

Beyond mobilisation at McDonald's: Towards networked organising

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Beyond mobilisation at McDonald's: Towards networked organising

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journals.sagepub.com/home/cnc**Alex J Wood**

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Abstract

This article uses McAlevey's mobilising/organising dichotomy to analyse the recent McDonald's mobilisation in Britain. It argues that this movement has had some impressive successes but building on these requires greater organising activities. However, conventional union organising techniques are unlikely to be successful in hospitality. Instead, the approach of another low-wage worker movement *OUR Walmart* demonstrates how social media can be used not only to benefit mobilising activities but to enable organising beyond the workplace.

Keywords

Fight for \$15, MacDonald's, mobilisation, organising, OUR Walmart, protest, social media, union renewal

Introduction

In September 2017, McDonald's faced its first ever strike action in Britain. The *#McStrike* came to fruition following votes in favour of the Bakers, Food and Allied Workers Union's (BFAWU) call for industrial action at two McDonald's restaurants. The movement which developed out of this strike resembles, and is inspired by, the Service Employees International Union's (SEIU) *Fight for \$15* in the United States (Cant 2018; Cant & Woodcock 2019). However, *Fight for \$15* proved extremely resource intensive and has been heavily criticised for ignoring worker organising (Dencik & Wilkin 2015; McAlevey 2015, 2016). In light of these issues, how should we understand Britain's *#McStrike*? This article seeks to answer this question by reflecting on the author's participant observation of three fast food worker protests (two in Britain and one in the United

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States) and 6 weeks of participant observation of organising by Walmart workers in California. It combines these ethnographic reflections with an indicative media analysis of #McStrike in order to argue that if this movement is to build on its mobilising success, it must learn from another US labour campaign, 'OUR Walmart' (Wood 2015). This tale of two union campaigns highlights how, unlike *Fight for \$15*, OUR Walmart used social media not only to enhance mobilising activity but also for organising. In particular, social media provided a crucial means for worker organising beyond the workplace and which could help overcome employer hostility and worker fragmentation. To fully understand #McStrike and analyse its potential requires that we first understand the *Fight for \$15* movement in the United States which directly inspired it.

The Fight for \$15

On 30 November 2012, around 200 New York City fast food workers from McDonald's and Burger King went on strike demanding US\$15 per hour, a raise of around US\$7, and the right to form a union (Dencik & Wilkin 2015; Pasquier & Wood 2018). The success of this mobilisation can be seen in the role it played in the adoption of a higher US\$15 per hour minimum wage in Seattle, California and New York (Pasquier & Wood 2018). The campaign began earlier that year when SEIU, the second-largest US union with around two million members, formed an alliance with the community organisation, New York Communities for Change (NYCC). With the SEIU's backing, NYCC proceeded to make contact with fast food workers and their communities. In alliance with other community and faith groups, NYCC and SEIU created 'Fast Food Forward' as the New York City chapter of what would soon become a wider national movement. These other local chapters took action in major cities during the first half of 2013, building up to a coordinated day of action across 60 cities on 29 August 2013, and a similar day of action on 5 December 2013 (Dencik & Wilkin 2015). This last action included a coordinated strike across 100 cities and culminated in a large evening rally in New York City (observed by the author) which drew together hundreds of supporters from the labour movement, community and faith organisations and dozens of workers. Since 2013, numerous larger national one-day strikes have followed (Dencik & Wilkin 2015), including a demonstration by more than 500 fast food workers and 1500 supporters at McDonald's headquarters in May 2014, which led to the arrest of 101 McDonald's workers and 38 community supporters (Rushe 2014).

This mobilisation gained significant traditional media coverage from leading US outlets such as *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* (Dencik & Wilkin 2015). Moreover, Pasquier and Wood (2018) argued social media amplified these offline actions and facilitated the building of online coalitions with movements such as *Occupy Wall Street* and *Black Lives Matter*. As a consequence, *Fight for \$15* has more than 300,000 Facebook likes and more than 50,000 Twitter followers. Social media requires each individual to participate in the broadcasting of the message. Castells (2012) refers to this as 'mass self-communication' – making social media well suited to highlighting highly personalised individual worker testimonies. Therefore, the heavy use of social media by *Fight for \$15* coupled with professional community organisers, while keeping the union offstage, significantly increased the legitimacy of the mobilisation in the eyes of the

public, media and policymakers (Pasquier & Wood 2018). Despite its central role, SIEU was able to remain in the background, meaning that the protests appeared far more grassroots and worker-led than they were in reality (Dencik & Wilkin 2015).

