

## **Making class politics possible: Organising contract cleaners in London**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper tells the story of community and union-led efforts to re-regulate the contract cleaning sector and to organise cleaners at Canary Wharf and in the City of London. It provides a historical overview of the campaign and highlights its innovative responses to subcontracted employment in the city today. The paper starts by outlining anti-essentialist approaches to the politics of class before using the campaign to flesh out what such politics might look like. In this case, the successful prosecution of class politics has depended upon the politics of class moving far beyond any particular workplace. Workplace issues have been recast as matters for the wider community engaging a diverse set of actors including including workers, community organisations, contractors, clients, the media and London's politicians.

### **KEYWORDS**

Anti-essentialist class politics, contract cleaning, subcontracting, living wages, trade union organisation, broad-based organising, intersectionality

### **Introduction**

*The City fat cats are living the high life whilst cleaners are scraping by on poverty wages. It is obscene and unjust, and makes a mockery of the claims of big business that they exercise any corporate responsibility.* Tony Woodley, General Secretary of the Transport and General Workers' Union (T&G)<sup>1</sup> (2007)

The stark divides between rich and poor are nowhere more evident than at Canary Wharf and in the City of London. The well-heeled army of analysts, brokers, dealers and traders do their business in the gleaming tower blocks and offices alongside a supporting cast of low paid caterers, cleaners and security staff. The super-rich and the working poor are in the same buildings and on the same streets – even if they are there at different times of the day or night. Whereas in 2006, the average annual salaries of city professionals exceeded £100,000, the caterers, cleaners and security workers have to survive on just above the minimum wage. White British and foreign-born workers are more likely to be found amongst the well-paid. Black workers, many

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<sup>1</sup> At the time of writing, The Transport and General Workers Union (T&G) was in the process of merging with another large trade union to create a new organisation called UNITE. For the purposes of simplicity, in this paper, the union is referred to as the T&G.

of them recent migrants from the poorest parts of the world, are concentrated in the catering, cleaning and security jobs.

This paper tells the remarkable story of ongoing efforts to re-regulate the contract cleaning sector and to organise the cleaners employed at Canary Wharf and in the City of London. The East End of London is no stranger to innovative labour and community organising efforts. The T&G has its origins in a dispute between dockers and their employers over casualised labour around West India Dock at Canary Wharf in the 1880s and the same union is now behind the cleaners' campaign. Here, it is argued that the story of organising cleaners at Canary Wharf and in the City of London highlights the need to re-think contemporary models of class politics. It further illuminates the growing body of literature that takes an anti-essentialist approach to understanding class politics, showing that while there is nothing inevitable about the relationships between employment/structure, identity/consciousness and political organisation/action, a geographical congruence of political, economic and cultural factors *can* provide the grounds on which it is possible to politicise class.

In this case, the nature of the industry, the politics of the city, the organisation of the wider community, changes in the T&G and the intersections of the cleaners' identities have all proved particularly important. The success of the cleaners' campaign has involved organising the industry, the clients, London's politicians, the media and a diverse alliance of community groups as well as the cleaners themselves. In this case, class politics has travelled far beyond the cleaners who are at the centre of the campaign. The campaign demonstrates that the successful prosecution of class politics is not necessarily dependent upon narrowly defined class identity. Rather, the campaign has been prosecuted by workers and their allies embracing a diversity of actors with interests that include the profit motive, the defence of corporate image, the democratic mandate, the need for a good story, the representation of civil society and the desire for justice.

In what follows, the cleaners' campaign is located in terms of wider academic debate about taking an anti-essentialist approach to understanding class politics. The paper then goes on to explore the impact of neo-liberalism on the conditions and politics of

work in sectors like cleaning. Many commentators have highlighted the way in which neo-liberal policy has, by design and default, amounted to a series of assaults on organised and unorganised workers. Such challenges are exemplified by the impact of privatisation and subcontracting in the cleaning industry and yet despite this, cleaners have emerged as an unlikely vanguard in a transnationalising urban labour movement. Since the celebrated victory of the *Justice for Janitors* campaign, led by the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) in the United States during the 1990s, cleaning has become an important arena for union growth. The paper explores the ways in which the SEIU, its partner trade unions like the T&G and their community-based allies like London Citizens in the UK, have been able to find the means to intervene in this labour market and to organise cleaners. In particular, it explores the ways in which these unions and their community allies have sought to overcome the challenges posed by a neo-liberalising political-economic environment. Such experience points to the importance of developing a carefully grounded and strategic response that embraces sets of interests far beyond those of the workers themselves.

The paper draws on material collected through my active involvement in the London living wage campaign since 2001 together with face-to-face interviews and two focus groups conducted with contract cleaners. Additional interviews have been conducted with cleaning managers, industry experts, trade union officials and community allies. To explain the success of the campaign, the paper focuses on two broad sets of issues identified here as ‘the limits to neo-liberalism’ and ‘intersections with class’. Unions like the SEIU and the T&G, together with the wider living wage movement (Luce, 2004), have begun to identify ways in which they can exploit the vulnerabilities of neo-liberalism and devise new forms of class politics in order to re-regulate the cleaning sector and avoid the deleterious impact of subcontracting and high rates of labour turnover on trade union organisation. The paper does not suggest there are easy solutions to the challenges facing labour organisers or workers in the contemporary political-economic context. However, it is written in order to demonstrate the potential gains to be made by re-thinking class politicisation today.

### **Whatever happened to class?**

Many of the central preoccupations of academics in the humanities and social sciences during the last half-century have involved questions of class. Whereas class

was assumed to be primary in the immediate post-war period, in more recent years, it has been notable for its absence. Indeed, the development of post-structuralist approaches have been counterpoised, at least in part, to the ways in which class was treated in earlier times. The battle to cut class down to size has been a particularly bloody intellectual battlefield (Byrne, 2005). Debate has tended to polarise between those who seek to defend class as an important foundation for political organisation and those who look to replace it – or at least complicate it - with other axes of identity such as ethnicity or gender with all that this implies for political focus and action (and for the debates about this in geography, see Harvey, 1996; Katz, 2006; Smith, 2000; Wright, 2006; Young, 1998).

