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Blocked and new frontiers for trade unions: contesting ‘the meaning of work’ in the creative and caring sectors

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Abstract

Many jobs feature tensions between workers' own motivations, and the objectives imposed on them by management or economic imperatives. We call these tensions 'meaning of work conflicts'. We ask whether trade unions can intervene in them, or whether they are simply too subjective to be a credible campaigning focus. We examine two professional groups in Britain and France, musicians and healthcare staff. Among musicians, workers tend to negotiate meaning of work conflicts themselves, seeing little role for unions in this process. This engenders legitimacy problems that unions have had to find ways around. By contrast, in the hospitals sector, there is more scope for unions to campaign over the meaning of work, thus potentially increasing legitimacy among staff and the public. The difference is explained by the more diffuse and fragmented nature of employer structures in music, and the more chaotic set of motivations found among music workers.

Keywords

Trade unions; meaning of work; intrinsic motivation; musicians; hospitals

Word count: 8958

Introduction

This article considers how trade unions can address 'meaning of work conflicts'; situations where the 'sense of purpose' (Locke and Taylor, 1991) workers assign to their jobs conflicts with imperatives imposed by management or economic circumstance. While seemingly remote from more quantifiable industrial relations concerns, meaning of work conflicts can profoundly affect unions. In some cases, workers' own objectives may legitimise quiescence over working conditions, diminishing union legitimacy. In others, meaning of work conflicts could provide new legitimacy, if unions can intervene constructively in them.

The 'meaning of work' often figures in organisational behaviour or management literature. Managers are advised to help employees find 'meaning' in their jobs, reducing cynicism and promoting 'engagement' (Cartwright and Homes, 2006). The concept has a more instrumental relative- 'intrinsic motivation'- where workers' own values and motivations become variables to be measured and manipulated through management (e.g. Delfgaauw and Dur, 2007). However, this does not justify trade union researchers neglecting the topic. The individual's capacity to exercise agency over how and why they direct their capacity to work is a defining human characteristic, and conflicts between this capacity and management control have been fertile ground for study. The meaning of work is contested terrain, and these conflicts are highly relevant to unions.

There is little prior literature examining trade union responses to meaning of work conflicts, and so this study takes an exploratory approach. It considers two professional groups- healthcare workers and musicians- who encounter very different labour processes and industrial relations contexts. However, in both cases, meaning of work conflicts affect the relationship between workers, employers and unions. The article examines the problems these conflicts cause unions and how they might address them. Among musicians, workers' intrinsic motivations presented severe challenges to unions, forcing them to reorient towards more direct engagement with employers. In hospitals, there was much more scope for unions to intervene in meaning of work conflicts, and the potential for enhanced legitimacy. These differences reflect the structural characteristics of the two sectors, rather than national contextual differences. The porosity of labour markets and the transient nature of employment relationships are key factors which prevent unions engaging in meaning of work conflicts.

The article proceeds by critically reviewing the concepts of 'the meaning of work' and of intrinsic motivation, presenting them as a site of tension between employers and employees in which the union's role is ambivalent. There follows a discussion of methods and the two empirical sections. Then, a final section will consider what structural factors enable unions to contest the meaning of work, along with future research questions and priorities. We argue that there is a need to better understand the way in which workers' qualitative attitudes towards the meaning of work interact with their views on trade unionism. While centralising meaning of work conflicts may help unions claim greater legitimacy and catalyse mobilisations, this is dependent on particular material conditions related to the structure of the labour market and the nature of employers.

Meaning of work conflicts

'The meaning of work' has occupied researchers in organizational behaviour, sociology and management literatures (see Rosso et al, 2010, for a review). Such sources emphasise the dehumanising implications of viewing work purely as a source of material remuneration, stressing work as a creative endeavour which counters social isolation (Gill, 1999), and generates 'a feeling... of having a purpose in life' (Morse and Weiss, 1955:191). These arguments can help advance the business case against 'hard' human resource management methods, whose emphasis on individualising

material rewards could cause cynicism (Cartwright and Holmes, 2006) or stress (Locke and Taylor, 1991).

'Intrinsic motivation' is a closely-related term with wider use in mainstream managerial literature. Frey and Osterloh (2000) argue that, in contrast to 'extrinsic' reward (i.e. pay), "motivation is *intrinsic* if an activity is undertaken for one's immediate need satisfaction'; in other words, where the nature of the work is in itself fulfilling, either because of the satisfaction found in the results of work or in the 'flow' of the labour process itself. In either case, they note that intrinsic motivation may lead employees to adopt priorities which differ from managers'. However, there is also an extensive management-oriented literature which seeks to integrate intrinsic motivation as either a dependent variable (Amabile, 1993; Deci, 1972, Zhang and Bartol, 2010) or an independent variable with productivity-enhancing effects (Lin, 2007; Thomas, 2000).

