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Learning from the Cleaners? Trade Union Activism among Low Paid Latin American Migrant Workers at the University of London

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In June 2008 in a small but influential corner of Bloomsbury, London, a group of Latin American cleaners won a significant victory. After eighteen months of tireless campaigning, they saw their hourly pay rate go from a few pence above the minimum wage, £5.56, to the London Living Wage of £7.45, an increase of 34 per cent. In addition they won union recognition and experienced a process of personal and collective empowerment. Drawing on primary research, funded by the British Academy, this paper aims to 'rebalance the prevailing trend ... to treat migrants as objects of policies and ignore their political agency and active engagement in the improvement of their conditions' (Però 2008: 73). The article documents the highs and lows of the migrant cleaners' struggle, which included dismissals and deportations. The article concludes that the trade union movement needs to develop specific, effective legal and campaigning strategies to defend its migrant activists.

Keywords: migrants, trade unions, cleaners, Latin Americans, regularisation

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In sum, the struggle for immigrant rights is at the cutting edge of the global working-class fight-back... it challenges the class relations that are at the very core of global capitalism (Robinson 2006: 89).

Introduction

In June 2008 in a small but influential corner of Bloomsbury, London, a group of Latin American cleaners won a significant victory. After eighteen months of tireless campaigning, they saw their hourly pay rate increase by 34 per cent, from a few pence above the national minimum wage to the London Living Wage (LLW). This takes into account the higher costs of living in the capital and is the minimum 'liveable' wage for London, which for a 40 hour week amounts to a less than £16,000 gross annual salary.² In addition they won union recognition and experienced a process of personal and collective empowerment. Their workplace, the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), became the third University of London college to agree to pay its cleaners the LLW, following the example of Queen Mary, University of London and the London School of Economics.³ Success at SOAS had a knock-on effect. A co-ordinated Bloomsbury Living Wage campaign was formed involving the Bloomsbury-based colleges. After a two year campaign, neighbouring Birkbeck College agreed to pay its cleaning and catering staff the LLW in March 2009. The London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine followed in April 2009. Over a quarter of University of London colleges now pay the LLW, with ongoing campaigns at University College London, the Institute of Education and King's College.

There is a growing literature documenting the extent to which migrant workers are amongst the most exploited and vulnerable members of the UK labour-force today (Cuban 2008; Hardy 2009; Heyes 2009; Holgate 2009; MacKenzie & Forde 2009; Migrants' Rights Network 2008; Pai 2004; TUC 2008; Wills 2008a, 2008b; Wills et al 2009b, 2009c). In their ground-breaking research on what they call London's Migrant Division of Labour, Wills et al (2009b) show how the city's labour market has become increasingly polarized with jobs at the bottom-end experiencing real and relative deterioration. They (2009c: 3) note '...wages for the lowest paid in London failed to keep up with changes in pay earned by other workers in London as well as others doing the same jobs outside London'. They continue: 'While working Londoners gained an average of 71p per hour in their real earnings between 2001 and 2005 ... cleaners lost 44p per hour'. Their research goes on to explore who these cleaners are. By comparing the 1993/94 and 2004/05 Labour Force Surveys of London Wills et al (2009b: 263) found that in 1993/94 41 per cent of cleaners were born abroad whilst a

decade later this had risen to 69 per cent. Unsurprisingly, Scandella (2008: 123) has called the cleaning industry a 'migrant consuming sector'.

Over the last twenty years cleaning services in the UK have been privatized and sub-contracted as part of an avalanche of measures aimed at reducing labour-costs (Wills 2008a). A survey of managers in two thousand UK-based workplaces found that as many as 93 per cent had outsourced at least one service by 2002. Further research from the 2004 British Workplace Employee Relations Survey found that cleaning was subcontracted by 52 per cent of workplaces with ten or more employees (Wills 2008b: 3). The underlying rationale behind sub-contracting with its rhetoric of service improvement is simple; the private and public sectors (including universities) save money by targeting the pay and conditions of the poorest workers. It is worth citing at length from the introduction (Herod & Aguiar 2006: 4) to *The Dirty Work of Neoliberalism: Cleaners in the Global Economy*.