Post-structuralism has had a devastating impact on classical Marxism and as Wright (2006, 84) explains:

Marx's call for workers of the world to unite appears as a dream-wish. For to assume that different workers share an experience of self based on a common experience of work is to assume there exists not just a knowable subject but also a knowable category of experience that is common across different subjects. Such assumptions are impossible under post-structuralism.

In this context, a number of social scientists have revisited historic examples of apparently class-based collectivism and suggested that what was interpreted as 'organic' working class organisation was, in practice, predicated on other foundations of collectivism such as community relations, institutional resources and powerful political narratives such as trade unionism or socialism (Calhoun, 1982, 1983; Evans and Boyte, 1986; Samuel, 1986; Shorter and Tilly, 1974). Klandermaans (2001, 330) argues that what was read as class politics always depended on other identifications such as loyalty to neighbourhood, the company or a commitment to socialism.

Mike Savage (2000, 2001, 2005) has taken this argument furthest to suggest that class has never been a strong source of collective identity for workers in Britain. He argues that any collective organisation has arisen through the assertion of individual dignity and honour at work. In order to defend their dignity and autonomy as individuals, workers have sometimes organised collectively to protect their skills, defend their wages and resist managerial control. As he puts it:

The collectivism of the working class, which was in certain times and places considerable, depended on the recognition of the dignity and autonomy of individuals (though largely male individuals). This can be powerfully witnessed in the various self-help and mutual aid organisations characteristic of the working class ... and can also be seen in trade union cultures, whose organisation depended on not submerging individual identities into collective organisation through rituals and processes that recognised the role of the individual within the collectivity. (2000, 154)

As such, Savage disputes that a collective class identity necessarily arises from the experience of being at work and he argues that what might appear to be collectivism is actually an expression of individualism. In his recent work that is not grounded in workplace politics, Savage finds that people use class as a reference point to make sense of their relationships to other people but not as an important part of their own identity (Savage *et al.*, 2001). He finds that the vast majority of people do not use class as a way of identifying themselves even though they may use class as a way of addressing the structural inequities of the society at large. Echoing the critiques that have been made of Marxism, this analysis suggests that a politics based on being working class and on identification with other people who are similarly positioned in the economy and society is an unpromising way to proceed.

In this regard, it is important to recognise the role of Marxism in *making* class a significant axis of identity. The institutions of the socialist and labour movement were designed to promote an understanding of class as the central social relationship in capitalist society and the working class as the key agent of change. With the decline in such institutions, this view of class has also declined, and in many ways, class is now seen as a factor explaining de-politicisation and political disengagement in countries like the UK (Pattie *et al.*, 2004). However, in this regard, there is now a growing body of scholarship that seeks to explore the circumstances in which class *can* become an axis of political mobilisation, even if, as Savage suggests, this activity is not experienced or articulated as being a 'classed' act. Scholars working in political theory have gone back to class to address the scope for its politicisation.

As part of wider arguments about anti-essentialist approaches to identity politics, these thinkers have made a critical move to liberate class from any *a priori* assumptions about identity and action. For scholars such as Laclau (1994), anti-essentialism means that class *can* be an important axis of identity and political

organisation but it is not *necessarily* so. Class has to be politicised by deliberate intervention in the battle for hegemony in political life and in these terms, class politics can be thought of as a particular political project. If pursued, such a project would necessarily take different forms in different locale and it is also clear that making class a political project would demand a focus on the processes of identity making rather than the excavation and mobilisation of identities that already exist.

In practice, of course, the historical record attests to the way in which labour organisers were critically important in taking particular forms of class politics – in whatever form – from place to place. Even if the ground was fertile, organisation was generally implanted by organisers who travelled from workplace to workplace, recruiting and organising workers into trade unions (and for historical examples see Charlesworth et al., 1996; Southall, 1988). In addition, those workers who gained trade union experience in one workplace would often take it with them to another, translating political lessons and repertoires of action across space and time (Croucher, 1982; Hobsbawm, 1988; Wills, 1996). As a result of this organisational culture, there were always sharp geographical differences in local labour and trade union cultures and traditions, even in cases where there were strong similarities in the nature of work and the labour process involved (for the coal industry, see Sunley, 1990). Strong differences in working class culture and politics are similarly visible at a cross-national scale, and Lamont (2000) usefully explores these in her comparison of working class identities in the US and France (see also Mann, 1973).

In Laclau's analysis, these particular kinds of political interventions will be more or less likely to provide a point of 'universal connection' to which others can identify. As he explains:

If democracy is possible, it is because the universal has no necessary body and no necessary content; different groups instead, compete between themselves to temporarily give to their particularisms a function of universal representation. Society generates a whole vocabulary of empty signifiers whose temporary signifieds are the result of a political competition. (1996, 35)

Following this line of argument, while labourist traditions (in the trade unions and the Labour Party) did provide a point of universal connection in many communities during the early years of the twentieth century, there has been a sharp move towards

the incommensurability of class politics from the 1970s onwards. Accelerated in the Thatcher years and cemented by the shift to New Labour, trade unions have been confined to the workplace and cast as reactionary and 'special-interest' organisations. Outside a very small leadership cadre, being a trade unionist and/or working class is no longer resonant with a wider political and social movement.

Partly in response to this narrowing of class politics, Gibson-Graham, Resnick and Wolf (2000, 2001) have developed an explicitly anti-essentialist approach to the politics of class, focusing on the *processes* rather than the *structures*, of class. In contrast to those social scientists who retain a commitment to mapping class structure, income, inequality and exploitation at the nexus of employment, this alternative approach develops the Marxist tradition by reading class as a relationship that extends *beyond* the site of exploitation itself. For Gibson-Graham et al. (2000, 2001) it is important to think about class as a set of relationships involved in the production, appropriation and distribution of surplus. In so doing, it is possible to see class and the potential for political agency in and beyond the direct exploitation that take place at work. Rethinking class might facilitate new ways to politicise class and make class politics happen.