Below, references to 'meaning of work conflicts' denote instances where different actors- workers, managers, and potentially unions- have opposing views on the motivations and objectives that are legitimate in a particular job. This resonates with critical literature, particularly labour process theory (e.g. Thompson, 1990), which centralises the tension between managerial control and worker autonomy within the workplace. Two widely-studied settings in this respect are 'creative' and 'caring' sectors; in both cases, literature reveals important conflicts between workers' own sense of purpose and imperatives imposed on them.

In 'creative' work, meaning of work conflicts take various forms. In some cases, such as computer game design, managerial priorities regiment the labour process, reducing workers' creative input (Thompson et al, 2015; Bulut, 2015). Austerity pressures on arts funders engender tighter monitoring of workers in core arts fields (Hewison, 2014). Freelance arts workers often sacrifice the 'meaningfulness' of their work in order to adapt their 'product' to market demands (Author A, 2014; Eikhof and Haunschild, 2007). Many such workers have 'portfolio' careers characterised by transient engagements with disparate clients (Gill, 2002). This means that workers may be aware *a priori* of which jobs afford more meaning, and seek to construct 'balanced' careers that combine these opportunities with more restrictive but better-remunerated engagements, as we have shown previously (author A, 2014; 2015).

In professions such as education, social services and healthcare, the caring objectives of frontline staff conflict with managerial priorities (Harris, 1998:842). Such workers often have an intrinsic desire to care for patients (Bolton, 2000). This may cause conflict where efforts to cut-costs and tighten managerial control reduce the scope for staff to pursue these ends. In Greer's (2016) study of welfare-to-work provision, pressures to speed-up client turnover marginalised the social work ethos of staff, discouraging them from spending time addressing qualitative social needs. In education, tighter performance monitoring has also diminished workers' discretion to pursue their own intrinsic objectives (Wilson, 1991; see also Randle and Brady, 1997). In health, austerity pressures may cause work intensification, thus threatening the time and energy that enable staff to be sufficiently 'caring' (Aiken et al, 2014). Efforts to cut-costs by connecting service financing to quantifiable outcomes may 'Taylorise' frontline health jobs (Hartzband and Groopman, 2016). In such cases, unlike with 'portfolio' creative workers, meaning of work conflicts are structured around disputes with a particular employer who imposes labour process changes. Below, we will consider how these differences affect the role of trade unions.

Trade unions and meaning of work conflicts

We ask two research questions. Firstly, we consider whether and how trade unions engage in meaning of work conflicts in music and healthcare work. Secondly, we consider how the forms taken by meaning of work conflicts affect the wider role of unions in a sector. Workers' intrinsic motivations can evidently pose problems for unions. 'Passion for the job' may justify poor working conditions and legitimise personal hardship (Madden et al, 2015), rendering workers fatalistic about their employment conditions (Vazquez-Cupeiro and Elston, 2006). Furthermore, unions may encounter hostility if they appear preoccupied with material concerns which go against workers' view of their job as a cause, as Cunningham (2001) found among charity workers.

There is limited literature on the relationship between unions and the meaning of work, but evidence suggests that these problems apply to both caring and creative sectors. While it is recognised that unions struggle with creative workers due to the informal and transient industrial relations characterising the sector (Dean, 2012; Heery et al, 2004; Umney and Kretsos, 2014), there is limited information on the extent to which workers' intrinsic motivations delegitimise arts-sector unions. However, in recent research we have shown how musicians may reject perceived union interference in their careers, fearing infringement on their pursuit of meaningful work (author A, 2016; see also Proust, 2010).

These questions are slightly more developed in healthcare literature. French-language literature shows how unions have been perceived as remote from the core business of care provision (Tallard and Vincent, 2010), particularly as the hospital workforce professionalised throughout the 20th Century (Vincent and Volovitch, 2003). Sainsaulieu (2008) argues that hospital staff have historically proven hostile to unions, perceiving their campaigns to come between health professionals and their patients. Literature on unions in the British National Health Service (NHS) gives a similar impression. British healthcare unions tend to be comparatively partnership-oriented with relatively rare instances of industrial action (Eurofound, 2011). The emphasis on partnership and service provision has limited their mobilising capacity (Saundry and McKeown, 2013; Tailby et al, 2004), and it appears that grassroots membership is frequently less inclined to mobilise against managerial initiatives than representatives and officials are (Givan and Bach, 2007).

Trade union revitalisation literature provides another angle on meaning of work conflicts; as a potential source of enhanced union legitimacy. This is most evident in literature on 'external solidarity' (e.g. Levesque and Murray, 2005; 2013) and community unionism (Holgate, 2015; Wills and Simms, 2004). A central premise here is that unions should build alliances with other social actors and frame their concerns as part of a wider public-interest agenda. This requires unions to have 'external legitimacy'; the perception that their claims represent the interests of society rather than their own members' material conditions (Dufour and Hege, 2010).

