

Recovering from December 2019 – the role of the trade unions

Other parts of this report consider policy, media coverage and public opinion nationally and in specific locations where Labour lost seats.

The purpose of this submission is not to analyse the cause(s) of the 2019 general election result, but to consider that result in a broader historical context and the role of the trade union movement in working with the Party to achieve a different result next time.

The most eye-catching losses in 2019 were the so-called 'Red Wall' seats. There are 13 'Red Wall' seats that were lost for the first time in recent history in 2019:

- Ashfield (mining)
- Bassetlaw (mining)
- Bishop Auckland (mining nearby; + Manufacturing, including food processing and packaging, public sector employment, retail and agriculture)
- Blyth Valley (coastal, mining)
- Don Valley (steel, mining)
- Heywood and Middleton (offices and retail)
- Leigh (high street decline, mining in Tyldesley)
- North West Durham (steel and mining)
- Redcar (steel, coastal town)
- Sedgfield (mining)
- Wakefield (mining)
- West Bromwich East (industrial decline)
- Workington (coastal town, mining, steel, vehicle manufacturing, significant nuclear work due to proximity to Sellafield).

Of these Heywood & Middleton and Leigh are in the metropolitan area of Greater Manchester, but the rest are towns. Three of them are coastal, all of them have suffered as a result of deindustrialisation, and the majority of them were mostly profoundly affected by the decline of the coal and steel or manufacturing industries.

Any analysis of Labour's 2019 defeat that does not take into account the disastrous loss of support in Scotland after the 2014 Independence referendum would be incomplete. This was the culmination of a deep rot that had taken place over decades that foreshadowed the outcome of the 2016 Brexit referendum, and Labour's loss of seats in post-industrial Britain. Equally, there were marginal constituencies in most regions of the country that the party will need to take in a future General Election if it is to secure a majority. The proposals in this chapter are focused on reconnecting with communities so they would be applicable in all these constituencies.

The labour movement – the party and the trade unions – arose out of similar conditions to those that pertain now especially but not exclusively in the

deindustrialised areas. Where poverty, inequality and ill health in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries arose primarily from conditions of employment, the issues today are underemployment, casual employment, low pay, unemployment and in some cases social breakdown culminating in ill health and addiction.

In the nineteenth century working people took the decision to work together and organise their own communities to resist these difficulties. This took various forms, from radical syndicalism to co-operatives and friendly societies, as well as trade unionism. What unites these solutions is the desire to pursue change and to build it through collective organisation.

Today the union movement faces a number of additional challenges: anti-trade union laws, an individualistic culture and increasing levels of inequality that undermine the idea that 'another society is possible'. Ageing membership, the decline of industries with high trade union density, and a reliance on public sector employers present a potentially existential challenge to the movement, although total membership has started to grow in recent years. Unions such as the National Union of Mineworkers essentially exist now to support retired members with legacy issues such as health complaints and pensions queries.

On the other hand the steelworkers' union, Community, adapted when the steel industry went into decline by started creating community memberships. As with Unite's Community branches, the idea was to help the families of people who don't work in the industry anymore because they're still part of communities which were extremely geographically focused.

For the past decade there has been a great deal of talk and a number of practical experiments in a 'community organising' approach to campaigning in sections of the labour movement and associated campaigns.

It is important to note the role of non-political community organisations such as Citizens UK and London Citizens in pressing for a Living Wage. Faith groups have also played a role in campaigns such as those in favour of Debt cancellation, Make Poverty History, Fairtrade; and a myriad of international solidarity actions.

Manuel Cortes describes a campaign event he attended in Coventry in spring 2020: "What was striking to me was that the meeting was put together by the Labour Party but there were representatives there from every different community group within that area. And I think we need to rebuild the labour movement by reaching out to all the different elements within our communities."

The anti-globalisation movement which inspired mass protests in locations such as Seattle and Prague looks in retrospect like a classic alliance of revolutionaries and middle class radicals. Similarly, the excitement generated by the Occupy movement in the early 2010s is now largely forgotten.

The climate justice campaign group Extinction Rebellion looks like it may prove more durable in that it has branches around the country which are building coalitions and carrying out effective lobbying campaigns as well as holding meetings.

