

U.K. : Your nearest marginal union needs you

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How can we support the new union movement? Steven Parfitt reflects on the successes and pitfalls of grassroots union organising.

Jeremy Corbyn wants to reconnect Labour with working-class people. He and John McDonnell have put together a [20-point plan](#), covering everything from trade union law to the minimum wage, that will help him to do it. But we need not wait until Labour wins power. The best way to reconnect workers with Labour is to help rebuild the very force that created Labour in the first place: the trade unions.

Unions have long been in crisis. Membership has plummeted from 13 million in the late 1970s to just over 6 million today. Anti-labour laws box unions in. Strikes, once the “British disease,” fell in 2017 to their [lowest level](#) since records began in 1893. Yet unions remain the largest democratic bodies in Britain, and they remain the closest link between Labour and working people. If socialists want to form and re-elect a government of the left they will need to expand the number of people in unions and extend the principle of solidarity on which unions have always been based, even if they have not always lived up to it.

Stirrings across the country prove that a revival of the unions is possible. The Bakers’ Union organised the first-ever [strike at McDonalds](#) in 2017. The University and College Union (UCU) fought an unprecedented [14-day strike](#) in February and March 2018 to defend members’ pensions. Branches of all the big unions, in the public and private sectors, still defend workers from government cuts or the rapacity of big business. And new unions have emerged, especially in London, among native- and foreign-born workers alike.

Two of these new unions, the Independent Workers of Great Britain ([IWGB](#)) and the United Voices of the World ([UVW](#)), have taken on big universities such as the [London School of Economics](#), big digital platforms such as Uber and [Deliveroo](#), and organise couriers, cleaners, carers and other vulnerable workers. These unions are much smaller than Unite, Unison, and the other mainstays of the Trades Union Congress. The IWGB has about 3000 members, the UVW rather less. But they are fighting, and winning, at a time when the unions in general are in retreat.

We on the left can help these two unions to survive, grow, and win. The following suggestions of how to do this are based on interviews with Henry Chango Lopez, President of the IWGB, and Petros Elia, General Secretary of the UVW, about the aims, methods, challenges and campaigns of their organisations. And the methods that can help these new unions can help the others. If Corbyn wants to reconnect Labour with workers, here are some ways to start.

Spread the word

The IWGB and UVW organise in their own distinct way. They don’t have the people or the money to act on an industrial nationwide scale. They rely instead on word of mouth, on people coming to them. They have been able to do this because of their close ties with immigrant communities in London, especially among cleaners at the University of London, London School of Economics, and

similar institutions. Having started a campaign at one place, workers from another place hear about it and get in touch with the union to start their own campaign. The two unions reflect these community ties: Spanish is spoken at least as much as English at the UVW offices, and both unions run English language lessons for their native-Spanish-speaking members.

The cleaners are majority Latin-American, but their organising includes many different sections of society. Most IWGB members, Lopez tells me, are now “white British”; and after successes among South Asian private-hire drivers in the capital, the union now has a branch of mainly South Asian drivers in Leeds. Like the Latin American cleaners, like the white and black British-born couriers and other workers drawn to the IWGB, the drivers in Leeds heard about them by word of mouth, from friends and family who had encountered the union in London.

Recruiting by reputation might help, in Elia’s words, to “keep our shit in order.” If nobody turns up to the head office the union’s activists will know that they are doing something wrong, or not doing enough things right. But if word of mouth means quality control, it does not foster rapid growth. The IWGB and UVW remain small, limiting their ability to intervene as widely as they might like. “We would like to be everywhere,” Lopez says. At present, that seems a distant ambition.

The rest of us can help speed it along. If you or someone you know works in precarious or low-paid work, especially in London, get in touch or get them to get in touch with the IWGB [here](#) or the UVW [here](#). Share what they do on social media, and do as much as you can to amplify their latest campaigns. And if you want to do more, and if you agree with Henry Chango Lopez that the IWGB and UVW should be everywhere, you can do more than this – and support their campaigns in a more direct way.

Help the campaigns

Many trade unionists in the nineteenth century fondly hoped that the force of reason would replace the law of the industrial jungle. For part of the twentieth century it seemed as if it had, with management meeting with unions to work out wages, hours and everything else. In the 21st century, the jungle has grown back. Law and power is on the managers’ side, and the managers know it.

