public sector, the 2011 census showed that there is a significant percentage of 23 per cent of foreign nationals employed in public administration, education and health. There are over 1 million non-UK born persons working in this sector (2011 Census 2013; LMS 2013). These figures illustrate the relevance, as well as potential of migrant workers for this union. In order to be able to set the public sector union’s inclusion strategy towards Polish workers



into relation, further data collection was conducted with two large general unions (referred to as General Union A and General Union B). The three unions together are the biggest organisations in employees' representation and account for 56 per cent of the membership of the TUC (Fulton 2013).

The formerly public sector union (hereafter referred to as the public sector union) has been promoting a community approach for different migrant groups such as for their Polish members in combination with a Polish activists' group. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with staff of the union working in different areas of the organisation. This involved two officers of the self-organised groups, three officers working on community organising and two officers with responsibility for training and education, one of which has a Polish background. Furthermore one interview was conducted with a former Polish organiser, as well as one with a Polish union member, who is active as the steward of his trade union branch.

In the case of General Union A, the largest of the three unions studied, two interviews were conducted with Polish officers, one of which was engaged in community organising and one is a women and equality officer. In line with their union's strategy, their work did not entail a specific focus on Polish workers, but included them in their general activities. With the smallest of the three researched unions – hereafter referred to as General Union B – an interview was conducted with an organiser, who used to work in a now dissolved Polish migrants' branch, as well as with representatives of a currently active migrant workers' branch, mainly consisting of Polish members. The interviewees for this branch were the branch secretary at the time of the interview and two current members of the executive committee; one is an auditor and the other an equality officer.

It needs to be acknowledged that the interviewees were all in favour of an inclusionary approach and; therefore, objection and wider internal and external dynamics are not covered by this research. Furthermore the initial focus of the research on the public sector union has led to a higher number of interviews being conducted with this union, as well as the inclusion of further reaching perspectives. The interviews with the representatives of the public sector union went beyond their approach to Polish workers and included their broader understanding of community organising, while the interviews with General Union A and B focused solely on their inclusion strategies towards Polish workers. The questions of the interviews targeted the background of the unions' activity in organising migrants, the implemented strategy of organising Polish workers, the experiences made and the evaluation of challenges and successes.

### 3. Findings

The researched unions have implemented different specific migrant projects in the past such as a migrants' participation strategy, or a migrant support section (Moore, Watson 2009; Connolly et al. 2012). However, for the present article, their specific inclusionary approaches towards Polish migrants were of interest; thus, the focus of the interviews.

#### 3.1. The Union Learning Strategy as Point of Access

In order to overcome problems in recruiting and pursuing the integration of migrant workers, Fitzgerald, Hardy (2010) suggest that trade unions need to formulate attractive strategies. The researched unions have implemented different strategies in attracting Polish workers. Sometimes these are aimed directly at activating Polish members or they can be part of broader project aims. For example, the union learning strategy has proven to have some successes in locating and organising migrant workers. All three unions are implementing union learning strategies delivering learning opportunities to their members and potential members.

The public sector union offered courses with the support of a Polish organiser, who addressed all people in employment, regardless of country of origin or union membership.

'We are trying to have both, migrant workers and indigenous workers; so they are getting to know each other, and it also helps with integration and social cohesion' (Union officer in the field of training and education, public sector union).

These courses help to provide relevant information for migrant workers while locating their training needs, treating everyone equally and not directly approaching only Polish workers speaking Polish; thereby, potentially excluding others. The courses include specific training for progression in employment, such as in bookkeeping or business English. Nevertheless, it is very difficult to organise them and encourage migrants' participation because of limited time resources of migrants in low-paid employment. In the public sector union and in General Union B, the project

organisers emphasised the need to be flexible in setting the time for the courses and trying to accommodate the workers' needs. Through these courses, the workers are also informed about the union in order to overcome the lack of knowledge and experience with unions.