Thus, whereas during the heyday of Fordism many firms were highly vertically-integrated and the service activities which aided them in the pursuit of their primary activities (such as cleaning or staffing workplace cafeterias) were typically conducted by workers employed by that firm ... today such activities are increasingly being subcontracted out and/or treated as quasi-independent...all with the goal of reducing labor costs both directly ... but also indirectly in terms of pension obligations... The result of such a transformation ... has been an immiseration of workers.

In 2009 the minimum hourly pay on one of the colleges of the University of London's pay scales is £10.70, over three pounds more than the LLW of £7.60 paid by the sub-contractor and nearly five pounds more than the national minimum wage of £5.80.⁴

The intention of this article is to show how low paid migrant workers do not have to be historical victims but can find their own political agency despite the very significant obstacles, tensions and contradictions within that process. The article aims to 'rebalance the prevailing trend ... to treat migrants as objects of policies and ignore their political agency and active engagement in the improvement of their conditions' (Però 2008b: 73). The article is divided into four sections. The first section introduces the Latin American community in London and documents why being Latin American has in effect become synonymous with cleaning. The second section explores the political economy of migrant labour. Using a Marxist framework it explains why the particular features of migrant workers make them an attractive (and essential) form of labour. It attempts to show why 'the struggle for immigrant rights ... challenges the class relations that are at the very core of global capitalism' (Robinson 2006). The third section investigates the relationship between trade unions and migrant workers. The fourth section examines the LLW campaign at the University of London.

Of the five colleges of the University of London that have had successful campaigns, this article is based on primary research into the campaign at SOAS from its inception in December 2006 to the deportation of some of its members in June 2009. Nearly all the cleaners are from Latin America, predominantly Colombia and Ecuador. The research was three-fold. First, it involved semi-structured interviews in Spanish in 2008 with eight of the cleaners at SOAS who had been active, in varying degrees, in the campaign. Their responses have been anonymized with pseudonyms. Second, we interviewed members of the local Unison branch and national representatives from Unison, Unite and the Latin American Workers Association (LAWAS). Third, this interview material was supplemented by participant observation at various events in the campaign (see Table 1). The authors had worked and studied respectively at SOAS prior to the campaign. This experience had allowed them to get to know the cleaners and their situation and to build a relationship of trust with them as well as enabling the authors to compare 'before' and 'after' the campaign.

The literature on migrants' political agency has shifted from theories that focus on structural causes to opportunities that facilitate migrants' mobilization (Però 2008a). However, from his own research on Latin American activism in London, Però (2008a: 122) suggests 'a rethinking in more comprehensive, loose, actors-oriented and interactive terms so as to avoid monocausal institutional determinism'. In their review of the current literature, Però and Solomos (2010: 10) argue that the emphasis on institutionalism places it in the 'paradoxical situation of having started off seeking to recognize migrants' political agency ... but ended up explaining it away with another structural account'. They call for a migrant-centric analysis that examines how political subjectivity is formed via socialization, values, emotions and networks. They (2010: 10-12) also go on to identify four features in some of the most recent writing in the field that this article shares. First is a qualitative methodological approach. Second, 'rather than claiming to speak from an abstract and neutral position, as if located over and above social relations and power dynamics'... 'these works tend to be explicitly positioned and committed'. A third characteristic is a return to studying migrant mobilizations beyond ethnicity alone. Finally, an engagement with notions of *resistance* allows for an exploration of 'transition moments' when latent political subjectivity breaks out into manifest collective action.