Since 2011 the anti-racist campaign organisation HOPE not hate has published a number of reports¹ outlining its research into the factors that have driven division in communities. It has also deployed community organisers to carry out campaign projects and deliver training to activists in post industrial areas.

The mutual aid groups that emerged in spring 2020 in response to the COVID-19 crisis demonstrate that there is a large pool of people who are ready and able to get involved in activities to address social problems in their local communities.

Senior figures in the Labour Party have launched a number of experiments in community organising. The 'Movement for Change' organisation that was associated with David Miliband's 2010 leadership campaign appears to have dissipated (it has not tweeted since 2015 and its website has closed). In 2011 Ed Miliband invited Arnie Graf to train Labour activists around the country in community organising techniques. These efforts were focused in a number of marginal seats. However, it is well documented that this approach was resisted by some within the party and the movement, and Graf ceased working with the party by 2013.

After the party's defeat in 2015, Graf published an article for LabourList² setting out a number of recommendations. One of them is striking: "Half of all the organisers should be freed up to spend the bulk of their time building relationships with leaders in the communities they are assigned to. Out of these relationships should grow local issue campaigns that engage a wide cross section of the people who live in the community. This work will lead to numerous local campaigns and show people that the Labour Party is the place to go to if you want to get something done."

In 2018 Jeremy Corbyn announced that the Labour Party would be establishing its own community organising unit which the BBC reported would target 'seaside towns and traditional Labour heartlands'.³ Since then the COU has held events in over 100 communities.⁴

A report to Labour's NEC states that the COU team trained over 7000 activists in community organising prior to the election and a further 8000 activists around the country in Persuasive Canvassing methods during the campaign.⁵ The report also implies a causal link between lower swings against Labour in areas where community organisers had been deployed compared to other parts of the country, although this may not be sufficiently demonstrated by the data, as the areas where

¹ <https://www.hopenothate.org.uk/fear-hope-reports/>

² <https://labourlist.org/2015/08/labours-failure-had-little-to-do-with-organisers-in-the-field/>

³ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-42599895>

⁴ <https://prospect.org/world/labour-secret-weapon-uk/>

⁵ https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/labour-party-community-organising-unit-report_uk_5e30606ac5b6dc843407b03a

these organisers were deployed were 'key seats' where more campaigning would have taken place than in non-target constituencies.

Len McCluskey views community organising as "an essential part of reconnecting". He explains: "My view is you can't afford not to have community organising... The idea was, as you well know, that instead of waiting for an election and knocking on somebody's door and saying will you vote Labour, the idea was to develop roots within the constituencies, in particular in marginal constituencies, to work over a year, 2 years, 5 year periods, supporting local campaigns, making certain that Labour was very much seen as being, living, with them in their areas."

McCluskey is adamant that more Labour Party staff resources need to be committed to community organising: "we'd certainly be encouraging the Labour Party to look at their financial structures and look to see where they can utilise their funds better to make certain that resources, if they have got to be transferred from one part of the Labour Party to another to organising, then my view is that's what should happen."

Manuel Cortes agrees: "There are some areas of good practice within the Labour Party where we have started to use community organising techniques, and in my view we should be expanding those rather than closing the project down."

Some trade unions embraced the community organising approach to campaigning. TSSA hired a number of community organisers and organised successful actions around the country such as the #Farefail coalition, which brought together disability rights activists, commuters and Labour party figures protesting alongside trade unionists outside stations over high fares and staffing cuts.

Michael Wheeler explains that USDAW organised a number of events in target seats in support of the union's 'Save Our Shops' campaign, focused on the retail crisis and local high streets. These were not overtly party political – the local Labour Party was invited to support the campaign, but "they were very much street stalls focused on USDAW campaigns, run by us". This was "far more accessible", says Wheeler, "for encouraging our members to come along and help out with than door knocking for the Labour Party."

One purpose of organising these sessions far ahead of an election was "to get our members more comfortable getting out there and talking to the public not just recruiting within their workplace but talking to people outside the union and also to build those links in those key seats with the local Labour Party, with the idea that once we got to the election these were relatively self-sufficient campaign teams."