Arguably, healthcare unions are increasingly seeking to mobilise this external legitimacy. Efforts to generate public opposition to market-oriented hospital reforms have helped to counter institutional weakness in cases including Germany (Greer, 2008) and England (Auffenberg et al, 2016). Intuitively, meaning of work conflicts could support these strategies; disputes over pay and conditions, for instance, may command greater public support if, by extension, they threaten staff's capacity to care for patients as they would wish. The recent NHS Junior Doctors' dispute played on this theme, with one spokesperson arguing in a television interview¹ that-

¹ Available to view at the following link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VbrHp5Jjlzo> (accessed 12 February 2016)

‘As it happens, I’m not terribly interested in the pay issue here. What I care about is my patients’ safety and the ways in which I believe his contract will case my patients’ safety to be jeopardised... It’s my duty as a doctor to protect my patients from this contract’

It appears that the strikers were moderately successful in garnering public sympathy (BBC, 2016), even if this did not help them defeat government proposals. It may prove more difficult for creative industry workers to use these frames, since their intrinsic motivations are more easily dismissed as individualistic or even self-indulgent (Dean, 2012), limiting the potential of appeals to external solidarity.

Other factors may also influence unions’ engagement with meaning of work issues, though lacking extensive literature the discussion at this stage is necessarily speculative. The porosity of the labour market in creative work may be important, particularly when combined with the transient nature of jobs and disparate employer relationships. Many creative workers are only partially-integrated into the labour market; in other words, they pursue jobs in film (Hesmondhalgh and Percival, 2014) or music (Umney and Kretsos, 2014) while holding down other sources of income elsewhere. The existence of these ‘safety nets’ might conceivably give workers greater scope to reject one-off jobs perceived as insufficiently ‘meaningful’, defusing the potential for meaning of work conflicts.

Below, we examine how unions engage with, and are influenced by, meaning of work conflicts in these two sectors. The differences between the comparators gives the research an exploratory focus, considering how unions intervene in two radically different contexts and using these insights to generate questions for future research. The two sectors are examined in England and France. In each industry there are important national contextual differences that will be elaborated in the empirical sections. While these differences have some effect, the sectoral environments prove most important in explaining the form taken by meaning of work conflicts.

Methods

This paper collates data from three interconnected research projects which, combined, enabled examination of meaning of work conflicts in the music and healthcare sectors in France and England. An appendix lists the dates and participant breakdown of each study more precisely. The first study investigated freelance jazz musicians in London. It was conducted between December 2011 and December 2012, involving in-depth qualitative interviews with 30 participants, as well as three key informants in the British Musicians’ Union (MU). This project mapped the diverse work interviewees undertook, examining the labour processes and working conditions involved, and attitudes towards union representation. Sampling followed a ‘snowball’ model, encompassing workers pursuing complex ‘portfolio’ careers typically involving sequences of short-term engagements with a disparate network of employers.

The French side of the musicians’ data was gathered between January 2014 and April 2015, after the original London research was integrated into an expanded comparative research project funded by the European Research Council (ERC). 20 participants were interviewed, following sampling methods transposed from the London case. We were not able to gain access to French trade unionists, but questioned our participants extensively on experiences of, and attitudes towards, musicians’ trade unionism.

The data on French hospitals was collected between January 2014 and April 2016, through the same ERC-funded study. Data gathering involved key informant interviews with 30 participants including trade unionists, public hospital managerial staff, policy-makers, academic experts, and private sector representatives. Interviews focused on policy trends towards increasingly competitive funding models

and their consequences for unions and the front-line labour process. Finally, the dataset was rendered symmetrical by further findings from a third project, part of the second author's PhD research. This project examined campaigns against recent NHS reforms, interviewing 21 participants, mainly drawn from trade unions and public campaign organisations.

All of our data was fully transcribed and coded. Given the fact that the data assembled here is derived from various projects assembled over several years, coding consistency, and its implications for analysis, were an important concern. In the case of the musicians' data, this issue was relatively straightforward. All data was gathered and analysed by the first author, meaning a relatively high level of coding consistency and a set of codes which evolved coherently as soon as the first transcriptions were available. Thus the focus very rapidly shifted to the tension between qualitative attitudes towards the labour process and attitudes towards trade unions, and this remained a recurrent theme through all fifty interviews.

The hospital sector interviews were more complex, being conducted independently by the first and second authors. The initial insight for this paper came when the first author noticed a parallel between hospital (French only) and musicians (French and English) datasets: in each case, the union role appeared to be closely shaped by workers' qualitative attitudes towards the meaning of work. This observation led to more extensive rereading of these datasets and then to the engagement of the second author who, at this time, was conducting qualitative research with trade unionists in the NHS. We discussed the first author's observations, and identified comparable patterns in the NHS data. This led to further adaptations in the second author's interview strategy to elucidate these themes further, as well as further discussions between the authors to ensure key terms were understood and represented consistently.