Latin Americans in London: Invisible Community, Invisible Workers

It has proven impossible to calculate accurately the number of Latin Americans living in the UK. McIlwaine (2009: 12) refers to a recent Foreign and Commonwealth Office (2007) report, which suggested that the number was between 700,000 and one million. It estimates that there are some 200,000 Brazilians, 140,000 Colombians, between 70-90,000 Ecuadorians and a smaller representation of other Latin American nationalities.⁵ Despite such a significant presence, the Latin American community in the UK, in

general, and London, specifically, has been described as 'invisible' (Bermudez 2009; Block, 2008; McIlwaine, 2009, 2007; Però, 2008). There are a number of reasons for this. Latin Americans are a new migrant group, having migrated largely since 1990 and not coming from the EU or the Commonwealth (Kyambi 2005). As Spanish and Portuguese speakers, Latin Americans are linguistically separated from British society, leading to a sense of isolation and marginalization. This is accentuated if their immigration status is 'irregular' (McIlwaine 2009, 2005).⁶ 'El problema de la comunidad latinoamericana es que muchos de ellos estan sin documentos entonces ... no salen a la luz, se mantienen en la oscuridad. The problem with the Latin American community is that many of them are without papers so they don't come out into the open, they keep themselves hidden from sight' (interview with Ruben).

As the literature increasingly shows (Datta 2009; McIlwaine 2009, 2007) the reasons why people migrate are complex and there are often a range of overlapping factors. This was also the case for the Colombian and Ecuadorian migrants that we interviewed. Some already had relatives in the UK, whom they wished to join whilst others had no connections with the country. A few of the Colombians cited refuge from political violence as a factor for migrating. However, the overriding motivation for all of our interviewees was the urgent need to find employment. Despite an age range spanning some thirty years, from early 20s to early 50s, all the interviewees migrated within a nine year period, between 1994 and 2003. Jokisch and Prebilsky note that 'in the late 1990s Ecuador experienced its worst economic crisis in more than a century' (2002: 76). Herrera (2008: 97) argues that underlying the 1999 economic crisis was a crisis of social reproduction with the structurally adjusted state increasingly removing itself from social policy obligations, 'compelling people to seek on their own for viable strategies, of which emigration was one'. Likewise, Gibbs & Leech (2009: 52) note that at the end of the 1990s the Colombian economy 'sank into its worst recession since the Great Depression' with an official unemployment rate of 22 per cent.

As a result, by 2004 some two million Ecuadorians, fifteen per cent of the population, had left the country (Hall 2008: 86). Remittances have increased from \$790 million in 1997 to \$1.750 billion in 2005, making them the second largest source of foreign exchange earnings after oil (Herrera 2008: 97). As Herrera (2008: 97) observes remittances 'have filled the void left by the diminishing role of the state in social expenditure, while emigration has contributed to a drop in unemployment rates'. More than four million Colombians live abroad, some ten per cent of the national population, with the UK accounting for the second largest Colombian community in Europe (Bermudez 2009: 4). Like Ecuador, remittances in Colombia have increased in importance since the economic collapse of the late 1990s. In 1999 remittances amounted to \$1.7 billion. In 2004, the figure was \$3.7 billion, a rise, as Gibbs & Leech point out of 220 per cent in just five years (2009: 56-57).

Historically, London and the UK have offered a haven to Latin Americans fleeing political persecution at home. This is relatively well documented and is evidenced by the migrant organizations that were first established in the 1970s to campaign against military dictatorships and then evolved into service-oriented groups (McIlwaine 2009:11). Less well known is that this historic trickle turned into a wave of Latin immigration at the turn of the millennium. McIlwaine (2009: 12) cites an LSE report using Labour Force Survey data that showed that between 1998 and 2005 as many Latin Americans were arriving in London as Poles. Again, there were a number of interrelated reasons why London was attractive to Latin American migrants at this time. These included joining family members already in the UK, the post-9/11 tightening of immigration controls in the US in 2001, receiving asylum, the strength of sterling vis a vis other currencies and the attractiveness of learning English. However, the overriding factor found both in the existing literature (McIlwaine 2007: 20, 2005: 20) and amongst our interviewees is employment opportunity particularly compared to Spain.