In the case of the public sector union, the union learning project has proven to be successful with a list of a few hundred Polish members and newly recruited stewards. General Union B also successfully used especially English language courses as a means of recruitment. Due to lack of experience and knowledge of the migrant workers about trade unions, it nevertheless still takes some time to activate people and for them to be willing to become a workplace representative. The union officer of the public sector union, working in the learning project would only identify a few Polish migrants as being actively engaged, while the majority is not pro-active. In this case, however the possibilities tailored for Polish activists are limited, as it will be discussed in the next sections. In contrast to other migrant groups, Polish migrants have the same formal rights as UK citizens when it comes to employment. While they experience the same problems as all other employees, their specific problems are being described as mainly based on language barriers and a lack of knowledge of their rights.

### **3.2. Different Forms of Community Organising**

The three researched unions have all implemented community organising strategies as part of their inclusionary approach towards Polish migrants. Nonetheless, these projects were sometimes focused on Polish migrants irrespective of where they lived and worked and sometimes on regions or workplaces in which Polish workers were concentrated.

While the organising model focused on the workplace level has dominated for a long time, the idea of community organising also influenced the researched unions' approach. The basic thought is to develop relationships around common interests between trade unions and other groups in the wider community such as church groups, schools, women's groups or migrant organisations. One of my interviewees argued for organising beyond the workplace as a means of accessing and activating workers since 'eight out of 10 trade union activists are also active in other communities'. In this sense, community organising is not only problem-driven

but also aiming at general organising, meeting community leaders, and identifying issues and common interests.

‘Our definition of communities is: it could be a geographical community..., it could be a community of interests so it might be a sports club or a group of football fans or a women’s institute or people who hang out around a pub, you know a particular pub... A community can also be a particular ethnic or religious community, or a migrant community, or it could be also... in a workplace or around an employer... and it’s also the intersection of all those things’ (Union officer in the field of community organising, public sector union).

Community organising is understood by another interviewee to be a more local and issue-driven form of activity, in which migrant community organisations can participate. It can also manifest itself in a migrant network without the locality aspect, but instead be based on belonging to the same migrant group. These community initiatives are defined according to the scale of the activity. The position of migrant groups appears to be manifold; they can either be a member of a local issue-driven community campaign, or they can be existing migrant organisations that the union wants to cooperate with.

‘I think the migrant groups, particularly in London anyway, you would find a lot of the groups already have community groups, they already have networks... so they already have a format in there...; it’s about finding those networks that are already there and tapping into it’ (Union officer in the field of community organising, public sector union).

In the case of Polish migrants, the cooperation with the broader, active Polonia in the UK built the basis of the public sector union’s community approach. The active Polonia refers to the Polish diaspora and its organisations, such as the Federation of Poles, amongst others, who were approached by the trade union for cooperation. Various activities such as supporting Polish Independence Day, events at the Polish embassy and advertisements in Polish newspapers were implemented. An interviewee describes this approach as a success:

‘We supported a lot of events, we also organised a leadership school for Polish leaders of Polish community groups, and the success was in terms of this; when they need the union or they want to contact the trade unions, they know only about (this union). So they only contacted me, even though they can’t join us because they don’t work in the public services’ (Union officer in the field of community organising, public sector union).

The engagement with community organisations and in the public sphere was successful for the image and high profile of the public sector union amongst Polish workers. As suggested by informants, workers started to address the union when they faced problems at work such as not being granted annual leave, lack of clarity about wages or discriminatory treatment even without any prior knowledge of trade unions and without being members. Nevertheless, it is difficult to measure the success of community organising, and additional limitations lie in the fact that only some Polish migrant workers are organised in migrant community organisations and many, of those that are reached by these measures, cannot be represented by the union due to its focus on public services.

The issue-driven understanding of community organising was also observed in the strategy taken by General Union A, which sees Polish workers as included in all local, workplace or sectoral community organising projects. General Union B actively participate in community initiatives. For example, they regularly organise blocks of members of their Polish-dominated migrant workers' branch to join various industrial relations or political demonstrations. They furthermore cooperated with Polish organisations such as a Polish culture club and a Polish library and engaged in a big Polish charity event organised worldwide.

### 3.3. Activating Migrant Workers

The public sector union has also implemented a migrant workers participation project, in which the aim was to integrate Polish workers and develop activists by spotting talent, finding interested members and inviting them to training. The Polish activists' network was established, which according to one interviewee was a vehicle for getting people to become active in the existing union structures.