Freelance musicians

Freelance musicians have limited power resources. They interact with disparate employers in highly informal conditions, often under intense competition from passion-driven part-timers as well as full-time professionals. As 'creative' workers they have limited external legitimacy, since their work is commonly associated with individual passion over public need (Dean, 2012). Moreover, the fact that they typically transact with a diverse range of employers, each offering different balances between meaning and remuneration (Author A, 2014) means there is rarely a coherent managerial agency driving labour process changes over time.

British and French interviews revealed an inverse relationship between workers' intrinsic motivations and expectations of material reward. Where jobs afforded little scope to pursue artistic objectives, workers were more assertive in expecting particular pay and conditions. Where labour processes were less regulated, expected fees could plummet (see Author A, 2014, for a fuller discussion). Since labour markets were structured through disparate one-off engagements, meaning of work conflicts were generally engaged *before* musicians entered each workplace. Meaningful work and materially rewarding work were undoubtedly in tension and often perceived as mutually exclusive. However, individuals traded these factors against each other on a case-by-case basis, looking to strike a balance. Thus meaning of work conflicts were negotiated in highly personalised ways through individuals' career planning.

This renders workers' intrinsic motivations a serious problem for unions for two reasons. Firstly, because workers could be fatalistic about working conditions on 'meaningful' jobs. Secondly, because balanced portfolios were negotiated in highly personal ways, workers often rejected union attempts to regulate pay as unwarranted interference. In this scenario, the meaning of work conflict is more

pronounced between workers and unions than between workers and employers. One French interviewee (interview, French pianist) put this pointedly, suggesting that the opportunity to pursue work (for whatever price) was a gift in itself: "In jazz, we never really have conflict with an employer... you are happy when you are engaged [to work] even if you aren't well-paid". Certain employers would allow less scope to pursue creative objectives than others, but this was typically understood in advance and was reflected in higher fee demands.

In Britain, the openness of the MU's structure was a further complicating factor, reflecting the porosity of the musicians' labour market. The union has virtually no membership restrictions except that applicants should undertake some form of paid music work. The implications of this are shown by one official, via a comparison with the Professional Footballers' Association (PFA):

'You're either on the books with a contract of a football club, or you're not... that's [the PFA's] criteria... For us, it's not that straight forward... If you go out there and talk to ten people on the street, [and ask if they are a musician]... two of them, maybe three, will say yes. "Are you off to do a gig now?" "No"... "But I am about to do a recording", "writing new material", "just left a band but I wish I hadn't", "hoping to pick it up again"... That makes it incredibly difficult for us because you're trying to influence this shifting mass of people... A girl might be working at Waitrose today and doing a gig at Pizza Express next week- if we catch her the week she's working at Waitrose, that doesn't mean she's not a musician'

This openness raises the image of the union organiser as cat herder (a metaphor used by the same interviewee). Even setting aside the trade-offs made by full-time professionals, there is an unquantifiable constituency of people who are partially integrated into the musicians' labour market, whose *only* concern was pursuing an intrinsic motivation to play music. This multiplicity of motivations in both Britain and France presents fundamental problems when trying to galvanise collective demands.

The British MU has sought new strategies to address this problem. Most obviously, it has recruited freelancers through an 'almost consumerist' servicing model (interview, national official), providing discounted insurance, legal services and career-support events. However, it has also tried to conduct campaigns over pay, albeit in a highly specific manner reflecting the unreliability of mobilising workers themselves. Its flagship 'Work Not Play' campaign (WNP) aims to 'name and shame' employers who offer low pay, hoping to raise awareness among musicians of the necessity of thinking critically about pricing. For its targets, the campaign relies on workers having the awareness and assertiveness to report such instances; as such, the model is inevitably highly voluntaristic in tone:

'I think [it's] down to the individual's personal politics. But I think what's key here is that people can choose to work for free. What we're saying is that it should be their choice. That's the message... They may well do ten paid gigs and then say "let's do the eleventh for nothing, because that's the one that could really crack it for us". I wouldn't necessarily recommend that, but what we're saying is that that's the artist's choice.' (interview, national official)

The likelihood of musicians buying into this campaign is threatened by worker pursuit of meaningful work, and the structure of the labour market which necessitates individualised 'balancing acts' between meaningful and well-remunerated jobs. For this reason, there is a recognition underpinning the WNP campaign that its primary 'audience' is not actually musicians. As one official states: 'let's put it bluntly here. What we're trying to do is influence and educate engagers'. Musicians' own reporting is a conduit to reach and pressurise employers, addressing issues of poor pay at source,

without depending on inculcating a coherent set of material expectations among musicians. Thus, the question of the meaning of work is avoided entirely; employers, at least, provide a focal point with negotiable objectives. Hence among British freelance musicians, meaning of work conflicts have driven a wedge between workers and their unions, meaning that the latter vacate this terrain, and instead look to engage directly with other actors.