The SEIU and its discontents

The *Fight for \$15* campaign has been undeniably successful at raising the issue of low wages in the hospitality industry, building support for higher minimum wages and raising awareness of unions among young workers (Pasquier & Wood 2018). However, these successes have come at a heavy financial price. In 2014 alone, SEIU spent US\$24 million on the campaign (Layne & Baertlein 2015). This is clearly a very large sum to spend on activities not resulting in union recognition at a single workplace. That it was necessary for SEIU to spend so much also raises questions as to how genuinely grassroots and worker-led the campaign really was. Unsurprisingly, the campaign is not without its critics – including McAlevey (2015) who argued: ‘The problem is that there isn’t any depth to the *Fight for \$15* campaign. We call it the Berlin Rosen [a PR company] campaign: one hot-shot media firm that’s gotten something like US\$50 to US\$70 million from SEIU to paint, through social media, the illusion of a huge movement’. This critique builds upon McAlevey’s wider disillusionment with the strategy pursued by the SEIU leadership since the mid-1990s. She illustrates her criticism by drawing a distinction between ‘shallow mobilising’ and ‘deep organising’ (McAlevey 2016). Shallow mobilising entails professional staff attempting to motivate large numbers of people to engage in a campaign. However, those who join the campaign are often the same activists who can always be counted on to turn up at every protest and meeting, but who are incapable of building support among their wider colleagues or communities. What matters in this mobilising model is simply having sufficient numbers ‘for a photo good enough to tweet or maybe generate earned media’ (McAlevey 2016: 10) and thus disempowers workers because it relies on professional organisers who make the key decisions, with little grassroots accountability. Thus workers, such as those engaged in *Fight for \$15*, are confined to play only a symbolic role as ‘authentic messengers’ managed by PR professionals. She contends that mobilising in this way can only ever win low-cost victories as it constitutes little more than ‘pretend power’ (McAlevey 2016).

In contrast, she outlined how organising activities focus on expanding the number of people involved in a campaign who were not previously engaged, and who would not normally consider themselves to be activists. This model is derived from the activities of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) in the 1930s and focuses upon building mass collective organisations through identifying and growing the skills of organic leaders. Organic leaders are the key influencers in a workplace – these people are able to draw on their social networks in the workplace and community to expand participation until mass action, such as majority strikes, becomes possible, drawing on a high level of support from the workers’ own community in a manner which is impossible for professional external organisers to replicate. Similar criticisms of *Fight for \$15* have been made by Dencik and Wilkin (2015: 149, 160), who suggested it was little more than a tightly controlled PR ‘march on the media’ and that ‘if practices of social media become . . . increasingly important . . . but are primarily

concerned with visibility and advocacy, this tends to favour fast and short-term actions of spectacle and risks neglecting the solid relationships that are necessary to sustain any campaign or organising drive over time'. McAlevey (2014, 2016) provided a number of convincing case studies in healthcare, education and food manufacturing of the benefits of the organising model. She has little doubt that mobilising campaigns such as *Fight for \$15* build 'little real power . . . it is not a life altering change, and the process develops few real worker leaders' (McAlevey 2016: 65). In light of these criticisms of *Fight for \$15* and SEIU's 'mobilising model', how should Britain's #McStrike be understood?