Given the number of Latin Americans in London, is it possible to speak of a community? There are a range of views. McIlwaine (2009: 11) suggests that 'this is a 'community' in a sense of denoting people from the same continent, sharing a language and a very loose cultural affinity. It is not based on homogeneity and social cohesion'. Block (2008: 12) argues that one can talk about a Latin community in statistical terms. However, he is sceptical of an understanding of community as a self-conscious collectivism or a refuge of mutual acceptance and shared identities in an otherwise hostile world. He cites interviewees who describe competition and a lack of trust as the norm. He (2008: 20) concludes that the current characteristics of the Spanish speaking Latin American community in London are fragmentation and division. McIlwaine (2005: 42) also cites a lack of trust and unity from her interview material. Specifically, her interviewees mention both the fear that other Latin Americans would inform on those without immigration status to the government but also that the Colombian community in London reflected the similar political divisions of the armed conflict as those found at home. In addition, there was the fear of being associated unwittingly with drug trafficking networks. However, she also notes sources of trust such as migrant support organizations and churches as well as the extended family (2005: 43-45).

Però (2008), on the other hand, points to a number of unity-forming initiatives, first of which is the growing 'ethnic' or 'community' Spanish media, including a monthly magazine and a weekly newspaper and radio programme. He argues: 'By addressing the entire Spanish-speaking Latin American collective in the UK, the Latino media are simultaneously facilitating the UK's Latino population idea of themselves as a 'community' (2008: 77). He goes on to discuss two other projects, LAWA and the Latin Front (Frente Latino), an organization representing the political interests of Latin Americans in the UK. Throughout the 2008 London mayoral election candidates were lobbied for the recognition of the needs and contribution of

the Latin community. In January 2009 the mayor met with an audience of 2000 Latin Americans at the Elephant and Castle, South London for the first time. In addition, London hosts Europe's largest annual festival of Latin American music, *Carnaval del Pueblo*, which brings together tens of thousands of Latinos to celebrate and re-connect with music from home and the diaspora.⁷

Arguably, central to why the Latin American community suffers from 'invisibility' or marginalization is because its workers are invisible, cleaning banks, universities and hospitals, while the city sleeps (Wills 2008: 317). As early as 2004, Pai coined the term the 'invisibles' to describe migrant cleaners at Canary Wharf. In a 2005 study of 341 low paid workers, it was found that 26 per cent of those in office cleaning were Latin Americans and 72 per cent of Latin Americans interviewed worked in office cleaning (May et al 2007: 159). McIlwaine's (2005, 2007) research amongst the Latin American community in London also highlights the centrality of cleaning as an occupation amongst Latina/o Londoners. Her interviewees note: 'It's rare to find someone who arrives here who doesn't end up cleaning' and 'I've seen lots of professionals doing cleaning jobs. What else can they do?' (McIlwaine 2005: 33, 37).

This was confirmed in our research. As one interviewee explained when asked why she worked as a cleaner: 'Primero la barrera del idioma... generalmente la mayoria de latinos emigrantes que llegan a este tipo de paises es como limpiadores. First of all, the language barrier... generally the majority of latin immigrants arrive in these countries as cleaners' (interview with Ana). Deskilling and a lack of occupational mobility due to real and/or perceived lack of language proficiency are widely acknowledged in the literature on migration to the UK (Cuban 2008; Heyes 2009; MacKenzie & Forde 2009; Wills et al 2008). Language (alongside migration status) was identified as the joint number one problem faced by the Latin community in London (McIlwaine 2007). All the cleaners in our study had been deskilled. Two were qualified lawyers, another was an engineering graduate, another had trained in veterinary science and had been working as a financial adviser, another was a retired professional sportsman and another had been a law student. The language barrier and occupational immobility are locked together in a vicious circle. Due to the long anti-social hours that most migrant cleaners work, they do not have the time to learn English nor the opportunity to practise it and therefore they remain stuck in cleaning.

Low Paid Migrant Labour: A Structural Feature of Contemporary Capitalism

Robinson (2006) argues that migrant workers have become a distinct category of labour under the current model of global capital accumulation. He (2006: 83) suggests: 'The creation of these distinct categories ('immigrant labour') becomes central to the global capitalist economy,

replacing earlier direct colonial and racial caste controls over labour worldwide'. He (2006: 89) contends:

At the core of the emerging global social structure of accumulation is a new capital-labour relation based on alternative systems of labour control and diverse contingent categories of devalued labour – subcontracted, outsourced, casualised, informal, part-time, temp work, home-work, and so on – the essence of which is cheapening and disciplining labour... Immigrant workers become the archetype of these new global class relations.