'This network is a vehicle to bring people into branches, to bring them into the self-organised groups, to bring them into structures that are already here, so it actually feeds in and it is another way for people to come into the union and become more active in different ways... it's a fluid vehicle' (Union officer in the field of community organising, public sector union).

In contrast to the situation of more established self-organised groups such as the young members, LGBT or women's groups, this network does not have representation on branch, regional or national level and cannot put forward motions to the national

executive council. It is rather a loose, informal network of Polish activists. As an interviewee explains:

‘The self-organised groups are at branch level and they also have their regional level and they have the national level... they also have a conference and the conference runs with motions, so actually people, activists have a chance to influence the way the union goes’ (Union officer in the field of community organising, public sector union).

The network of Polish activists on the contrary is a loose association of activists around all regions. It had three national meetings until 2014, has its own Facebook group and a commitment to annual meetings. Because of the group being located at the national level, there are limitations to an active engagement with other Polish activists. When comparing this new migrant network to the union’s network of Filipino activists, the differences in activity, engagement and history become apparent. The Filipino network is very engaged, which can be explained on one hand, by a strong community approach and activism of the Filipino members themselves, but also by continuous efforts over years by a Filipino union officer at national level. During one network meeting, they discussed their aspiration to have a Filipino assistant general secretary in 20 years. The presence of the Filipino officer is crucial here. Interviewees referred to the ‘like for like principle’ and point to the potential benefit of having a Polish union organiser. While in the union learning project, the organisers tried to address all people in the same way, very often the Polish organiser would receive calls later on to ask about more details in Polish.

‘It helps that I can speak Polish... so people are quite happy to call me and speak to me, ask questions and learn more about the union and I think over the years they learned a lot about trade unions’ (Union officer in the field of training and education, public sector union).

The informal form of activism of the Polish activists’ network may be more successful than trying to force migrant workers into existing group structures, but it might also prevent the inclusion into self-organised groups. In order to further activate members, it was seen as important to have face-to-face conversations, so as to find out with what kind of activist role they might identify with. While some migrants are international officers interested in solidarity work, such as the interviewed Polish steward, others might be more interested in being a health and safety representative. The individual meetings with members, called one-on-one, are important in order to avoid falling prey to any prior judgements, for example, sending a Polish member to the Polish activists’ network when the person might identify more with the LGBT

self-organised group. The national level in this context provides best practices for regions and branches to engage with migrant workers and as one informant describes:

‘The role of the branches is actually crucial... we only provide tools... the branches at the end of the day will elect delegates for the conference, for the committees, for various union structures and bodies, which make a decision on the future of the trade union’ (Union officer in the field of community organising, public sector union).

In relation to language issues, as well as work conditions and training, Polish workers were described as suffering from low self-esteem and no sense of entitlement, which could be relieved by the participation in the Polish activists’ network. One interviewee furthermore connected the problems in integrating into a general branch, to the social background, and another additionally to the Polish context of transformation from socialism to capitalism.

‘This is something, which is related to living and growing up in Poland..., and especially the dominant discourse of neoliberalism ‘you are not entitled to anything’. In the communist time, you were entitled to everything: job, no unemployment, social benefits, but after that 20 years of this dominant discourse, which is happening now in Poland, ‘you are not entitled to anything, you should work, be happy that you have any job’... They bring it with them, this kind of ideology and then probably, they will also have the ideology of working really hard’ (Union officer in the field of community organising, public sector union).

This interviewee describes Polish workers as not wanting to be viewed as victims or as failures, and trying to avoid being associated with the picture of migrants dominant in the public discourse as people taking advantage of benefits. Because of these characteristics, they are seen as reluctant to address work issues and their needs with British organisers. This paradox in their experience leads to the question of special versus equal treatment. On one hand, Polish workers are reported to ‘not want special treatment’, but on the other hand, they do not integrate as well into existing union structures such as the branches or self-organised groups, and they do have specific issues.

Some union officers also consider special treatment as discriminatory to other migrant groups. Therefore, projects dealing with Polish workers therefore are not easy to sustain and fund; the public sector union in its membership statistics does not specify the nationality of members. When joining, this union’s members are asked to identify their ethnic origin on the basis of ‘white UK, Irish, white other, black UK, black African, black Caribbean, black other, Asian UK, Chinese, Asian

other, Bangladeshi, Pakistani and Indian'. Polish migrants may choose 'White other' for their ethnic origin, but so would various other migrant groups. Locating Polish migrants hereby becomes a difficult task, because as a union official states;

'It's hard for us to work out exactly who they are and where they are, because we don't have any way of recording the country of origin of our members' (Union officer in the field of community organising, public sector union).