In France, as mentioned, we did not obtain data from trade union officials, but our musician interviews revealed insights into how unions were perceived by workers. The important contextual difference is the existence of the *intermittents du spectacle* system; a social insurance institution specifically adapted for arts workers, which has no equivalent in England. This system, and the austerity-driven threats to it, provide a focal point for union action that does not exist elsewhere (Proust, 2010; Bodnar, 2006). However, our interviews with French freelance musicians revealed scepticism about the union role in coordinating these initiatives (author A, 2016). Only two musicians were union members: one because of administrative support provided in negotiating *intermittence*-related bureaucracy, and one (for one participant with strong left-wing beliefs) because of a sense of political duty. One participant, who was not a union member, nonetheless supported their mobilisations against threats to the *intermittence* system, but favoured more informal discussion as a means to make his point:

“What we have to do, *musiciens intermittents*, is inform people. Most people don’t know how the *intermittents du spectacle* system works. The majority are only informed by the media and the media doesn’t tell the truth about the system. And us, our role, is to inform people so they understand how it works. The system is not as *deficitaire* as we are told and it is even coming to be viable itself... to be unionised or not matters little. To inform people of our day-to-day and how the statute works, that’s important” (interview, French bassist)

While this indicates a political awareness that was arguably slightly more elevated than in the UK owing to contestation of *intermittence*, it is therefore striking that this political awareness tended to be expressed in what one interviewee described as a more ‘underground’ way: she pointedly argued that jazz musicians, herself included, would attend demonstrations or sign petitions but would not attend a union meeting. The fact that musician participants resisted perceived interference in the day-to-day decisions they made about work is important in explaining why union membership rarely went beyond this level. Hence, while institutional differences provided unions with different priorities in both cities, the basic structure of freelance music work meant that meaning of work conflict were blocked terrain for trade unions.

The hospitals sector

Hospital workers are situated very differently from freelance musicians. They are more likely to be employed continuously by one organisation, with less scope for competition with peripheral labour market participants. Intuitively, they appear to have greater scope for external legitimacy given the (often literally) life-and-death nature of their work. Moreover, there is a much clearer managerial agency at work compared to music. Both France and England have witnessed significant hospital reforms over the last decade; notably the Health and Social Care Act of 2012 (HSCA) in England which sought to significantly expand the scope for private provision in the NHS, and pushes towards more competitive models of funding in France.

In France, public hospitals have experienced pressure from organisational-level management and directly through government policy. Budget restraints have prompted reductions in the hospital workforce. Between 2000 and 2012, staffing levels in French healthcare lagged behind those in other OECD countries (OECD, 2015) leading to work intensification for the remaining staff (Audier et al, 2012). The same period has also seen a shift in hospital financing methods towards *Tarifcation à*

l'Activité (T2A), whereby conditions and procedures are associated with standardised costs established at national level. French hospital budgets are now almost entirely determined by the number of procedures they perform following standardised tariffs. This has unleashed pressures to accelerate turnaround times and was blamed by many participants for pushing public service organisations towards a 'mass production' model of health provision (*massification*). In the English NHS, recent decades have seen repeated reorganisations, generally with a view to encouraging greater competition between public and private providers. The HSCA sought to expand private provision through the creation of Clinical Commissioning Groups (CCGs). CCGs comprise mainly General Practitioners alongside some lay members, and are responsible for commissioning and managing service provision, including setting targets and allocating funding.

In both cases, these changes had precipitated growing concerns among hospital workers their labour process. In particular, a recurrent theme was concern that these changes would threaten staff's ability to practice in a manner consistent with their own motivations. In the NHS, accelerated by the HSCA, measuring outcomes has become more and more important for managers, albeit unevenly. While some CCGs appeared willing to find collaborative solutions to patient care others had a more distant approach which was more reliant on imposing managerially-defined processes and targets on staff, particularly around patient contacts and discharges. This depends on how easily quantifiable particular health services are; where this is difficult, staff retained autonomy to design care in a manner they felt matched patient needs. In other cases, workers could find that the targets set by the CCG did not fit their own view of the purpose of the job.

'Our outcomes, I wouldn't see as being the same as theirs. Good patient care and quality to me, is not necessarily what the CCG identifies as good patient care. [...] They are just looking at numbers and money really as opposed to quality of care. They want more volume. I want to give the M&S of services, they want the Primark, fast and cheap' (interview, NHS Speech and language therapist [SLT])

In response, staff had had to find ways to navigate the conflict between management demands and professional ethics. In dealing with her own targets, one healthcare professional said:

'You find ways to work around it don't you, you fit your priorities in. [...] You were literally going through the motions to make it work. Tick the box...it was a meaningless exercise. It took a lot of time, it was very time consuming and took you away from patients for a meaningless exercise because someone decided that was what was good for that' (interview, SLT)

There was also a growing sense that playing along with bureaucratic demands is necessary to preserve jobs in a context of scarce funding.

