

Fast Food Shutdown: From disorganisation to action in the service sector

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Abstract

This article discusses the Fast Food Shutdown, a strike on 4 October 2018 that involved Wetherspoon, McDonald's, TGI Fridays and UberEats workers in the United Kingdom. It compares the different strategies of the Bakers Food and Allied Workers' Union at Wetherspoon and Industrial Workers of the World at UberEats. The two case studies, drawing on the authors' ongoing ethnographic research, provide important examples of successful precarious worker organising. In particular, the argument focuses on the role of action in organising, as well as the relationship between the rank-and-file and the union. While these could point the way to the recomposition of the workers movement – both in greenfield sectors and within existing unions – there remain important questions about how these experiences can be generalised.

Keywords

gig economy, new unionism, organising, platform work, syndicalism

Introduction

On 4 October 2018, workers at four companies (Wetherspoon, McDonald's, TGI Fridays and UberEats) took coordinated strike action as part of a 'Fast Food Shutdown'. This article compares the organising approaches adopted by the Bakers Food and Allied

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Workers' Union (BFAWU) and Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) at Wetherspoon and UberEats, respectively, in the run up to this strike. Through this comparison, we will develop an account of how some unions are moving from disorganisation to action in 'greenfield', precarious, low-density service sector workplaces in Britain. In particular, we will identify the importance of organising for action instead of for representation, the necessity of unions acting responsively to worker self-organisation and the centrality of rank-and-file control over processes of collective action.

Data on these two case studies were collected through ethnographic engagement following the tradition of 'workers' inquiry' (see Woodcock 2014). Hence, both authors were involved in various ways with the disputes in Brighton and London. This entailed attending meetings in the run up to the strikes, visiting picket lines, as well as 10 semi-structured interviews with Wetherspoon workers and informal discussions with IWW organisers. This involved the kind of engaged research that Burawoy (1989: 14) has discussed, with 'interventions' not understood as something just to be minimised. The critical engagement both authors undertook provides evidence that is reflected upon in this article. The two chosen case studies are still developing yet, in our experience, provide an important starting point for thinking through the changes in organising in Britain today.

Both of these case studies are examples of 'distant expansion', or the recruitment of workers in workplaces without pre-existing union branches or recognition agreements (Kelly & Heery 1989). The failure to achieve this kind of expansion, particularly in greenfield private service sector workplaces, has been shown to be the predominant factor in the decline of union membership in Britain since 1979 (Disney et al. 1995, Machin 2000). As a result, the question of how to reverse the failures of distant expansion is central to discussions of how the workers' movement can be revitalised in the contemporary context (Gall 2005a, 2005b).

Our empirical discussion of distant expansion and greenfield organising in the contemporary context draws upon Bronfenbrenner and Juravich's work conducted over the 1990s in the United States. In a series of studies covering both public and private sectors (Bronfenbrenner 1997; Bronfenbrenner & Juravich 1995, 1998; Juravich & Bronfenbrenner 2005), they argued using an aggressive rank-and-file oriented strategy increased the chances of organising success. The two case studies examined here provide striking evidence of the continuing relevance of this in the context of increasingly recomposed technical and social class composition (Notes from Below 2018b).

Wetherspoon and BFAWU

The organising drive at Wetherspoon was not initiated by the BFAWU. Instead, it came from the shop floor. In late 2017, workers at a large (>50 employees) Wetherspoon in Brighton were facing unreliable shift scheduling and authoritarian management practice. Workers on the lower rungs of the internal Wetherspoon labour market perceived that their supervisors were putting together the shift rota without sufficient care for their specific circumstances. In response, a small group decided to turn their existing and informal workplace network into a scaffolding for collective action. At the same time doing this and having initial discussions with other workers, this small group contacted the BFAWU

– who had recently been involved in highly publicised strike activity at McDonald's. Initially, it provided these workers with minimal support, telling them to recruit their co-workers and take no other form of action until achieving a 50% density. Upon the reaching of this target, the BFAWU strategy was to seek a recognition agreement through either statutory or voluntary means. However, rapid labour turnover and lack of 'buy-in' among the wider workforce meant that this density target evaded the nascent union branch. Despite the efforts of a small number of organisers, density hovered around 30% for months. However, this initial organising work succeeded in spreading the organising drive to another Brighton Wetherspoon (again with >50 employees).