Indeed, this focus on surplus brings questions of class to the wider polity (to see the classed nature of such things as taxation and public spending), and the world of investment (including the investment of surplus generated elsewhere in second homes, pension funds, insurance and financial speculation).<sup>2</sup> Such an approach to class is strongly represented in the historical record. In establishing the Labour Party in the early years of the twentieth century, for example, the trade unions were able to act on class issues beyond any particular workplace, reflecting working class identities at work as well as raising issues of community-based social reproduction and the common good. This agenda provided a point of universal connection in British political life for much of the twentieth century (see Hobsbawm, 1996; Wills and Simms, 2004) and while the trade unions retained their focus on working class

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<sup>2</sup> It is interesting that this argument parallels those made by Postone who differentiates between concrete and abstract labour and the social relations embodied in the commodity form. As Castree (1999) suggests, this draws our attention to the classed nature of social domination rather than a narrow focus on class exploitation. It reinforces the heterogeneous nature of class identity and the importance

interests at the point of production, the Labour Party enacted a wider working class agenda around housing, health care, education and public services at local, national and international scales. The Party was both appropriating and distributing the surplus produced by workers either directly through income tax, or indirectly through the taxation of corporate profits, inheritance or capital gains.

In making this intervention, Gibson-Graham et al (2000, 2) thus remind us of what has been lost. They argue that class politics needs to be remade around a new language that can: “retrieve memories and adumbrate possibilities; one that can authorize projects, interpellate subjects, and proliferate identities; one that can connect gender, race, sexuality and other axes of identity to economic activity in uncommon ways.” This argument highlights the extent to which the way in which people think about class shapes popular imaginaries about what is possible. Moreover, there is a political urgency to this process of re-thinking class at a time when class politics is still stuck in the workplace, cocooned in a cultural time-warp created in response to the experience of white male manufacturing workers in jobs that, in Britain at least, no longer exist.

As yet, however, we have few documented examples of this anti-essentialist approach to class politics in action. Debate has been largely theoretical and speculative, and where it has been applied, it is largely to ‘non-capitalist’ political practice (Gibson-Graham, 1997, 2006). We still know very little about the grounds on which successful action around issues of class is possible. Indeed, as Bottero (2004, 996) asks: “Why do explicit class identities, class solidarities and demarcated class boundaries emerge at some times and places and not others?” In the case study presented below, successful class politics is argued to depend upon the trade union, the organised community, the employers, the clients, London’s politicians and the media as well as the complex identities of workers themselves. In relation to London’s living wage campaign, class politics is about the cleaners’ identities in relationship to a wide group of actors with very different interests in the campaign. The case illustrates the potential gains to be made by mobilising around a new political model of class.

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of ‘commonality-in-difference’, an argument that is also relevant to the notion of ‘being-in-common’ as is outlined elsewhere by Gibson-Graham (2006).

### **Neoliberalism's challenge to cleaning, cleaners and trade unions**

Jobs like cleaning are now emblematic of 'bottom end' service work in countries like Britain. The work is poor quality, low paid, without additional benefits (or a 'social wage') and with little chance to secure workplace organisation. It is routine, repetitive, manual work. Recent evidence suggests that there has been a growth of such jobs at the 'bottom end' of the labour market, alongside a faster growth at the top (Goos and Manning, 2003; see also Kaplanis, 2007). Such trends have been particularly pronounced in global cities like London where the concentration of high-paying business, financial, media and creative companies has fuelled demand for more low paid service workers in hospitality, retail and personal services (Sassen, 2001). Recent data shows that such trends are fairly strong (see May et al., 2007) and Kaplanis (2007) finds greater polarisation in London than the rest of the UK. Although those at the bottom of Britain's labour market have benefited from the National Minimum Wage and policies to 'make work pay' through tax credits, these initiatives have failed to prevent workers in poor jobs being at an ever-widening divide from those at the top.

The roll out of neo-liberal policy agendas has fuelled the polarisation of urban labour markets by allowing greater market penetration in sectors like cleaning. In their recent collection of papers on the cleaning industry, for example, Herod and Aguiar (2006) argue that the combined impact of marketisation, privatisation, deregulation, cuts in welfare provision and an assault on collectivism have eroded the wages, conditions and potential power of cleaners. Drawing on examples from locations as diverse as Australia, Canada, Chile, Denmark, New Zealand and South Africa they "examine how neoliberalism is transforming ... [cleaners'] work and worsening their economic position and, frequently, their health" (Herod and Aguiar, 2006, 427).

The twin processes of privatisation and subcontracting merit particular attention in this regard. Privatisation and subcontracting mean that cleaners who used to be employed by large private or public sector organisations that adhered to collective agreements negotiated by trade unions have been thrown to the lions of the market. Moreover, even if they manage to retain union organisation after privatisation or

subcontracting, as is possible under British TUPE<sup>3</sup> regulations, cleaners no longer bargain with the ‘real employer.’ Whereas hospital cleaners were once covered by nationally-agreed terms and conditions with the right to bargain with the National Health Service, for example, privatisation and contracting out means that they have to bargain with their current cleaning contractor rather than the NHS managers who run the facilities in which they work and determine the terms of the contract through which they are employed. Over time, the numbers of workers covered by TUPE inevitably declines relative to new staff employed on inferior terms and conditions of work (a situation that is known as the ‘two-tier workforce’ in the UK), and in this context, union membership is likely to fall (and for an example of this story in London, see Wills, 2008).

The competition associated with every round of re-tendering for contracts puts yet more pressure on the companies involved. Ryan and Herod (2006) report that some firms in Australasia have been willing to make a loss on their contracts if they are able to recoup a small profit from the ‘special services’ they sell to the client or through the sub-subcontracting of work. Moreover, in a labour intensive industry, wages and conditions are the easiest place to make savings, and cleaners have often suffered reductions in pay (see Aguiar, 2006; Bezuidenhout and Fakier, 2006).<sup>4</sup> In addition, subcontracting is also associated with a sharp intensification of work. Fewer cleaners are contracted to do the same amount of work and they have to work harder to get the job done. To reflect this situation Aguiar (2006) uses a case study of subcontracted cleaning services at Simon Fraser University in British Columbia, Canada, to argue that subcontracting has resulted in ‘sweatshop citizenship’ for workers. Whereas cleaning might have provided living wage jobs with minimal ‘industrial citizenship’ in the past, particularly when in the public sector, subcontracting now means that cleaners are in ‘sweatshop’ jobs associated with poverty wages, high levels of personal risk and the increasing intensification of work (see also Allen and Henry, 1997).