'It would take me 30-45 minutes every day to do the reporting... go in a slow system, click a whole bunch of buttons, look for the activity that we were doing... And 45 minutes, that's one patient that I would see less in a day. But it's all about protecting yourself because someone will come around and say 'you have 4 nurses but you're doing the equivalent work of 2 nurses, so you don't need 4' (interview, NHS Nurse)

In French hospitals, meaning of work conflicts had intensified more obviously, particularly following T2A. By marginalising the unquantifiable aspects of healthcare, T2A conflicts with the public service sensibilities of public hospital participants. Interviewees spoke about a *privatisation de l'esprit*: the sense that management discourse in public hospitals had internalised, and was propagating, the cost-effectiveness rhetoric of the private sector.

‘We are saying to public hospital doctors, you should do your job badly... It’s a culture, it’s in the head... We don’t force them to do it but we say to them... “a birth is three days. If you retain someone four days, we are in deficit, the service is in deficit”... That’s the marketisation of hospitals. All the rules come from the private sector, from enterprise’ (interview, health economist)

While interviews did not uncover widespread managerial enforcement of this logic of ‘*massification*’, this was something that concerned participants greatly. As in the NHS, techniques such as performance-related pay and other ‘individualising’ incentives are highly limited, notably through centralised regulation of *fonctionnaire* working conditions and career progression. Nonetheless, an interviewee from the union *SUD Santé-Sociaux* was worried about initial steps in this direction:

‘We are not penalised individually. Not yet. Today, we are not told that “you have spent too much time with a patient, so you have been less efficient, so we’ll hold back some of your salary”... But it’s not out of the question that we’ll get there. There are already measures in place that go towards that logic- for example the *prime au merit*... There are *primes* [bonuses] which are allocated to us twice a year... So that is an entry point towards a more generalised system of meritocracy... [Secondly, we] have an annual interview with our line manager, with whom we discuss how well we’re integrating into the team, what place we have taken, we summarise also the work we have done... More and more, in these meetings, we have individualised objectives... And one feels all of a sudden responsabilised’

How have unions responded to these emerging meaning of work conflicts? This differed in each country, but in both cases unions increasingly saw them as areas for intervention. In France, as we have seen, workers have been historically resistant to unions, perceiving them as a threat to their intrinsic motivation to care for patients. However, in the wake of work intensification and perceived *massification*, unions have increasingly sought to emphasise care quality in their discourse (Vincent and Volovitch, 2003). In this sense, T2A and related reforms have been a source of ‘fuel’ for them (Sainsaulieu, 2008). A national CGT official, when asked to summarise his organisation’s campaigning objectives, made this explicit:

‘We consider that we are not *producteurs du soin* [‘manufacturers of care’]. The logic is that the hospital is a business producing health care. We say that it doesn’t work like that. The taking care of patients is very complex. It’s not just technique, and the more the population ages, the less it’s about technique... It’s time, it’s words- when we reassure the person and explain their illness, or explain their treatment... Because that time, in the *chemin productiviste* [‘productivist pathway’] that we face today, that doesn’t exist. It considers it as time lost... So what we trade unionists are demanding now is: return the meaning to work. Work in teams... and above all, value human relationships with patients... Voila. Today, people are worn out. They no longer find meaning in their work.’

In principle, this reveals a very different relationship between unions and meaning of work conflicts compared to the musicians’ case. Unions are beginning to see the latter as a battleground which can help them gain external legitimacy and build alliances. It fits neatly with emerging organisational methods such as the ‘defence committee’, where unions collaborate with journalists and public campaigners to centralise the wellbeing of ‘*le malade*’ in campaigning against hospital restructurings (Vincent and Volovitch, 2003). Such frames play on the juxtaposition between the caring motivations of staff and government and managerial agendas. However, contextual factors may reduce the impact of these frames in ‘street level’ action. Most French hospital worker mobilisations place them alongside other sections of the *fonction publique*, all of which is suffering a long-running pay freeze,

and hospital-specific messages may become submerged. Note that management strategies designed to re-shape worker incentives remain relatively under-developed in French hospitals. As they progress, meaning of work conflicts may move closer to centre stage in union campaigning.

In England, meaning of work conflicts have been picked up in a less explicit and more *ad hoc* way. While New Labour made attempts to proliferate partnership agreements and social dialogue in the NHS, unions have little institutional voice in the CCGs established by the HSCA. Consequently, they have sought to mobilise in national anti-privatisation campaigns, some of which were begun by unions themselves (such as *NHS Together*) and some by grassroots campaigners (such as *Keep Our NHS Public*). In the words of one trade union interviewee:

‘We did everything we could in terms of legal things, a lot of money into fighting it, did a lot of political work, social media things, there was even the *Andrew Lansley rap* which brought it down to pretty puerile levels, anything to popularise it, because that was the big thing; that it was being done under the radar’

Whereas French trade unionists were explicit about the meaning of work, in England these themes were used in more improvisatory fashion, to lend external legitimacy to their campaigns and thus build alliances. The juxtaposition between creeping public-private competition and the public service ethos of staff was important. Professional associations in healthcare such as the Royal Colleges have historically been more apolitical than unions, with whom they have had a tense relationship. However, these groups have voiced strong opposition to the HSCA reforms and this lent weight to trade unions’ arguments. Trade unionists describe fighting against the government to persuade these kinds of organisation:

‘There was... a big rush with the Royal Colleges, it was all but two of them that signed this joint letter to Cameron, saying that the bill needed to go. Then [two of them] pulled out. There was a lot of phone calls from the department of health saying not to do it and they backed away at the last minute’ (interview, national union official)

The implicit association between worsening material terms and the professional objectives of staff has, in some cases, led the traditionally non-militant Royal Colleges to build closer links with unions and indeed take industrial action. The RCM went on strike for the first time in its 133-year history in 2014. For organisers in this organisation, working conditions and the quality of service provision were inseparable:

‘We... see our role as campaigning for the best quality services for women and families, so I think we’ve always taken an approach that the best services are those that listen to women and try to meet their needs, but also engage and motivate midwives and treat them fairly. So we take a very rounded approach to things. So the perception is not that we are not just a trade union, we’re not just about members’ pay, we are about the services too’

Hence there were tensions and possibilities for negotiation throughout the process of building opposition to HSCA and subsequent local privatisations. Professional organisations have a more deeply-embedded concern with qualitative elements of service provision than unions, and for this reason they could mistrust the latter. However, the implications of the HSCA and creeping privatisation created scope for closer relationships.

Our interviews suggested that, in this sense, unions engaging with meaning of work conflicts was less a strategic choice, and more a learned campaigning tactic, as they sought to build links with new actors. Local-level mobilisations against privatisations remain difficult for English hospital unions,

partly due to fatigue among activists and fear of management reprisals. Consequently, public campaigns have tended to outstrip unions in terms of innovative mobilisations, with local activists playing an important (and in many cases successful) role in trying to stop private providers taking over various health services. The relations between unions and campaigning groups have sometimes been strained, particularly if the former are reluctant to become too heavily involved in mobilisations that might have workplace repercussions. This constitutes a limit on the use of meaning of work frames in current English hospital trade unionism.

In both the English and French cases unions, in some form, were referring to the meaning of work. This was possible because in both countries there was a clear agency imposing changes that would affect the labour process and thus exacerbate meaning of work conflicts, upon which unions could capitalise to gain legitimacy. In both cases this agency was government, the ultimate employer of public hospital workers. However, it was also manifested in a more pointed concern with new management techniques in France, which may explain why the meaning of work was highlighted more explicitly by union organisers. The final section considers what conclusions may be drawn from these observations.

Discussion and conclusion

Our initial discussion posed two questions. Firstly, how can unions engage in meaning of work conflicts? Secondly, how does the form taken by meaning of work conflicts affect unions' roles? There are clear differences between the sectors. Among musicians, meaning of conflicts were more pronounced between workers and their union than between workers and their employer. Consequently, unions sought to shift the terrain entirely, towards 'engaging the engagers'. By contrast, among hospital workers, unions saw meaning of work conflicts as a potential source of legitimacy and emerging area of intervention. What explains these contrasts?

One explanation may be that the opportunities provided by centralising meaning of work conflicts are higher for hospital workers, since their intrinsic motivations intuitively appear to have more scope for generating public sympathy than musicians'. This explanation has commonalities with the argument that unions should engage more widely: the need to expand 'external solidarity' (Levesque and Murray, 2005; 2013) and 'external legitimacy' (Dufour and Hege, 2010), thus aligning the union's cause more closely with the interests of the wider community (Holgate, 2015; Wills and Simms, 2004). Existing literature does suggest that community campaigns are a hopeful avenue for hospital workers opposing privatisation or managerialism (Greer, 2008; Auffmanberg et al, 2016). In furthering these efforts, the apparent resonance of meaning of work frames in relation to hospital unions may be a powerful potential advantage that creative worker unions do not have. As such it is not surprising that hospital unions in our cases sought to capitalise on this, even if this took uneven forms in practice. However, this is only part of the explanation. It affects the ease or difficulty with which these frames can be employed, but does not explain a deeper-lying difference: whether or not the meaning of work is actually a battleground unions can enter in the first instance.

In this respect, a more critical difference between the cases was the structure and agency of employers. In hospitals, workers' conditions were ultimately determined by an actor with whom they were employed continuously (i.e. the state), whose policies were imposing changes affecting the labour process and intensifying meaning of work conflicts. This was not the case with freelance musicians. Each freelancer interacts with many employers, and participants generally felt they knew *in advance* which kinds of engagement would afford more scope to pursue creative objectives, and which would afford fewer. As soon as this *a priori* knowledge exists, meaning of work conflicts are removed from the workplace and enter the realm of individuals' career-planning decisions. Combined

with the fact that workers could be highly fatalistic about conditions in jobs which did satisfy their intrinsic motivations, it is clear that the pursuit of meaningful work seals off large sections of the labour market from union influence beyond service provision. While existing literature is well aware of the difficulties of organising freelance creative workers (e.g. Heery et al, 2004; Gill, 2002), the extent to which meaning of work conflicts can create barriers between workers and unions merits greater acknowledgement.