In mid-2018, the union strategy changed for the organising drive was now be conducted according to the one which had proved successful at McDonald's. Hence, BFAWU's 'Fast Food' campaign would be the internal point of contact for the two Brighton branches. Workers would map their workplaces, systematically build support for collective action through one-to-one organising conversations and then take limited forms of workplace collective action over specific small grievances, before building towards strike action over wages and union recognition. The process would be supported by a team of experienced organisers devoting time and energy to mapping, developing and stress testing the workplace organisation in the two pubs.

Drawing from the 'Fight for \$15' campaign in the United States, this strategy proved more successful. Thus, density rose in both pubs. In the first pub, a collective 'march on the boss' in work time to present a signed letter from the majority of staff on shift scheduling proved successful. This first collective action functioned not only as part of the union escalation strategy but also to stress test shop floor organisation (see McAlevy 2016). The strategy continued to be pursued. A dispute was declared and a strike ballot won. A day of strike action was announced for 4 October 2018. The process of building for the strike saw a sense of confident excitement develop among workers and aided further recruitment.

The strike began at midnight with workers and supporters cheering strikers as they walked out. No morning pickets were mounted to obstruct the entry of strike-breakers. Instead, workers boarded a union-funded coach to London, where they participated in a multi-union demonstration in Leicester Square addressed by the Labour Shadow Chancellor, John McDonnell. The strikers went on to have a discussion with workers from other striking workplaces at TGI Fridays and McDonald's before heading back to Brighton for an evening demonstration and picket. The demonstration was large, and mobilised a community coalition of 300 supporters, leading to both pubs closing early. Significantly, this was the first action of the day that was conducted without the oversight of BFAWU's media team.

For many, this first experience of striking was transformative. The collective agency manifested on the day changed the way they understood themselves, their workplace and their union. However, the strike also had contradictory elements. Some workers expressed a feeling they did not have full control of the form of their action, leading to dissatisfaction. Centralised union control of details ranging from slogans and media strategy to graphic design of strike materials (including T-shirts, banners and stickers) and where workers stood on pavements to create the best photo opportunities was a marked contrast to earlier phases of the organising drive, which were characterised by a high level of

autonomous initiative. Yet, this strategy produced substantial media coverage. In the course, Wetherspoon granted significant concessions, despite the limited initial scope of the strike action. These included a 60p per hour pay rise, the abolition of the 18–20 pay band; a £1 per hour night shift bonus (implemented nationally, although locally the union got night shifts scrapped altogether); an annual pay rise being brought forward; rota issues being resolved and pub management being reshuffled following formal grievance procedures.

IWW

The IWW has a distinct organisational history and structure, requiring some contextual introduction. It was founded in Chicago 1905, with a constitution containing the preamble: ‘The working class and the employing class have nothing in common’. It grew to become a revolutionary syndicalist union of not just national but global consequence (Cole et al. 2017). The union did not build a substantial base in Britain during the 20th century but has taken steps towards doing so in the 21st century. The IWW carried out its first lawfully sanctioned strike in Britain in 2012 (Kirkpatrick 2014) and in 2015 its membership reached over 1,000 members, rising to nearly 2,000 by 2018 (Certification Officer 2016, 2019). Most IWW members join because they are highly motivated supporters of revolutionary syndicalism inspired by its history, rather than because the union is an organised force in their workplace. Yet this recent growth suggests this is changing.

The IWW and BFAWU are substantially unlike in two key ways. First, the IWW has nothing like the centralised infrastructure of the BFAWU. This is not just a question of scale: the IWW employs no staff on political principle, and as a result it relies on volunteers to organise and administer its branches. This structure has both advantages and disadvantages, but one of its most prominent effects is that the union can be exceptionally flexible and reactive. Second, it has no formal relationship to the Trades Union Congress or the Labour Party, likewise increasing its potential flexibility of action.

UberEats and Deliveroo are also unlike Wetherspoon in that they are not long-neglected service sector workplaces, but rather entirely new dispersed workplaces that have grown rapidly over the last few years. This rapid growth has been combined with a rapid process of research, which has come to a series of important early realisations: food delivery platform workers meet each other at accumulation points in the labour process, build digitally mediated networks on WhatsApp and used this organisational skeleton to take part in repeated collective action directed against these platforms (Cant 2018; Waters & Woodcock 2017). The combination of algorithmic management technologies (which eliminate the mediating role of workplace supervisors) and bogus self-employment (which allows workers to bypass all forms of legislation on industrial action but also bars them from gaining statutory recognition) further contributes to a tendency towards worker resistance. This tendency has been expressed through a series of successful organising efforts, both in Britain and further afield (see Notes from Below 2018a).