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<sup>3</sup> The Transfer of Undertakings Protection of Employment (TUPE) regulations date back to European Directives in 1981. They provide important protection to the wages and conditions of employees when they are transferred from one employer to another, both at the time of initial privatisation and upon any subsequent re-tendering.

<sup>4</sup> It is striking that in the examples given in Herod and Aguiar (2006) workers did not appear to have anything like the TUPE regulations that operate in the UK and the rest of Europe. Workers’ wages and

Privatisation and subcontracting have also made it harder for workers to organise than was often the case in the past. If workers do successfully organise they are likely to price themselves out of the market (Aguilar, 2006; and for related examples from the garment industry see Hale and Wills, 2005). In addition, poor conditions of work stimulate labour turnover and multiple job holding that conspire against the kind of workplace solidarity required for successful unionisation campaigns. Bauman (2001, 48; see also Sennett, 1998) has highlighted the impact of short-termism and high rates of turnover on workplace relationships, arguing that: “The perpetually changing social environment does not unite the sufferers: it splits them and sets them apart. The pains it causes to the individuals do not add up, do not accumulate or condense into a kind of ‘common cause’ which could be pursued more effectively by joining forces and acting in unison.” In this context, workers are more likely to leave than stay to fight in order to try and improve their terms and conditions of work.

In the wider context of economic globalisation and the relocation of manufacturing activities to low cost locations, the implementation of neo-liberal labour market reform has prompted scholars and activists to talk about a “race to the bottom” and a “one-sided class war” (Rachleff, 2006, 462). For most, there is little hope that labour can mount any collective response. Yet remarkably, it is amongst low paid workers in geographically immobile sectors, such as cleaning, care and hospitality, that the US labour movement in particular has made considerable gains in recent years (see Gray, 2004; Milkman, 2000). Immigrant workers in low paid jobs have provided the backbone of a labour resurgence in cities like Los Angeles (Pastor, 2001). New strategies and forms of organisation such as living wage campaigns (Luce, 1994), workers centers (Fine, 2006) and immigrant rights groups have mushroomed across the US (Pulido, 2007). Cleaners have become a new urban vanguard in efforts to renew labour organisation and the SEIU’s *Justice for Janitors* campaign has been particularly influential in this regard (see Savage, 1998; Waldinger, et al., 1998).

Britain has had a longer period of neo-liberalising government and subcontracted employment in the cleaning industry than most other parts of the world. Market

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conditions could be cut with impunity upon contracting out and re-tendering, making it inevitable that wages and benefits would fall over time.

testing was introduced into the NHS as early as 1983, and the Local Government Act introduced compulsory competitive tendering for some services in 1988 (Pinch and Patterson, 2000; Reimer, 1998). Britain now has more than twenty years of experience of privatisation and subcontracting across both the public and private sectors and in this context, it is critical to explore the lessons of campaigns like that led by the SEIU. In London, at least, the campaign to organise cleaners at Canary Wharf and in the City of London is positioned to exploit the emerging limits to neo-liberalising employment regimes. Following a brief introduction to the organising campaign, these ‘limits’ are explored in more detail below.

### **Cleaners as a new urban vanguard?**

In 1971 a group of socialist feminists got together to tackle the poor conditions of employment in London’s cleaning industry. They formed the Night Cleaners’ Campaign and encountered a labour force that in many ways resembles that found today. Their night-time leafleting brought them into contact with women who were working at night so that they could look after their children during the day. Many were newly arrived immigrants from the Caribbean, Greece, Ireland and Spain. Some agreed to support the campaign and provided inspiring leadership, but their efforts ultimately failed to progress. Looking back more than thirty years later, Sheila Rowbothom (2006) highlights their lack of strategic insight into the industry and the unwillingness of the T&G to co-operate as particular problems with the campaign. As she concludes: “In an odd way, our ignorance and inexperience gave us the courage to fight against a system, the power of which we did not comprehend. In our naivety and outrage we stumbled upon something that was far, far bigger than anyone at the time envisaged” (Rowbothom, 2006, 624).

A quarter of a century later, the T&G, now working alongside the SEIU and their allies in the community, has begun to devote the resources necessary to develop the strategy needed to organise cleaners at Canary Wharf and in the City of London. However, this latest phase in the organising effort was also kick-started from outside the trade union movement. Drawing on experience gained from across the Atlantic, and from Baltimore in particular, a local alliance of faith, labour and community organisations called The East London Communities Organisation (TELCO), launched a living wage campaign in 2001 (see Luce, 2004; Schoenberger, 2000; Walsh, 2000;

Wills, 2004). The aim was to secure living wages, improved holiday entitlement, occupational sick pay and union rights for subcontracted workers employed at large public and private sector organisations across the East End. Preliminary research projects established a living wage rate for London (Family Budget Unit, 2001) and explored the terms and conditions of employment for cleaners working in the councils, hospitals, universities, underground system and at Canary Wharf (Wills, 2001). The first targets were the east London hospitals where the campaign joined forces with the public sector trade union UNISON to campaign for improvements in the wages and conditions of cleaners (see Wills, 2004, 2008). In the private sector, and without a trade union presence, the campaign focused on particular high-profile financial services companies at Canary Wharf, demanding that they took responsibility for the staff who kept their premises clean.

Much of the energy was focused on HSBC in the run up to the grand opening of a new 44-storey global headquarters at the site in 2002. Activists made a series of public demands to meet Sir John Bond, the company chairman, protesting at a branch of the bank in Oxford Street and outside the company Annual General Meetings (AGMs) in 2002 and 2003. In early 2004, and following negotiations with TELCO, Barclays Bank announced an improved employment package for the cleaners at their new global headquarters at Canary Wharf and this helped to trigger a similar deal at HSBC. In the event, both towers were to be cleaned by companies paying well above the minimum wage with improved holiday entitlement and sick pay. Even without a union, limited improvements for cleaners were secured in two buildings at the Canary Wharf site.