In this section we want to draw on Marxist theory to explore why migrant workers are a distinct category of labour that is central to capitalism. Why is this form of labour so attractive to employers and the state and how do its unique features lay the foundations for its structural role in capitalism? As Wills et al (2009b: 259) point out: 'employers employ migrants because they are migrants, with different qualities to the "native" labour supply'. Wills et al (2008) observe that Marxist theory has fallen out of fashion in migration studies, and the social sciences in general, since the 1970s. Our survey of the literature confirms this, however, some work is being done. Here we draw on Bakker (2003), Bakker & Silvey (2008), Bezuidenhout & Fakier (2006) and Dale (1999) for a discussion of the relevance of the concept of the social reproduction of labour from Marxist and feminist political economy perspectives, whilst we have returned to Castells (1975) for an overall Marxist theoretical framework that we believe provides a useful insight into understanding the cleaners' struggle.

Contrary to contemporary popular and government policy discourse, low paid migrant labour is not an optional extra for capitalism, it is intrinsic to it. It meets its fundamental need for a cheap and compliant source of labour, which will perform a set of jobs that other sections of the workforce will not. The government may attempt to control the volume of low paid migrant workers but it cannot do away with the category altogether. Based on his study of a number of European countries in the early 1970s, Castells (1975: 39) finds that in the long term there is a tendency for unemployment and immigration to coexist. He observes: 'Immigrant labour is thus a fundamental element in the economic structure of European capitalism, and not simply an extra source of labour in conditions of rapid growth'. He (1975: 38-39) shows how in Great Britain in 1971 migrants made up seven per cent of the working population in the building and machine-tool industries, commerce and service industries. In France in 1973 eight per cent of the working population were migrants and in Germany in 1972 it was eleven per cent. In Great Britain in 2006 the number of migrants has risen to 12 per cent of the overall workforce. In London in 2005 migrants accounted for 35 per cent of the city's workforce and 46 per cent of all of its 'elementary' positions (May et al 2007: 155). Clearly, Castells was correct in arguing, over thirty years ago, that migrant labour is no passing phenomenon but integral to the capitalist economies, despite recent

government initiatives to reduce the number of new migrants (Wills et al 2009c).

In attempting to understand why this is the case, the first point to make is that it is the needs at the heart of capitalism, in the metropole, that create the demand for a category of migrant labour. Although it is part of the same process of combined and uneven development that creates underdeveloped peripheral economies with little economic activity and therefore limited demand for labour, it is important not to overestimate this 'push' factor. As Castells (1975: 44) argues: 'While uneven development explains why people emigrate, it does not explain why capital is ready to provide jobs for migrant workers in the advanced countries occasionally even in conditions of unemployment.' To understand this we need to turn to the concept of the social reproduction of labour and who bears its costs.

In every society, labour supply, the 'vital force of the nation', as Marx (1976: 348 cited in Dale 1999: 294) called it, is critical to the functioning of production. Since the gradual and uneven emergence of capitalism on a global scale, states have been the overall institutional regulator of the supply of labour within their economies. Given that capital's 'blind desire for profit' drives 'towards a limitless draining away of labour-power' (Marx 1976: 348 cited in Dale 1999: 294) and that 'labour-power withdrawn from the market by wear and tear, and by death, must be continually replaced by, at the very least, an equal amount of fresh labour-power' (Marx 1976: 275 cited in Dale 1999: 293) states are faced with two choices. They can either exhaust the labour supply by working people to death and drawing on fresh reserves of labour or they can secure the regeneration of the existing workforce by supporting the basic costs of the social reproduction of labour. The former forms the premise of many forms of slavery. It includes silver mining at Potosi, Bolivia in the late sixteenth century where barely one fifth of *mitayos* survived their first year in the mines (Potts 1990: 22). The latter involves enforcing protective labour legislation, providing an affordable infrastructure of sanitation, health and housing, supporting predominantly female unpaid labour in the household and investing in labour productivity via education and training (Bakker and Silvey 2008; Bakker 2003; Dale 1999). It is everything that is necessary 'to reproduce the muscles, nerves, bones and brains of existing workers, and to bring new workers into existence'.