Wheeler reports that these sessions weren't just successful in upskilling members and building links with local parties, but attracted support from the public: "We hit upon something that was genuinely felt, people are worried about their local high streets, their local shops, and it allowed you to have a conversation and certainly with our activists and with the Labour Party there too, it formed a bridge so quite often we were able to introduce them to local Labour MPs or councillors or candidates who off the back of that in, were able to have a proper conversation, not

just be walked past. So we were trying to build that recognition and positive associations with the public by doing this as well.”

A different approach to involving the public was signalled by Unite when it launched ‘Community’ branches in 2011. Membership of these was open to students and people who were unemployed or retired, as well as workers employed by organisations that do not recognise a union.

Len McCluskey explains: “I could see that our members were leaving work and going back into their communities, communities that were under attack by the Tory austerity programme and really where people’s neighbours and friends and family had nowhere to turn. So we saw this a long time ago if you like, that we needed to reconnect our trade union values with our community. We wanted to be seen not just as a trade union who was interested in more pay and better conditions for our members, as important of course as that is, and indeed that is the primary reason for the existence of unions. But we wanted to say no, we are concerned about the communities in which our members live.”

McCluskey reports that 20,000 people have joined Unite as community members and says: “they’ve been at the forefront of all kinds of campaigns - the bedroom tax, the universal credit, Unite Community is at the forefront of all of those. They’ve been extremely helpful in many industrial campaigns that we have been involved in. Being on the picket line when perhaps the workers themselves couldn’t do something, our Community members did.”

He also cites the role of Unite Community activists in successful campaigns against the use of zero hours contracts at Sports Direct and Wetherspoons as examples of this approach.

RECOMMENDATION: Trade Unions should consider adopting a community organising approach if they have not already done so, and press the Labour Party to increase its use of this method of campaigning. This will require dedicated staff resources but also the development of shared training programmes. There may be value in bringing together Labour Party members and members of assorted unions for training.

Engaging with grass roots members

The most credible advocates that the trade union movement has are its members. There is considerable anecdotal evidence of a cultural gap between the political stances of some trade unions and their grassroots members.

Len McCluskey explains: “When I visited during the election campaign many of the manufacturing plants in our heartlands and during the campaign it became increasingly more difficult as each day and each week ticked away, the animosity and the hatred of the Labour Party, was shocking. I’m talking about huge workplaces. Jaguar Land Rover for example, 15,000 Unite members in Solihull. The convenors were telling me: Lenny, we can’t go on the shop floor now and try to project Jeremy Corbyn or the Labour Party, all because of Brexit of course. The only

good thing they were able to say to me. The only speck of light is we haven't come across one single person who has got a good word to say about Boris Johnson. But the disconnect between the Union's political stance and the rank and file members, driven primarily by Brexit, is huge. And we took a decision then that we needed to reconnect with our own members - I think that's what unions should try to do in whatever way they feel is appropriate, and support the Labour Party trying to reconnect with the community on a day to day basis, not waiting for 4 years, but starting to develop and do things and check things now."

Different industries have different workforces and different unions have different cultures so it is not possible to recommend a 'one size fits all' solution.

Michael Wheeler from USDAW explains: "The nature of our membership is fundamentally a bit of a barrier, and perhaps differently for us than other trade unions, in that we start from a fairly low level of political engagement for our members when they come into the union. We think there are benefits to this because by and large our members are reflective of society - supermarket workers are by their nature embedded in their local communities and not particularly different from their local communities unlike maybe a public sector worker could be... They don't come from a place where joining a political party or direct activism of that nature is common, it's not a normal part of their world... So we have the whole range of political engagement that we need to do with our members, we need to basically engage them in politics and make some of them realise that politics affects their lives in a very general and basic way, and that all needs to be done before we layer on the 'by the way there's the Labour Party, this is what it means and you can be actively and directly involved in that.' So the fundamental challenge - and these will be similar with other unions to greater or lesser degrees - the fundamental barrier is just one of general political engagement."

McCluskey describes Unite's plans to reconnect with its members thus: "We'll now be looking at developing ways and means that we can take arguments and visions in to the workplace. We've just for example taken on Laura Pidcock up in the North to do exactly that, to start figuring out how we can go in and take our political message to the rank and file. And that's a process that is in its embryonic stages, even though in normal ways we would hope we preach the political necessity of the Labour Party in all our industrial courses anyway."