In addition, TELCO was able to strike a deal for the living wage with the Mayor of London, Ken Livingstone. At a mass meeting involving more than 1000 members of different communities in the run up to the Mayoral elections in 2004, Livingstone agreed to establish a living wage unit and to produce an official annually updated living wage rate (Jamoul, 2006).<sup>5</sup> The publication of an official – albeit non-statutory – living wage rate has since set a new benchmark for wages in London. The urban

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<sup>5</sup> These figures were published as £6.70 in 2005 (GLA, 2005), £7.05 in 2006 (GLA, 2006) and £7.20 in 2007 (GLA, 2007). Although TELCO initiated the living wage campaign in 2001, it has subsequently

polity now has a new lexicon of living wages from which to engage in debate about public policy in relation to the labour market.

This phase of the campaign, and ongoing activities led by TELCO to win improvements in the terms and conditions of cleaners in higher education, the luxury hotel sector and large public galleries demonstrates the potential for community-led efforts to tackle issues of class without trade union involvement. Indeed, as Fine (2005, 187; see also Freeman, 2007) notes in her overview of new forms of community unionism in the US, it is often easier for the community to act than it is for trade unions to establish mass membership organisations at work:

In order to win a public policy issue, a community organization often just needs to mobilize a dedicated minority, but in order to alter the labor market dynamics of a particular sector of the low-wage service economy, a significant number of individual workers and workplaces have to be organized.

In London, TELCO worked with UNISON to secure living wages in the hospitals and laid the groundwork for a subsequent trade union organising campaign at Canary Wharf and in the City of London. Since 2004, the T&G has taken on the difficult task of implanting workplace trade union organisation in London's private sector cleaning industry for the very first time.

Since the election of a new General Secretary in 2004, and subsequent relationship building between the T&G and an internationalising SEIU, the T&G has started to focus on organising new groups of workers (see Anderson et al, 2008). Although the union's efforts to organise cleaners started in a very low key way, with just two organisers dedicated to the task in 2004, the subsequent arrival of SEIU strategists in 2005 prompted the T&G to dramatically step up its campaign. At the time of writing, the union has a team of multi-lingual foreign-born organisers, many of them ex-cleaners from Canary Wharf, to work on the campaign that has since been extended to the City of London. The union has recruited well over 1500 cleaners<sup>6</sup> and signed

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been taken up by the pan-London alliance of which TELCO is part along with sister organisations in South and West London. This body led the Mayoral Campaign and is called London Citizens.

<sup>6</sup> At the time of writing, membership figures were rather uncertain due to the time that it takes to process membership application forms, the difficulty in collecting union dues and the effort needed to keep up with turnover in the sector.

agreements with almost all the leading cleaning contractors that are active at the two sites.

Drawing on the lessons of the SEIU's *Justice for Janitors* campaign, the T&G has broken new ground for the UK by targeting an industry on the basis of its geography – in this case, cleaning at Canary Wharf and in the City of London – rather than progressing workplace-by-workplace, employer-by-employer, as is usually done. The union has tried to secure union organisation and employer agreements across the two areas in what is being called a 'zonal approach'. This is designed to re-calibrate the market and prevent subsequent re-contracting from under-cutting the gains made in any one workplace at any one time. As the T&G's lead organiser explained:

The idea of a zone is that we want all the workers in that zone to understand that they are fighting together. At the moment cleaners on one shift don't even speak to cleaners in the same building on a different shift, never mind the other building that the same company is running down the road. The idea is to build the union on a geographical basis and to go for the same wage rates on a geographical basis as well. Otherwise, say we've got one company who agree to pay the living wage [that] because of their client they manage to get it, they'll be undercut by the ones who are saying "we'll pay the going rate, the market rate." So it has to be every company. T&G lead organiser (interview, 18.1.07)

In developing this zonal strategy, the union has targeted the largest cleaning contractors that look after more than three-quarters of the office space at Canary Wharf and in the City of London. The T&G has signed agreements with companies including ISS, OCS, Mitie and Lancaster that operate when the union has organised more than 55% of the office space in the zone. At Canary Wharf, this means organising enough of the estimated 900 cleaners to prompt their employers to sign agreements and then ensuring that these agreements cover at least 55% of the 10 million square feet of office space. In the City of London, it means organising enough of the 3000 cleaners to do the same across an office space that stretches to 40 million square feet (T&G lead organiser, interview, 18.1.07). At the time of writing, this coverage had already been achieved and the union was trying to trigger these agreements, securing living wages for almost 4000 cleaners across Canary Wharf and the City of London. The costs of such pay rises are to be met by the clients and the

union strategy is designed to prevent any subsequent re-tendering eroding these terms and conditions of work.<sup>7</sup>

To date, the union's progress has been made largely on a client-by-client basis. Improvements have been secured after identifying workplace organisers who have recruited their colleagues and the T&G has then approached the clients and contractors for talks. Where necessary, additional pressure has been applied by organising demonstrations outside the buildings of recalcitrant clients, often in conjunction with TELCO, under the lens of the local media who have photographed the cleaners, clergy and their supporters outside.

In what follows, I explore some of the factors that have made this new approach possible, looking in particular at what I am calling 'the limits to neo-liberalism' referring to the consolidation of the industry, the negative impact of competition and the vulnerability of the key clients before going on to explore the identities of the workers themselves. The story of the campaign illustrates the need for unions to organise the industry as well as the cleaners, and to think about the politics of class *beyond* those doing the work. To go back to the arguments outlined at the start of this paper, it illustrates the ways in which what might have been read as a manifestation of classical class politics is dependent upon the geographical congruence of a host of factors and actors with diverse interests and particular needs.

### **The limits to neo-liberalism**

In the early days of subcontracting, the cleaning industry was characterised by very large numbers of small firms, and although this pattern is still significant, the industry has undergone very rapid consolidation. This is particularly true at the 'top end' of the business, where small companies would be stretched to meet the exacting cleaning standards now expected by large corporate players. In the most prestigious markets for cleaning, services are now largely provided by a small number of large transnational firms such as ISS, OCS and Rentokil-Initial. Moreover, in the City and

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<sup>7</sup> The zonal agreements also include 'fair-share' whereby those newly appointed cleaners who elect not to join the union will be expected to pay 80% of their monthly union dues. 'Fair-share' is a means for the union to stop free-riding and increase membership rates while also offsetting the costs of monitoring the agreements. The additional funds will allow the union to employ full time staff to do the zonal agreements in the context of high labour turnover.