#McStrike

Press reports suggest around 40 workers in Cambridge and London took part in the first #McStrike (Khomami 2017). This first strike was organised in response to dissatisfaction with the McDonald's grievance procedure (Press Association 2017) and, in particular, the prevalence of 'flexible discipline' (Wood 2018). Flexible discipline enabled managers to informally punish workers simply by arbitrarily cutting the workers' scheduled hours (Kollewe & Slawson 2017). The schedule insecurity entailed by flexible discipline is a considerable source of distress and suffering for workers (Wood & Burchell 2018). The resultant strike action sparked by flexible discipline led to significant nationwide demonstrations with more than 100 supporters protesting outside McDonald's headquarters in London on the preceding Saturday (Kollewe & Slawson 2017). Despite the mobilisation having been generated out of workplace discontent regarding managerial discipline, the campaign quickly adopted a more conventional headline demand of '£10 per hour and a union'. On the day of the strike, approximately 200 supporters, including the Shadow Chancellor, John McDonnell, held a rally outside Parliament (Khomami 2017). Moreover, with the support of the left-wing campaign group, Momentum, dozens of protests were held across Britain. For example, in Oxford, I observed how the local Momentum group joined with the Oxford Living Wage Campaign to organise a rally and leafleting outside the city centre's McDonald's restaurant. However, worker participation in these activities proved minimal. The campaign was, however, extremely successful at gaining both traditional and social media traction. For example, just 40 workers out of a workforce of 115,000 went on strike for a single shift but managed to generate more than 5,000 words of coverage across seven articles in Britain's main liberal newspaper, *The Guardian*, over a 3-week period between 18 August and 8 September 2017. The strike also went viral on social media. For instance, a video produced by Momentum, entitled 'Breaking the Silence', was watched more than two million times across Facebook and Twitter. On Twitter alone, more than 6,000 people retweeted or commented on the video and the video was viewed by more than 25,000 Facebook users who list McDonald's as their employer (Elgot 2017). What was remarkable about the impact of this strike was that unlike SEIU in the United States, the BFAWU is a relatively small union, with 18,000 members and an income of just £3 million.

Following this initial strike, in January, McDonald's increased pay at its directly run restaurants and recommended that its franchises did the same (Chapman 2018). A more limited strike and demonstration followed on May Day 2018, before a large-scale day of

action on 4 October 2018 which linked together McDonald's workers with other hospitality workers at Weatherspoons, TGI Fridays and Uber (see also Cant & Woodcock 2019). Again, the action focused on a strike by a limited number of workers in combination with a large demonstration outside a central London McDonald's outlet, in addition to dozens of other local protests. Once more this garnered significant traditional and social media attention. For example, during a 3-week period between 20 September and 4 October 2018, *The Guardian* covered the strike with over 2,000 words across four articles, plus a video posted on its website. To understand these events requires first examining the fast food workers movement in the United States which directly inspired them (Cant 2018; Cant & Woodcock 2019).

Analysing #McStrike

The case studies used by McAlevey (2014, 2016) to construct her argument clearly demonstrate the power unions can build when they focus on organising over mobilising in public services such as healthcare and education. It is important, however, to draw a distinction between the power resources available to core public service workers and those available to workers in hospitality. Workers who provide health and education have the potential for creating significant disruption by withdrawing their labour. A strike in healthcare, for example, would have immediate and serious implications for patients, meaning that employers must take the strike seriously and invest heavily in keeping services running. While the impacts in education are not as immediately serious, strikes, nevertheless, have significant wider economic consequences by requiring workers to stay at home to care for their children (Silver 2003). The main barrier to disruptive strike action by public service workers is their feelings of responsibility towards the public – a fact that employers and the media are all too ready to exploit so as to weaken worker resolve (Miliband 1973). On the other hand, these services are usually aggregated together and provided on mass, meaning that these workplaces are relatively large, and that organic leaders can tap into extensive social networks to grow engagement. As pointed out by McAlevey (2016), many of these workers also have customer-facing roles, which aid the building of community alliances. These workers therefore have potentially high levels of both 'structural economic bargaining power' and 'associational power' (Silver 2003; Wright 2000). For these reasons, healthcare and education tend to be heavily unionised in Europe. Even in Britain, union density is more than 50% in education and more than 40% in health and social work, with similar proportions covered by collective agreements (BIS 2015).