Accordingly, as statistics on union membership of Poles are underdeveloped, there is no substantial argument for funding projects. Following the recession and cuts in public services, other issues are likely to be higher on trade unions' agenda.

The key issues raised by the public sector union can be found in the experiences of an interviewed Polish steward. This interviewee has been active in unions for some years and has multiple functions as an activist, a steward, a health and safety representative and an international officer. When the informant took part in a national meeting of all international officers, there were no other Polish workers present in a similar role. In the interviewee's workplace, there were a lot of stewards who reportedly stepped down. Amongst those who resigned, were also Polish stewards, who quit because of a lack of time for union activities and their fear of hindering their progression in employment, because of their involvement in unions. It also took the interviewee one year to finalise training as a steward, which in the respondent's perception was too long. The Polish steward joined the Polish activists' network when it was established, but he would still see the need for a Polish regional officer or a Polish contact at national level. As an individual, the interviewee is very active in the union, as well as in the broader Polonia writing for a Polish online regional newspaper. These activities offer possibilities in further community organising.

### 3.4. Migrant Workers' Branches

In contrast to the public sector union and General Union A, which both tried to include Polish members as activists in existing structures, General Union B has implemented a special treatment approach as an inclusion strategy for Polish migrants. The union has implemented migrant workers' branches with a dominance of Polish members. However, they are also caught in a dilemma caused by their short-term commitment to special treatment and their long-term strategy of equal treatment.



‘Nationwide, it is a unique trade union branch for Polish people. Before that, there was no such thing as a nationality branch. In the (union) it was understood as a form of discrimination or unequal treatment of other nationalities, so there were no such branches; it was an experimental branch, and it was a big success, because the branch consists of 400 people’ (Auditor of the migrant workers’ branch’s executive committee, General Union B).

In order to find out about the benefits and limitations of this approach, interviews were conducted with the branch secretary at the time, and two current members of the executive committee of a migrant worker’s branch in the North of England, as well as with a former branch secretary of a now dissolved migrant worker’s branch in the South of England. General Union B established the first migrant worker’s branch consisting of 500 members in 2008, which has been dissolved with the communicated intent to include members in existing union structures. It was conceptualised as a holding branch, trying to educate and organise Polish workers and build up confidence before incorporating them into existing structures. The branch ended up having a heavy workload of individual cases in different workplaces, which was not sustainable at a certain point anymore. In the North of England, a branch was set up in 2010, which today is the only migrant worker’s branch with a 90 per cent membership of Polish members. The experiences of these two branches show on one hand, the success in recruiting and activating female migrant workers, who were more engaged and even set up a migrant workers’ women<sup>2</sup> forum within the branch, and on the other hand, illustrate the dilemma of equal versus special treatment. General Union B traditionally organises workplace-by-workplace, but experienced problems in organising Central and Eastern European migrants. The interviewees reported that migrant workers’ lack of knowledge about trade unions and poor English competences hindered them to take part in union structures.

‘The (branch) is a part of the union which brings together Polish people, which do not speak English. Those who are able to speak fluently in English have no problems in talking to anyone from the (union). I do not mean that they do not speak English at all, but those are people who don’t feel confident, or when they go to a solicitor they prefer to have someone with them who gives them confidence or understands better and can explain to the employer what the

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<sup>2</sup> Women unionists have also emerged in Poland in significant numbers, while until the late 1990s men dominated unions, in 2007 the share of men and women was almost even explained by the deteriorating position of women after 1989, their emerging aspirations and an outflow of male craftsmen from unions. The leadership of Polish trade union nevertheless stayed male dominated (Gardawski et al. 2012).

issue is' (Equality officer of the migrant workers' branch's executive committee, General Union B).