Canary Wharf, these transnational firms compete with large national companies such as Lancaster, Mitie and Principle that are potentially vulnerable to future take-over bids. The SEIU is already using this situation to its advantage, finding the same companies in different national contexts and looking to leverage union power in one place to assist those located elsewhere (see Anderson et al, 2008). Organisers at the T&G have likewise found it an advantage in developing the zonal campaign.

Such industrial consolidation has been driven by intense competition. Over the years, margins have fallen and in the UK, they are now reported to be as low as just 5% (cleaning industry representative 1, interview, 3.5.06). Moreover, competition for contracts has ensured that the cleaning industry provides whatever the clients wants at the lowest possible price. Cleaning has been thus been provided at night or in the evening and/or the early morning. There has been an inevitable pressure on staffing levels, training and support, as well as on wages and conditions of work (not least because labour represents at least 80% of industry costs). Indeed, clients have further worsened these trends by reducing cleaning specifications to make further cuts. Unless clients are convinced of the need to pay more for their cleaning services, subcontracting makes it inevitable that cleaners will have to work harder to a shrinking specification for poorer wages and worsening conditions of work.

In this context, it is clear that the cleaning companies have a material interest in getting the clients to recognise the importance of cleaning and to pay more for the service. The future of the industry and its very profitability depend upon public and private sector clients paying more for the work. As this representative of cleaning employers explained, the industry desperately needs to find a way out of the mess. Somehow, the cleaning industry has to start competing on quality and productivity rather than price:

If competition only takes place on price, then you are creating a downward spiral frankly out of which there is no real resolution for either the client or the contractor or the worker. If, however, you have competition which is based on a combination of value and service then that provides win-win opportunities for clients, contractors and workers, and it's changing that basis of competition from price to value and service which is, I think, going to be key to making the next chapter in the [industry] (cleaning industry representative 2, interview, 3.5.06)

In its living wage campaign, TELCO managed to develop a strong relationship with some parts of the cleaning industry, finding common ground over shared interests in increasing productivity, training and professionalisation, as well as improving the pay and conditions of work.

Some cleaning industry managers recognise that if they were to pay better wages and reduce labour turnover, there would be more capacity for staff training and career development. As this representative from the cleaning industry explained: “in the UK the average manager is spending 90% of his time recruiting, not managing but recruiting! ... If you have got a more stable workforce you can concentrate more of your time on people development, morale and motivation and all the things that we know add productivity” (cleaning industry representative 1, interview, 3.5.06). Cleaning contractors are in a relatively weak position vis-à-vis the clients, and the living wage campaign has actually increased the strength of their case.

The combined experiences of TELCO’s living wage campaign and, more latterly, the T&G’s organising campaign amongst cleaners highlight four significant ‘limits to neo-liberalism’ in the cleaning industry. First, the industry is now dominated by large TNCs that serve to cohere the sector, making it more vulnerable to community and trade union organisation. By targeting these companies, the T&G and TELCO have started to change the market for cleaning and although this does not necessarily trickle down to the smaller companies, the campaign has set a new benchmark for wages and conditions across the sector in London. By winning living wages from some of the leading corporate players and by securing the political support of the Mayor, there is a strong moral momentum behind the campaign.

Second, competition between cleaning contractors has been extremely deleterious to profit margins, wages and conditions, and often, to cleaning itself. The cleaning contractors are caught in a vicious cycle of competition that is not in their interests. This situation has provided fertile ground for the union and community groups to develop relationships with some of the cleaning contractors and industry-wide bodies in support of organising campaign. Indeed, as one cleaning manager at Canary Wharf put it to me: “these are big banks [the clients] and they could pay more ... it’s hard to live in London ... and I don’t think our clients realise that [the cleaners] ... are having

to send home loads of money to care for their own children or their extended family” (interview, 4.12.06). This manager valued the fact that the organising campaign gave voice to cleaners in London and her response demonstrates the scope for working *with* some contractors to change the terms of the market.

Third, the major clients in a global city like London are extremely vulnerable to negative publicity about their activities. When exposed, the situation facing cleaners detracts from published standards of Social Corporate Responsibility (CSR). The potential embarrassment caused by negative publicity has provided significant leverage for union and community intervention over the wages and conditions of cleaners. Indeed, since 2004, large prestigious companies like Barclays, Citigroup, Deutsche Bank, HSBC, Lehman Brothers, KPMG, Morgan Stanley and PWC have all put more money into their cleaning budgets – and committed themselves to being living wage employers - as a result of the campaign. And finally, as outlined below, the low wages and conditions associated with the contract cleaning sector have created a growing dependence on foreign-born workers which has major implications for the nature of politicisation. Such workers are attracted into the industry as a result of having a ‘dual frame of reference’ (Waldinger, and Lichter, 2003) – both to the wages on offer in their ‘home’ country and to their situation in their ‘host’ country where they generally have no access to support from public funds. As such, the industry relies on a group of workers who are very particularly positioned in London’s labour market and their experience depends on their immigration status, ethnicity and gendered responsibilities. While they are relatively powerless, these cleaners have strong motivations for organising (to resist the impact of immigration status and/or racism) and additional ideological and institutional resources (particularly around faith) on which they can draw. As elaborated below, the intersections of class with gender, ethnicity and immigration status have created an explosive mix for the organising campaign.

### **Intersections with class**

In tandem with other low paid jobs in the capital, cleaning jobs are generally paid at just above the minimum wage with minimal holiday entitlement (20 days including 8 bank holidays) and no additional benefits such as sick pay, anti-social working allowances, overtime rates, compassionate leave or pension entitlement. These jobs

have been pared down to the legally-endorsed minima and as might be expected, labour turnover is very high and a recent survey found rates as high as 50% (Evans et al, 2005).

Living in one of the most expensive cities in the world and cleaning some of the most expensive real estate in the world, cleaners recognise the injustice of their pay and conditions of work. At one level, they joined the union simply to secure increased pay and improved conditions of work. However, interviews highlighted the extent to which workers also looked to the union for support in relation to discipline and recognition and in relation to a wider set of grievances that operate beyond the scale of the workplace, including labour market opportunities for immigrants, racism and a lack of respect.