In contrast, hospitality services are provided to consumers on an individual basis and, thus, tend to be relatively small scale and geographically dispersed so that workplace and community social networks are also smaller. These workers additionally lack structural economic power, not holding a strategic location in the social division of labour, or scarce skills which are hard to replace and these workers tend to be drawn from loose labour markets. As Silver (2003) pointed out,

in the fast food industry . . . a strike in just one or a few outlets within a large chain will not interfere with the operation of other outlets in the same chain . . . [Moreover] people will not

starve . . . [as] there are multiple competing alternatives . . . the level of coordination among workers necessary to bring about a general stoppage . . . is very hard to attain. (p. 120)

Given the weak structural economic power of fast food workers, it is hard to imagine how the 'organising model' could ever achieve the kind of economically disruptive majority strikes which are held to be the aim of this approach. Presumably, McAlevey would argue that unions should not waste their time and resources on workers such as these, and instead focus on 'education and healthcare [which] are the strategic sectors' (McAlevey 2016: 203). Certainly, the amounts spent on *Fight for \$15* does raise the question of value for money, but Britain's current McStrike mobilisation has seemingly been much less resource intensive, has won some concessions from the employer while highlighting the issues of low pay and inequality and raising awareness of unions.

Rather than abandoning low-paid hospitality workers, it is necessary to recognise that lacking both structural economic power and associational power, they require access to a different power source if they are to achieve any improvements in their conditions. Chun (2009) demonstrated the importance of symbolic power in manipulating socially accepted concepts and norms in order to legitimise worker struggles. Moreover, Wright and Brown (2013) suggested employers' increasing sensitivity about their public reputations may present an alternative 'opportunity structure' to traditional collective bargaining. Mobilising activities might actually be well suited to this alternative opportunity structure, offering such workers their only means for improving conditions. Therefore, while acknowledging the tremendous importance of organising, there is a danger of throwing the baby out with the bathwater if we consequently abandon mobilising. As can be seen in McAlevey's (2016: 207) research, mobilising techniques are an important source of worker power but as she correctly argues the problem is that these tactics have been converted into a 'model' which denies the importance of organising. There is, however, another US low-wage workers' movement, in retail rather than hospitality, that demonstrates how such workers can effectively undertake organising while simultaneously using mobilising activities to improve their conditions. In 2013, I spent 6 weeks participating in this mobilisation (see: Wood 2015).

Towards networked organising: OUR Walmart

In 2013, the retailer, Walmart, was the world's largest private sector employer and had already defeated numerous unionisation attempts (Lichtenstein 2009). As a result, the United Food and Commercial Workers Union (UFCW) created the 'The Organisation United for Respect at Walmart' (OUR Walmart). The impact of this mobilisation can be seen in the fact that Walmart increased starting pay to US\$10 per hour, improving the pay of more than 500,000 workers. This victory was impressive, given Walmart's historical hostility towards unions and that starting pay had previously stagnated around the minimum wage (Wood 2015). The potential for traditional union organising at Walmart was minimal, as union organisers were routinely expelled from stores and workers feared retaliation even for mentioning unions. This context made it difficult for even the most effective organic leaders to emerge and engage more than a handful of workers. McAlevey (2016: 62) is often dismissive of social media, for example, suggesting that those who

took part in Occupy believed that ‘tweeting about it will generate enough power to bring down Wall Street’. However, it is a mistake to see social media only as a mobilising tool when, in fact, it can also facilitate organising.

Social media provided Walmart workers with a means to connect with each other and union organisers beyond the boundaries of their workplaces. As a result, the 1,000 Californian members of OUR Walmart were dispersed across numerous different stores. It was Facebook groups which provided them with space in which to learn of their similarities and develop a sense of solidarity. Social media provided a means for organic leaders to access social networks when traditional workplace social networks were barred to them due to employer repression. These social media-facilitated networks were used to bring other workers and members of the community into the mobilisation. Social media-facilitated networks are well suited for this purpose as they do not have rigid communicative boundaries and are, thus, organisationally de-centred (Castells 2012). This enables an expansive form of solidarity to develop in which workers can easily learn about mobilisation efforts and begin communicating with their colleagues simply as a result of viewing a post on social media or joining an online group. For example, workers explained how viewing videos on Facebook and YouTube of leaders and actions from other stores was an important factor leading to their own participation.