A further factor is the porosity of the musicians' labour market and the resulting complexity of motivations among its participants. The constituency of musicians' unions in both countries comprised a significant number of people for whom music's status as an interest outweighed its status as a source of remuneration. This is by no means unique to music; there are unpaid volunteers in many hospitals. The question is one of degrees. The music worker with a regular job elsewhere who may perform live occasionally is a regular fixture in the live music scene to an extent which is unthinkable in medicine. This means that it is not just particular kinds of work that are inherently resistant to union influence, but entire groups of partially-integrated labour market participants. While previous studies (e.g. Hesmondhalgh and Percival, 2014) have noted the importance of hobbyism in creative labour markets, our data casts light on the implications for trade unions.

We view these factors as more important in explaining differences in union engagement in meaning of work conflicts than the perceived legitimacy of workers' intrinsic motivations. This argument has implications that will require testing in future empirical work. It leads us to make predictions about other potential scenarios. Take a hypothetical case of a different kind of music work; orchestral work, where musicians are often retained as regular employees, and which demands regular attendance for rehearsals as well as performances (thus ruling out more casual labour market participants). Our argument suggests that if, in this context, changes were imposed to the labour process (for instance shifting to a more commercialised repertoire) then the relevant union conceivably *could* intervene productively in the resulting meaning of work conflicts. Conversely, we would expect unions representing freelance health workers who shift between a range of clients to experience the same problems in engaging with the meaning of work as the musicians' unions described above. It is here that we locate our key conceptual contribution: meaning of work conflicts are not just a normative question. Rather, they reflect the intersection between normative ideas and material circumstance. The most important conceptual idea presented here, which should form the starting point for any future investigations into unions and the meaning of work, is this connection between employer agency and the labour process. We venture that, in other circumstances, the key factor which can enable or prevent unions engaging in meaning of work conflicts is the extent to which deleterious changes to the labour process are imposed by an identifiable employer agency.

Hence, in response to the second question identified above, it is clear that where workers encounter a complex combination of employers, and where the pursuit of meaningful work is an important factor in influencing their labour market choices, meaning of work conflicts will be blocked frontiers for unions. Instead, their action is likely to be pushed towards either service provision or attempts to engage other targets, such as employers. Where these conflicts are imposed by a continuous employer, unions have greater scope to intervene; indeed, they should prioritise doing so if they are to be successful in mobilising members in highly 'meaningful' jobs such as those in public service. This is likely to become more important as austerity pressures increase, and this raises an important question to be addressed in future empirical work: how can unions be more proactive and effective in centralising meaning of work discourses in their campaigning?

Understanding meaning of work conflicts is important for understanding trade unions generally. The way these conflicts play out can have important implications for the strategies unions pursue. They

can also, potentially, be an object of union agency, if the conditions are appropriate. Hence, unions have to find ways of drawing links between worsening conditions and meaning of work conflicts. This will likely be an increasingly important task under austerity pressures, particularly in counteracting inevitable attempts by conservative voices in the media to prise public support away from workers in the event of disputes (see, for instance, the *Sun* newspaper's notorious 'Moet medics' attack on NHS junior doctors' leaders) (*Sun*, 2016). Consequently, trade union-sympathetic researchers should consider more closely how material trade union concerns can intersect with supposedly intangible questions concerning the meaning of work.

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Appendix

There are four separate studies informing this research.

Study one: UK musicians	Interviewees	Frequency
First wave: December 2011-December 2012	Freelance musicians working in London	30
Follow-ups: January-May 2014	Key informants in the Musicians' Union	3

Study two: French musicians	Interviewees	Frequency
One wave: January 2014- April 2015	Freelance musicians working in Paris	20

Study three: English NHS	Interviewees	Frequency
First wave: April 2015 - December 2015	Trade unionists	7
	Healthcare activists	8
	NHS management	2
Second wave: September 2016 - November 2016	NHS employees	2
	NHS activists	2
Follow ups – September 2016	Key informants in trade unions and NHS campaigning	2

Study four: French hospitals	Interviewees	Frequency
Interviews conducted in Paris by first author: January 2014-April 2015	Academic experts	4
	Trade union representatives	2
	Private sector representatives	1
	Public policymakers and policy advisors	2
	Hospital managers and senior practitioners	2
Interviews conducted in Marseille by both authors; January 2016-April 2016	Trade unionists	2
	Senior managers in public hospitals	1
	Senior managers in private hospitals	1
Interviews conducted in Nice, Corsica, Marseille and Paris by second author, (January 2016-May 2016)	Trade unionists	11
	Senior managers in Public hospitals	1
	Academic experts	1
	Political representatives	1
	Public policymakers and policy advisors	1