To deal with the workplace scale first, many respondents felt disrespected and they argued that this was reflected in the arbitrary and summary discipline they experienced at work.<sup>8</sup> As this woman in a supervisory role put it: “The minute something is not right or something ... it’s suspension” (black British woman, interview, 23.2.06). Workers unionised as a response to this discipline and the union would come and represent them if they encountered problems at work. Many respondents also argued that they felt invisible. The majority of cleaners at Canary Wharf and in the City of London are employed to work anti-social hours during the night and/or early morning. They work to keep the buildings clean when the occupants of the building are not there and as this respondent put it, it means that cleaners are like “ghost workers”: “The job has to be done. But who are the people? They don’t want to know. They just want to come and see that it has been done” (focus group discussion 1, Sierra Leonean man, 27.5.05).

Thus while cleaners appreciated the fact that the union had begun to secure wage increases across Canary Wharf and in the City of London, some respondents argued that the union was just as important for changing the way they were treated at work.

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<sup>8</sup> Of twenty-one cleaners who were interviewed at length at least once for this research, as many as 6 had been suspended and sent home on full pay following concerns about theft, destroying things that weren’t rubbish, arguing with a colleague or smoking in the wrong place. In these cases, union representation had successfully resolved the matter and the cleaners had come back to work, but when I re-interviewed some of these cleaners 18 months later, two of the 21 had been sacked. One

Respondents appreciated the role of the union in prompting managers to treat them with greater respect and forcing them to adhere to a set of workplace procedures. Thus as this Ghanaian man (interview, 29.09.05) put it: “Before \* [manager] was not speaking to us politely but now I think because of the union when they speak to us – they are better. There’s a bit more respect, yes.” Likewise, this Colombian man (interview, 26.04.05) said: “now they can’t put too much pressure on the people, they know we are in the union.” Other cleaners also argued that managers were becoming more restrained in their use of discipline as a means of workplace control. As this woman who came to the UK from the Caribbean as a young girl put it (interview, 23.02.06):

The way they used to treat people, it’s slowed down, it has slowed down a little bit, because they’ve realised that ... workers can get in touch, whereas before, people didn’t have anybody. If you couldn’t talk, properly, like some of them their English isn’t that good, and they’d just be able to and walk over them. You know? But because now they know the union’s there and people can, people come in and represent them.

A number of the cleaners interviewed had previously had higher status employment either in their home country or in the UK, including those who had worked as a teacher (in Spain), an administrator (in Lesotho), a manager (in Portugal) or in clerical work (in the UK). A number of respondents also had University degrees and/or were still studying for professional qualifications such as accountancy or pharmacology while working during the night. Other respondents had significant experience as community leaders both at home and in the UK: one Ghanaian interviewee was an active Methodist lay preacher and one Caribbean interviewee had run her own hostel in Kingston. These experiences contrasted sharply with their social position in their current employment, and this alternative experience provided further grounds to resist.

Beyond the scale of the workplace, however, cleaners were also aggrieved about the position of immigrants in the labour market, about racism and a general lack of respect. Rather than suffering the injustice of low paid work as a *fait accompli*, they wanted to resist the way in which they were condemned to this kind of work. They

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for theft and the other for sleeping at work. In this context, it is perhaps not surprising that workers

felt that their skills and educational background were not reflected in their position in the labour market and this class *dis*-juncture reinforced their sense of complaint. Some respondents felt that they were discriminated against on the basis of attributes over which they had no control and rather than accepting their position in the labour market on the basis of their own failings in human capital as is often the case for white British workers (see McDowell, 2003), they could draw on other sets of ideas to both explain and resist their position.

Challenging racism was especially significant in this regard. A number of black Africans argued that they faced particular difficulties in getting alternative employment, even if they had qualifications and the immigration status required to work. As an example, a Lesothoan woman who had a battery of qualifications and experience in administration complained that it was impossible for black Africans to find work beyond jobs like cleaning saying:

I tried so many times, I don't know how many applications I filled so far and I got tired of doing application forms because at the end of the day there is never going to be a reply, the only time I got a reply I didn't bother to tick the box for ethnic origin, whether you are Black African whatever, I didn't tick that. [I responded: Do you think that's why you haven't got anywhere?] Yes, I believe that it is not like they say, other things like helping with discrimination, actually, it helps them to be discriminating against people ... They check who is Black African. (Lesothoan woman, interview, 5.7.05)

Many workers similarly explained their labour market position on the basis of race rather than class. For these workers, joining a union and supporting the living wage campaign was a means to resist racism and marginalisation as well as challenge the nature of cleaning itself.

In a considerable number of cases, this spirit of resistance was reinforced by religious belief. A large majority of those cleaners born outside the UK were found to be active participants in faith organisations (see also Evans et al., 2005; May et al., 2007). Of the 21 in-depth interviews conducted for this research, only those who were born within the EU (one in Britain, one in Spain and one in Portugal) were not active Christians or Muslims. The major religions all assert equality in the eyes of God and this gave some respondents an additional reason to support the campaign. Moreover, a

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joined the union to give them some personal protection at work.

number of cleaners were also able to draw on the religious teachings of their faith to emphasise the importance of social solidarity and the struggle for justice. As this black British convert to Islam declared:

Well the Prophet says whomsoever amongst you sees an evil act, let him stop it with his hand. If he is unable to do that, let him stop it with his tongue. If he is unable to do that, then at least hate it in his heart and that is the weakest of faith. So, if I can speak out, then I'm, you know, vindicating myself if that's the right word ... If I don't say nothing then that's the sin on me. (black British man, interview, 4.4.06)

Likewise, for this Christian, her faith prompted her to take an interest in the wider community of which she was part and make a stand over the unjust treatment of others:

So if you're selfless and love people, you wouldn't want to see them harmed, you wouldn't want to see them in any kind of predicament, so I suppose that's why you find that a lot of people that are Christians and have got faith are where they are. (black British woman, 24.03.06)