The IWW began organising a campaign, variously called ‘Roovolution’ and ‘DeliverUnion’ in 2016, following in the wake of two large (linked) strikes in UberEats

and Deliveroo in London and the success of the Independent Workers Union of Great Britain (IWGB) in organising Deliveroo riders in London – particularly in the Camden zone. The IWW made initial progress organising workers in Bristol and Leeds, leading to wildcat strike action and protests against victimisation and pay cuts for workers leading training shifts. After this experience, the campaign identified a new grievance and re-orientated itself against the classification of UberEats and Deliveroo workers as self-employed. This new phase of the campaign was supported by local IWW branches but did not yield significant results. In Cardiff, the local branch made contact with a number of sympathetic riders but it got no further than that. This failure led key IWW organisers to reappraise the union's approach to platform worker organisation.

Through a process of inquiry and discussion with workers, the Cardiff branch spent a period of months talking to workers and identifying a different key grievance that might catalyse organisation. This was the amount of time couriers were forced to wait to collect orders at McDonald's branches around the city. With workers paid on a piece rate per drop, these waits could reduce hourly wages significantly. The renewed organising campaign abandoned the focus upon self-employment status and re-orientated towards 'bread and butter' workplace issues. The campaign was centred upon using direct action to resolving this issue. The first step in the campaign involved representing UberEats workers to the McDonald's franchise management to demand shorter waiting times. This was not directly targeted at Uber but was an important grievance of these workers.

The campaign developed with a workplace bulletin and adopted a form of hybrid organisation. Therefore, while some workers joined the IWW, many began organising within the WhatsApp network, without becoming dues-paying members but taking part in collective actions. This meant that the IWW gained no further financial resources but did bring it and other workers into contact with a much larger network of workers, allowing for preparations and action far beyond the IWW's existing capacities. Actions spread, with local strikes in Cardiff, Glasgow and Plymouth. From the action, the courier network had either sympathetic contacts or fully established branches in city in Scotland (Glasgow, Edinburgh, Aberdeen, Stirling and Inverness), England (London, Bristol, Manchester, Cambridge, Leicester, Birmingham, Plymouth, Southampton, Manchester, Bradford, Leeds, Sheffield and York), Wales (Cardiff, Newport, Swansea and Aberystwyth) and Ireland (Derry, Belfast, Dublin and Cork).

Then, in September 2018, there was further wildcat strike action in London by UberEats drivers. The IWW responded to this non-union collective action by advancing its own proposal for the first ever national food platform strike (involving both Deliveroo and UberEats) demanding £5 a drop with a £1 per mile bonus. It decided to use its flexibility and capacity to bypass union laws to call the strike on 4 October – the same day as Unite and the BFAWU's Fast Food strikes. Key organisers within the IWW aimed to exploit and develop the potential industrial connections between McDonald's workers on strike and the UberEats workers who delivered from them, as well as tie their strike action to a wider narrative about low pay in the service sector. IWW activists in London mapped all the McDonald's in London and divided them into five groups: North, East, South, West and Central (Figure 1). Lay IWW members then visited these McDonald's and attempted to recruit key organic leaders in the area and connect the self-organised

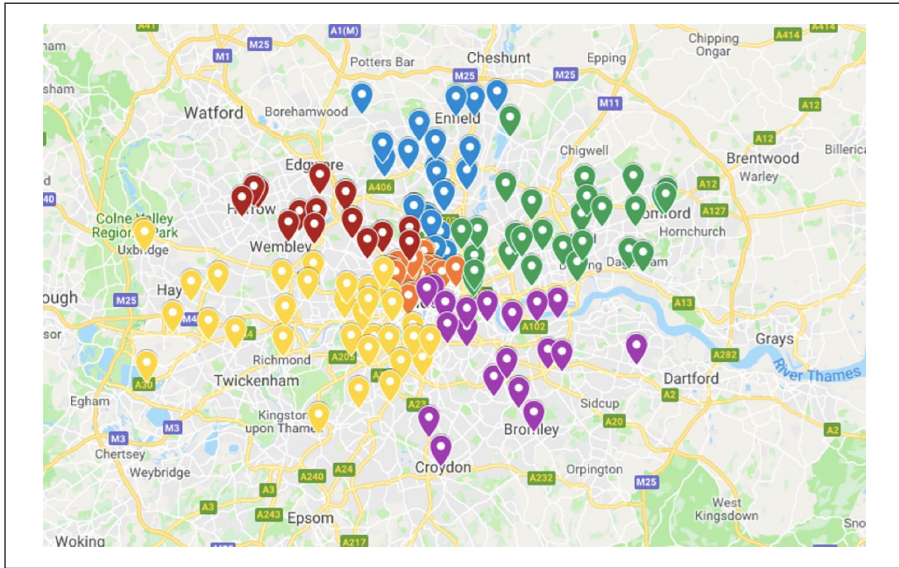


Figure 1. The map of London McDonald's used by the IWW Couriers Network.

strike networks to the union. In the process, they distributed up to 10,000 multilingual fliers calling for strike action.