While professional organisers played a key role in framing work issues as injustices and while it was clear that the UFCW’s professional organisers played an important role in engaging workers, I witnessed how, in California at least, this process was also the outcome of organic and independent communication between workers. It was interaction between workers facilitated by social media that was most influential for the realisation of common work experiences. In fact, the shared identity which developed out of this process coalesced into a class-based notion of exploited low-wage workers (Wood 2015). Again, this is a strength of social media that it enables ‘expansive networking’ in which broad sets of connections form (Castells 2012). I also observed how the union played a vital role in guiding decision-making but at the same time emphasised worker engagement and empowerment. For example, in meetings, union organisers acted as facilitators, who encouraged workers to participate and as a result it was clear that workers found the experience empowering and felt ownership of the mobilisation. I observed how the meetings contrasted with the process-heavy format synonymous with conventional union meetings.

The use of social media to aid organising thus enabled OUR Walmart to overcome barriers to workplace organising through adopting a more network-like form in which the union played the role of ‘orchestrator’ by providing strategic oversight (Arquilla & Ronfeldt 2000; Heckscher & McCarthy 2014). Despite the role of the union and the fact that it was spending millions of dollars supporting the mobilisation, OUR Walmart did not seek to engage in formal collective bargaining or to gain union recognition. In fact, it was widely recognised that Walmart would never accept a union. Walmart had reached market saturation in its traditional markets, and same-store sales had been declining in recent years. The fact that its expansion into metropolitan markets could be delayed or blocked by concerned local authorities (as happened in New York City) presented OUR Walmart with an opportunity structure by which it could apply pressure to Walmart. OUR Walmart, therefore, should not be judged in terms of its structural economic power – that is, the potential to organise disruptive strikes – but rather by the

potential for its direct actions to damage the reputation of Walmart to such an extent that Democrat politicians would block its growth. Mobilising tactics were well suited to this task, and OUR Walmart's networked form was crucial for facilitating reputational damage. High levels of communication can enable networks, guided by orchestrators, to undertake 'swarming' collective action – the strategic pulsing of action from all directions which is particularly effective at causing reputational damage (Arquilla & Ronfeldt 2000; Heckscher & Carré 2006). This swarming meant that a relatively small number of workers stopping work for a single shift created a significant level of media coverage of working conditions at Walmart. This was because social media aggregated the actions undertaken by small workplace groups of around five workers – and sometimes even lone individuals – into a continual stream of connected actions dramatically playing out across the country (Wood 2015).

Conclusion

McAlevy (2014, 2016) provides a powerful and convincing account of the need for unions to engage in organising activities. In strategic sectors where there is potential for workers to leverage both structural economic and associational power, these organising activities can facilitate powerful majority strikes. However, it would be an error to assume that this same approach would be successful in hospitality industries, such as fast food. In this sector, workers lack structural economic power and there are significant barriers to conventional associational power. Reputational damage offers such workers an alternative opportunity structure to traditional collective bargaining. Mobilising activities are well suited to this approach especially when used in combination with social media. That said, McAlevy (2015, 2016) is right to highlight how focusing only on mobilising at the expense of organising is a shortcut to nowhere, given that it does not build worker power and, in fact, disempowers those workers it does engage. In fact, this is precisely what has been reported as taking place in the workplaces involved in the *#McStrike* (Canady 2019). As Wright et al. (2019) argued, there is a danger that unions focus 'exclusively on the more immediate benefits which social media presents for mobilising. Consequently, social media could have the contradictory effect of further reducing union membership, by pulling attention and resources away from organising, even as spectacles of worker collective action seemingly increase' (p. 20). Given the limited resource of BFAWU, it is understandable why it has focused on the immediate gains which social media-facilitated mobilising activities can bring, but to build on the successes which *#McStrike* has already achieved and take the campaign to the next level requires greater organising activity (see also Cant 2018; Cant & Woodcock 2019). OUR Walmart demonstrates that social media can facilitate effective organising in addition to supporting mobilising. However, such activities are resource intensive. The challenge is to find innovative means of funding these organising activities; one potential source is crowdfunding, while in the United States charitable trusts have played an important role in funding worker centres. Another option could be for the Trade Union Congress and larger unions along with charitable trusts to set up a 'Union Renewal R&D Fund' which smaller unions and organisations could apply to for resources on the condition that their activities are independently evaluated to provide lessons for the renewal of the wider labour movement.

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