RECOMMENDATION: Each Trade Union should consider whether there is a cultural gap between the political views of its leadership and its grassroots membership and if so should draw up an action plan to address that gap.

Learning from new unions and ways of campaigning

Reflecting on social changes in post-industrial communities, Manuel Cortes says: "I think we need to look at new models of organising. Clearly there are jobs in these communities. Most of these jobs tend to be at the lower end in terms of wages, terms and conditions. There are a lot of warehouses, a lot of service sector jobs, where unions historically have not done particularly well..."

He adds: "I think it's remarkable that we've seen some new unions spring up, who are clearly organising those people that who, for want of a better word, the traditional elements of the labour movement saw as 'too hard to organise'. And I think we should be taking stock of some of the work they've been doing..."

One of these new unions is the Independent Workers of Great Britain (IWGB). Austin Kelmore, Chair of the IWGB Game Workers' Branch, explains the series of events that gave rise to the discussions that led to the formation of Game Workers Unite: "Around 2 years ago, the game developers' conference in San Francisco, the biggest conference every year, where game developers get together, give talks, but really it's a place for everyone to come together, and there was a talk or a panel that was themed 'Unions: good or bad for our industry?' And a whole bunch of people on the panel were basically CEOs, so it was very, very one-sided. Kind of like 'Why did you think this was a good panel in the first place?'"

Members of the group explored a number of options before deciding to form a branch of the IWGB.

"Typically, we're a little backwards from what IWGB normally does", says Kelmore.

"A lot of their branches they form around a workplace and then form the 'University of London branch' for instance. So they have a whole bunch of workers together already, they have almost a built-in campaign for whatever rights they want to try and get, and so they can push and activate right away. Whereas what we did was 'let's unionise the entire UK industry' and we didn't have any workers built up in any particular workplaces.

"So a lot of what we've been doing over the past year and a half is educating workers on what their rights are, even the basic stuff like 'if I join a union, I don't have to tell my boss'. People don't know that... And then a lot of connecting people together. So if multiple people from a workplace join, they don't know that they've joined until we link them up together."

This theme, of bringing together workers facing the same issues or employed by the same organisation, is also reflected in the experience of Bex Hay, co-founder and Chief Technology Officer at Organise, an organisation that makes free tools available to support campaigns in UK workplaces.

Hay describes how a lot of Organise's tools are founded on the principle that you can be anonymous at the beginning. They use a very basic open survey that asks: 'What is it like at work? What sucks at work? What's good about your workplace? What do you want to change? What do you want to say to your boss that you've never said to your boss?'

It works on the principle of building from a very simple ask like this anonymous survey to getting 3 colleagues on board until it becomes a campaign.

Hay quotes the example of two female employees at Ted Baker who filled in the survey and said something very similar about being sexually harassed by their boss.

"It was just so accepted as the culture of that workplace, and again because they were allowed to say it anonymously to start with, it was fine, they didn't have to put their names down, no-one had to know that they said it. They didn't know that each other had filled it out, so as soon as we connected the two of them, we said: this looks quite similar, is this a pattern, do you want to talk about it?' And they said 'oh we're not alone by the way, there's loads of women in Ted Baker, even senior directors, who've experienced this.' So that got started as an open letter.. The first 50 signatures are anonymous, you don't need to see names at the beginning of the campaign and that anonymity is quite important... so that was how that campaign built up, and then it turned into 100 women who said they'd been sexually harassed... At that point, because it had so many people... involved, two of the women were willing to talk to a journalist about it, but it took that level of confidence and that kind of build-up to get there."

Hay explains that Organise is just a platform so all the campaigns on it are submitted by users: "A thing that we have found through running the Organise platform is we don't write any of the copy on any of the campaigns. People go to Organise and they start their own petition, they define it... half of the stuff that people write on our platform I wouldn't have ever sat and written, some of it I don't even understand, because I'm not on the shop floor of Tesco or whatever, but because it relates to their colleagues and their friends, they then come on to it and they are convinced, and that's how it builds power."

There is of course a potential tension with such an open platform: "I think the flipside of it though is how much do you want to accept that's not the exact message that the Labour Party would want or the exact message that a union might want."