In the North of England, it was arranged that where recognised workplaces exist, the migrant workers would stay in those branches. If there are workers in a non-recognised workplace, they can join the migrant worker's branch, which now has 350 members. Active members ensure the sustainability of this branch, but this is difficult since in non-recognised workplaces, they do not receive paid time off for union activities. The branch president is now represented in the regional structure, but does not get paid for his union work or taking part in the regional meetings. The branch organises through workplaces, training, community approaches and word of mouth. The branch secretary identifies the potential benefits of a national coordination and other regional initiatives, and predicts the branch to be sustainable in the future, if Polish migrant workers take ownership of their branch. Taking ownership would entail taking charge of the finances, organising regular meetings, planning activities, ensuring the regional and national levels' support and being able to keep a core group of activists and a broader group of members, who regularly attend meetings, despite the lack of paid time for union activities and the time pressure low-paid migrant workers are under. However, this branch secretary, who was essential in establishing the branch and receiving support for it from the regional and national level, has returned to Poland; due to his previous strong role in ensuring the branch's activity, the near future of the branch is now unclear. This way of responding to Polish migrant workers is unique and differs to the other researched unions' responses, in tending more towards special treatment.

## Conclusion

The article examined different inclusion strategies implemented by three major UK trade unions, in face of post-accession Polish migration. The focus on the benefits and limitations of applied approaches contributes a new perspective to research into challenges faced by trade unions in organising Polish migrants in comparing differently implemented inclusion strategies. It furthermore adds a practice-oriented view to the discussion on which form of inclusion strategy, if equal or special treatment, is perceived as worthwhile. The dilemmas described by Penninx, Roosblad (2000) of opposing versus welcoming immigration, and of exclusion versus inclusion of migrants are currently leaning towards a supportive attitude of UK trade unions

towards immigration and an inclusionary approach towards Polish post-accession migrant workers. Whichever form this inclusion of Polish migrants into trade union structures takes, lies within the union decision-making process (Krings 2009). The form of inclusion can also be influenced by various factors such as the sector or type of workers, which would be interesting for further research. A special treatment of Polish workers is limited on one hand by public discourse and internal trade union debates, and on the other hand by established trade union structures. However, due to the profile of the interviewees, who stood in a close relationship with their respective unions either as officers or as members and activists; this level of analysis was somewhat limited. While the comparison between the different unions and examination of their structures provided an understanding of the differences, further research could benefit from including the views of internal critics and knowledgeable outsiders on the different unions.

The challenges of locating and recruiting are already a difficult barrier to engaging with Polish migrant workers. While special treatment would be more effective in locating potential members, the main recruitment issues are common to Polish and other workers alike. Strategies with the potential to attract Polish workers have been manifold. Sometimes within the outline of equal treatment combined with the 'level playing field' approach (Wrench 2004); as in the case of courses for all workers with the benefit of a Polish officer in the public sector union, and General Union B, working on the course project and the project, providing English courses for migrants.

The strategy of community organising and addressing the broader Polonia in the United Kingdom, has been evaluated by the interviewees of the public sector union as successful, in informing Polish migrants and building up a high profile as a trade union within the community, but has also shown some limitations especially in relation to the individuals reached. General Union B, in addition to engaging with Polonia clubs and organisations, implemented community organising bottom-up with the Polish members of the migrant workers' branch joining broader initiatives. These activities supported the understanding of Polish migrants for societal issues and promoted their inclusion and capabilities as activists. For General Union A, Polish migrants were rather seen as included into community organising strategies and no specific strategy aimed at Poles was formulated. While the public sector union and General Union B approached Polonia organisations and thereby conceptualised Polishness as the community's marker and involved their Polish activists into general campaigns, General Union A focused on issue-driven, local community organising without signposting Polish workers. In regards to the challenges of turning members

into activists and sustaining their engagement, the dominant request was for a member of staff with Polish background to work on it in order to make it successful. This special treatment or equal outcome approach was shown in the experiences of General Union B's migrant workers' branches and of the projects staffed with Polish officers at the public sector union and General Union A. In the experiences of the researched unions, the equal treatment and 'level playing field' approach have seen some positive results in regards to the challenges of locating and recruiting. In terms of activating, success is achieved by special treatment, but because of the unions' structures of recognised workplace or sector based branches as well as traditional self-organised groups, whose representatives are involved in union decision making processes, a special treatment approach is unlikely to be sustainable.

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