The first strike involved large-scale action in London (specifically Lewisham, Greenwich, Erith, Surbiton, Shepherds Bush, Hammersmith, Oldfield, Putney, Bethnal Green and Holborn), Newcastle, Bristol, Cardiff, Edinburgh and Glasgow. In the local 'zones' where these strikes took place, platform service was either totally halted or seriously impaired (Woodcock & Hughes 2018). The impact upon workers' terms and conditions is harder to measure given the lack of formal negotiation and communication between workers and management, but workers in many parts suggested that the 'boost' multipliers used to calculate piece rates increased in the wake of the strike. This organising effort also has the distinction of having been the subject of high-quality reflexive discussion by its participants, which deserves further attention (Fear 2018; Marotta 2018; Mills 2018; New Syndicalist 2018a, 2018b, 2019).

Discussion

In both case studies, union organising efforts were their most successful when they followed roughly the following four-step development: first, accurately identifying a winnable workplace-specific grievance; second, mapping the workforce to identify existing embryonic solidarities and informal work group structures; third, moving to collective action on that winnable grievance; and fourth, escalating from this initial collective action towards larger-scale collective action over larger-scale grievances. These are not particularly surprising but the case studies also demonstrate elements of novel 'green-field' organising. The point of organising, in both of these case studies, was action

rather than representation per se. The IWW engaged in a campaign in a sector where collective bargaining via the statutory route was a technical impossibility, barring changes in employment law or the classification of food delivery platform workers. It, therefore, prioritised informal bargaining via direct action rather than formal negotiations. Likewise, BFAWU had success in organising Wetherspoon workers when they abandoned a '50% + 1' membership density target in favour of building towards collective action. While both workers and unions in both case studies would likely be open to formal collective bargaining agreements (and, in fact, this was one demand of the Wetherspoon strike), they were not fixated on formal recognition and willing to engage in some strategic flexibility. As Hodder et al. (2017) demonstrated, strikes can lead to significant membership growth in the striking workplace. The shortest path to union growth in greenfield workplaces and a successful process of distant expansion is via strike action.

Both organising drives also emerged in response to worker self-organisation. Strikes among food delivery platform workers and organising efforts amongst Wetherspoons workers both predated union organising processes. IWW conventional wisdom suggests that engaging with workers' 'hot shops' (workplaces where collective action is already in the pipeline ahead of union involvement) is likely to consume large amounts of organisational resource without providing a commensurate return. However, in these cases, following up on 'hot shops' provided both unions with substantial opportunities. These cases indicate that organising strategies might do well to finesse union follow-up processes in response to initial contact by groups of self-organised workers, who often constitute a key part of the 'militant minority' (Darlington 2009; Uetricht & Eidlin 2019). Where action was controlled by the workers themselves, it tended to be at its most successful, in terms of exerting both workplace and associational leverage. These case studies indicate that organisation with the aim of action should not only emphasise grassroots leadership of the organising process but also in the resulting mobilisation processes. The bottom-up exertion of power seems to be both objectively and subjectively central to the function of being a stage in an escalating organising process. In institutional terms, both case studies were significant successes. Both unions extended their presences beyond their traditional bases, gaining both experience and members in the process. Retrospective evaluations of organising processes on the basis of political criteria have often been lacking from the literature (Simms & Holgate 2010).

We believe that these two case studies have contributed to the task of developing the working-class movement in Britain such that if the workers' movement in Britain is to be revived, it will be through politically informed organising methodologies which initially aim for action rather than representation, build from existing worker self-organisation and empower grassroots workers to determine the course of the struggles in their workplaces. However, there remains an important question to be asked about how these struggles from the alternative unions could generalise to the rest of the workers movement. As many of these unions – including IWGB and United Voices of the World (UVW) – are splits from mainstream unions, the connections between them can be limited. These examples remain at a relatively small scale for now, but they do provide powerful examples of how struggles can be organised today.

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