Edward Saperia, Dean of The London College of Political Technologists at Newspeak House in East London, says the use of the organisation's meeting space is similarly open: ""We never run any events. We go into the community, find Community Organisers and say we gave you a free space, and you can run whatever event you want. And then we give them tools to promote it."

In terms of developing campaign resources, Saperia highlights a collaborative project called electiontechhandbook.uk. This had had 20,000 hits and hosts over 200 projects, in which volunteers share technological approaches they have adopted during election campaigns. Saperia also points to a fundraising project at gived.org.

Cortes welcomes the challenge: "I think we have to be far more creative than we have been in the past. We need to use new technology to enable us to reach new people. But of course that does not negate the need for there to be face to face meetings, rallies, whatever you want to have. But I think we need to be far more creative than just trying to recreate the structures of the past, even though it's still

vital that we reach out to communities and that we have a presence in each and every one of them.”

RECOMMENDATION: The Labour Party and trade unions should look at the innovative methods adopted by new unions and campaigners organising workers from traditionally non-unionised background, including the use of technology

A visible presence in the community

A major contributing factor to the decline in support for Labour in many communities has been the decline of industries such as coal mining and steel making. Where the trade union movement would have been a familiar part of life in these communities, the loss of these unionised jobs and their replacement by jobs where unions are marginalised or non-existent will undoubtedly have eroded that relationship.

As Manuel Cortes explains, “in many of these communities, the so-called red wall - communities that historically would have been dominated by one industry and/or one employer - many of these places had that industry move out decades ago and with it sadly well paid trade unionised jobs. So people were voting Labour out of habit to be brutally honest, because they had no direct link with organised labour on a day to day basis.”

There is a risk that this decline into irrelevance will be exacerbated by the loss of Labour MPs in many of these places. Even if the party was not a regular feature in people’s lives, the simple fact that the MP has an office in the constituency and operates a surgery there is a visible demonstration to the surrounding community that the party cares about them.

Where offices are rented, it is likely they will close but even in locations where the party owns the office and is thus able to retain it, there is a risk that it will become a ‘campaign centre’, i.e. just a place where a paid organiser works and members of the party go to, further cementing the irrelevance of the movement and the party to ordinary people’s lives.

A trade unionist’s eye on the distinction between ‘servicing’ and ‘organising’ will immediately pick up on the difference between a place where individual casework is sorted out by a representative, and a place where communities come together to tackle collective problems.

As Len McCluskey says, “we used to have the Labour Club in many of our heartlands. You went to the Labour Club not only to have a pint and enjoy yourself, but also knowing full well that it was a place to go if you had a problem and people would help you out.”

The National Union of Labour & Socialist Clubs lists 28 affiliated Labour Clubs in the UK, of which more than half are in the North West of England. The website of the Working Men’s Club & Institute Union (CIU) is down, but the organisation is reported to have 1800 affiliated clubs, which including Royal British Legion, Liberal and working men’s clubs as well as some Labour clubs.

Manuel Cortes says Labour clubs were “places where people could go for a drink and a chat, but also places where the community could hold social events. I think that we could look at some kind of model around that but clearly that is more inclusive than the older model which tended to be places that were just frequented by men.”

A key element of this proposal is that any new venues should be open to the wider community: “We could build within communities the equivalent of community halls, whatever you want to call them, where the labour movement can come together, where we allow the local communities to hold meetings, we also could also run the food bank from there, and it’s all about embedding ourselves within the local communities.”

RECOMMENDATION: The establishment of Labour Community Centres in high visibility locations in target seats

Activities/services these centres could offer include:

- Employment rights and other advice services
- Food banks and other poverty mitigation measures
- A ‘library of things’
- Low cost / free meeting space for community groups
- Low cost / free co-working space for local people
- Free health checks / fitness classes / activities (eg walking clubs)
- Affordable, healthy refreshments to make the space inclusive (which might include alcohol in locations where that is appropriate)
- Breakfast/after school clubs (addressing both food poverty and the cost of childcare)
- Evening classes

These could be rented on 5 year leases or purchased outright. This need not be expensive – given the parlous state of many town centres and high streets, especially in some deindustrialised communities, the rent on suitable premises in high profile, accessible locations should be well within the reach of our movement.