While it can be divisive, in this case at least, religion provided an institutional conduit for an alternative value system that allowed some workers to stand up for themselves and each other. In many cases, faith gave workers the personal strength they needed to play an active part in the trade union organising campaign. This echoes research findings from the United States where the black church and its role in fighting for civil rights has been found to play a significant role in preserving a belief in the value of social solidarity and the collective struggle for justice. In her research, for example, Lamont (2000) found that the church played an important role in ensuring that black workers had an ideological explanation for their experiences in the labour market, emphasising a collective injustice on the basis of 'race'. As she puts it:

The mainstream black religious tradition has historically made available to blacks a ready-made discourse about the need for collective solidarity as a means to transcend hardship. It has also supported this collectivist tradition by framing freedom as communal in nature, and by stressing that it can only be realized for the race as a whole, given that racists evaluate blacks not as individuals but as representatives of their race. Other institutions, such as political organisations, have reproduced these collective frames of morality in the context of anti-segregation and anti-discrimination struggles and have reinforced the influence of the black church. (2000, 50)

The history of colonialism and racism has similarly had a powerful impact on minority religious institutions and communities in the UK and this ideological tradition has helped to reinforce the contract cleaners' campaign.

It is also significant that workers' religious commitments provide a link back to the wider community coalition that first launched the living wage campaign in 2001. The faith organisations in membership of TELCO all have large immigrant congregations. Many of London's clergy are acutely aware of the economic and social problems facing their flock and have acted over matters of immigration policy, employment and poverty (Davis et al, 2007). Through membership of TELCO, some faith leaders have actively supported the demand for a living wage and used their own institutional infrastructure to add weight to the campaign. On 1 May 2006, the Cardinal of the Roman Catholic Church in the UK, Father Cormac Murphy O'Connor, celebrated a mass to honour the work of migrant workers in London. Organised in conjunction with TELCO's pan-London body, London Citizens and its Catholic membership, the mass was attended by more than 2000 people and was followed by a political rally attended by all the major faith leaders standing alongside the low paid.

This service included prayers in six different languages, music from Poland, Africa and Latin America, along with a parade of supporting organisations including TELCO and the T&G's cleaners' campaign. In his address, the Cardinal declared:

Foreign migrants should not be treated just like any other factor of production. Every migrant enjoys inalienable fundamental rights which must be respected ... We commit ourselves to your pastoral care and to work towards removing obstacles to your dignity. We are grateful for the vital role that you play in our economy. We want you to play as full a role as possible in the life of our Church. We want our Catholic people to see in you the face of Christ. And though you may be far from your homes, we want you to know that here, in the Church in London, you have a home. (Speaking at the Roman Catholic Cathedral, London, 1.5.06)

This powerful message was repeated on 7 May 2007 when the Cardinal publicly supported a London Citizens-led regularisation campaign. Faith and labour organisations came together to challenge the injustices facing migrant workers at work but also in relation to state-managed immigration control.

## **Concluding remarks**

This paper has sought to contribute to an emerging anti-essentialist approach to understanding class politics (see Gibson-Graham et al, 2000, 2001). Drawing on the case of the living wage campaign and ongoing attempts to organise contract cleaners at Canary Wharf and in the City of London, the paper has highlighted the extent to which this has involved a wide diversity of actors with a multiplicity of interests. In this case, class politics has been executed at the scale of the labour market by engaging workers, community organisations, politicians, employers and the media.

The campaign has exploited the vulnerabilities of the industry, the clients and the city while also tapping the multi-faceted experiences and identities of the workers themselves. Questions of profit margins, political mandate, brand image, the need for good copy, the quality of community life, challenges to racism and religious faith have all played a part in the campaign. Experience in London thus suggests that while collective organisation on the basis of workplace experience is still possible, success – particularly in a hostile and difficult political-economic landscape such as that found in the subcontracted cleaning sector - depends upon finding additional support in the community, and finding allies and targets in the media, amongst politicians and employers. This is the trick that has alluded those who have sought to politicise class in Britain for much of the last twenty or thirty years. What is left of the Left have sought to reassert traditional class politics without this sensitivity to the potential breadth of its political constituency. The Left has sought to keep class for itself, jealously guarding it from outsiders, fiercely resisting efforts to ‘corrupt’ and ‘complicate’ it with the temptations of ethnic, religious and gendered identifications.

Thus while the British trade unions have launched efforts to ‘organise’ they have done so almost entirely within the ‘old’ language and politics of workplace organising, leaving strategy firmly dependent upon the capacity of workers for self-organisation (see Gall, 2003; Heery, 1998; Kelly, 1999). In contrast, community organisations like TELCO have highlighted the scope for finding common ground around issues such as job quality, housing, welfare, immigrant rights and street safety, all of which potentially embrace a much wider group of actors at a much large geographical scale. Workers’ issues have been recast as community-wide concerns and class interests have been read through the lens of community, immigration, ‘race’ and religion.

Just as the Labour Party connected different groups and shared interests over issues like jobs, health, housing and education in the early and middle years of the twentieth century, TELCO and the living wage campaign demonstrate similar possibilities today. The campaign highlights the scope to forge solidaristic relationships between workers' and community-based organisations, not least in questioning the distribution of surplus value in the city. Echoing the call made by Gibson-Graham and their co-writers (2000), the experience of cleaners in London suggests how class interests can be mobilised beyond any fixity in the social structure (class is not just about employment relations at the point of production or service) and beyond any dependence on shared interests or common identities arising from work. As such, London's cleaners and their supporters raise challenging questions for those on the Left who remain stuck with a traditional model of class and its potential politicisation.

As Katz (2006, 241) recently argued, class can be reinvigorated by 'messing it up:'

Subjecting class to a rigorous analysis of its limits would make it a stronger, more effective-to-organize-around notion of class. People might recognise themselves and all the messiness of their affiliations and antagonisms in a notion of class that doesn't encompass, but is faceted by – as it simultaneously cuts through – gender, race, sexuality, nation. It's not just that the category of class would be altered by this engagement, but the engagement itself might provoke a different way of working with theory and praxis.

Securing justice for the cleaners who labour in the offices of Canary Wharf and in the City of London has involved cleaners, contractors, clients and cardinals. In 'messing up' class, a renewed class politics has proved possible.

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