The casualised, marginalised workers who find their way to the IWGB and UVW don’t have the option of formal talks with their employer, at least at the beginning. The big outsourcing companies, courier firms and digital platforms that employ them aren’t inclined to listen to complaints, or act on them. Direct action becomes the only way to get redress for their grievances. The IWGB and UVW both rely on an in-your-face kind of campaigning, with strikes supported by public protests, building occupations and volumes of letters and emails designed to ramp up pressure on the boss.

Both unions try to mobilise as many other members as possible to support members on strike. The idea, as Elia says, is “to build as many links of solidarity as possible between members, and between workplaces.” Members do much of the planning done by organisers in other unions. And they’re not quiet about it either. Strikes are set to banging drums, chants, hailing from the loudspeaker, loud enough to wake up central London.

These tactics have worked. 100 Wood St, headquarters to Goldman Sachs and JP Morgan Chase, among others, gave in to UVW-organised cleaners after 61 days of strikes, protests, flashmobs, building occupations and other disruptions in the heart of the City of London. Over eight long years of campaigns, IWGB cleaners at the University of London administration have won the London living wage, more holiday and sick pay, and reversed the outsourcing of their jobs. These examples continue to pile up among couriers, carers and workers in other marginalised occupations.

These victories would come even quicker and more often with more support from the outside. The more people present, the bigger the pressure on the boss. And both unions do draw on outside support – from students, from some Labour and Green MPs, and from the anarchist group Class War and other tendencies on the left. If Labour Party members, Momentum members, and other groups on the left can join in *en masse*, the IWGB and UVW will be able to fight harder, and win faster. Practical solidarity will draw some of the most active workers within Labour's orbit.

Reach for your watch and your wallet

The UVW, Petros Elia says, was born on a cliff edge and remains on a cliff edge. This is not because they like their union to live as precariously as their members. They must keep membership fees low precisely because they, like the IWGB, organise some of the lowest-paid workers in London. Elia notes that the UVW has several times come close to bankruptcy, and both unions don't even dream of amassing a war chest comparable to those of larger unions.

The equation is very simple. The IWGB and UVW take on workers with problems, with piles of grievances that can sometimes cost large sums of money. Lopez put it to me like this: if you recruit workers who cost £500 in tribunal fees and pay £8 a month in subs, the union always runs the danger of a deficit. It's to the credit of both unions that they press on ahead with these workers anyway.

Their emphasis on an active membership keeps costs low, especially when it comes to paid organisers and officials. The UVW has been lucky with low rents for its HQ in Elephant and Castle. Yet the shortfall remains. To bridge the gap between dues and expenses, both unions rely on several other sources of funding. One is grants from charitable foundations, which have subsidised some of the expensive legal work they must do, as well as Lopez's pay as IWGB president. Another is crowdfunding, which the IWGB used to raise tens of thousands of pounds for legal challenges against Uber and Deliveroo. Finally, they depend on volunteers to complement the few paid officials and keep the administrative wheels of the union turning, in the physical and digital worlds.

The wider British left, especially in London, can do a lot here. Simply by promoting and contributing to these unions' crowdfunding efforts (the IWGB's [here](#), the UVW's [here](#)) they can make success more likely. By donating their time as well as or instead of their money, they can help the unions to work, free up organisers for other things, and make sure that when members campaign they have the smoothest possible machinery working behind them.

Check your watch and reach for your wallet. Donating just a little money and time can have a major effect on whether workers can survive a dispute, or see their employers in court, or ensure that as many people as possible know about and help with the IWGB and UVW's campaigns.

My nearest marginal union

The last general election in 2017 proved the power of mobilising people. Labour and Momentum members made possible Labour's poll result by canvassing, leafleting and pounding on doors. Momentum's findmynearestmarginal.com allowed activists to do their stuff where it mattered most, boosting Labour majorities and flipping marginal (and not-so-marginal) seats in Corbyn's favour.

Britain's beleaguered unions could benefit from the same approach. If we can push the IWGB and UVW to friends in casual work, encourage people to support their campaigns and donate money and time to their cause, we can surely do the same for other unions around the country. The IWGB and UVW, after all, remain small and limited largely to London. Workers organise and sometimes strike

all over the U.K., unreported by most of the press, and usually without the support they deserve.

This must change. How about a site called something like mynearestmarginalunion.com, doing for the unions what mynearestmarginal.com did for the Labour vote? Make it easy for people to support strikes, campaigns, and organising by unions close to where they live. If Labour people want to prove their support for the workers, this is one way to go. So many Labour members are trade unionists anyway, and the more they know about their comrades elsewhere the better.

New ties of solidarity like these can revive the union movement. That, more than any legislative programme, will place Labour's left on a solid footing for years to come.

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