With the consolidation of capitalism the reproduction of labour via its own regeneration has become the norm. However, who pays for this – capital, the state or labour - has been at the centre of political contestation ever since. During the post-war consensus the family wage model was built on the premise that the employer must bear some of the costs. The state also took responsibility for labour reproduction through a minimum standard of social provision, the social wage, as well as investment in training and technology. With the withdrawal of the state under neo-liberalism there has been a reprivatisation of the costs of social reproduction onto the individual. As state care provision has been slashed and women have been forced into

the work-place to contribute to the falling 'family wage', these costs have fallen disproportionately on women who have experienced simultaneously the intensification of their reproductive and productive labour (Bakker 2003; Bakker and Silvey 2008; Harris 1995). Drawing on the pioneering work done on South Africa's apartheid migrant labour regime and how it externalized the burden of social reproduction to rural subsistence economies, Bezuidenhout and Fakier (2006) investigate how contract cleaning at the post-apartheid University of Witwatersrand (Wits) privatizes the costs of social reproduction. They conclude (2006: 54):

Thus in the case of Wits, although the University has cut institutional costs by contracting out cleaning, it has done so ... with the result that, as was the case under apartheid's migrant labor system, the bulk of the cost of social reproduction is increasingly being carried by rural and urban households, and not the primary employer or the state.

Migration introduces a fourth element to the distribution of labour costs between capital, the state and labour. It divides states into sending countries and host nations.

The savings associated with employing migrant workers do not solely accrue to individual units of capital but to capital at a more systemic level. Thus it can be seen to be in the interests of the state within individual national systems, and supra-national economic entities like the EU, to redistribute the costs of labour reproduction onto external social systems (MacKenzie and Forde 2009: 144).

The host state is able to minimize the social costs of labour before, during, and after the migrant's stay. The migrant worker arrives already formed. The host country has made no contribution to raising, educating and training them. Writing about migration to the UK during the 1970s, Shelley (2007: 26-27 citing Berger and Mohr 1975: 69) notes:

It has been estimated that the upbringing, the price of survival to the age of 20 of a migrant, has cost the national economy of his own country about £2,000... Yet the saving for the industrialised country is even greater. Given its higher standard of living, the cost of 'producing' an 18 year old worker at home is between £8,000 and £16,000.

Once in situ, migrants accept very low wages with no sick pay, holiday pay or pension because these compare favourably with their potential earnings at home, their 'dual frame of reference' (Waldinger and Lichter 2003). The main way in which migrant workers survive on minimal wages is to extend the working day. Our eight interviewees worked between 50 and 65 hours per week in two or three jobs. The rationale is that because working abroad is only a temporary phase in their lives, migrants are prepared to live with this level of hardship. Finally, because the assumption is that they will return home, they do not need to build up a pension here nor will they access costly

health services as they get older. Two of our interviewees had worked at SOAS for a range of contract cleaners for over twelve years each, were British citizens and settled in the UK yet had no pension. To us, this is one of the most poignant aspects of migrants' working lives. It symbolizes the host country's rejection of them; you don't belong here, don't expect to grow old here despite giving the best years of your life to this country. Shelley (2007: 24) cites Berger (1975: 58) who observes 'It is not men who immigrate but machine-minders, sweepers, diggers, cement mixers, cleaners, drillers etc. Shelley (2007: 25) concludes:

What Berger describes is commodification of labour taken to an extent that is no longer easy to achieve with the indigenous workforce, even after the mass unemployment and weakening of organised labour in the 1980s.

It is at this point in the argument that Castells provides a key insight. He (1975: 50-52) provocatively, rhetorically asks: 'Why should immigrant labour accept what, for the indigenous working class, has become unacceptable? Because they are naturally submissive? Because of their extreme need?' No, the answer lies in the fact that the relationship of the indigenous working-class with capital is established through the labour movement. '... the utility of immigrant labour to capital derives primarily from the fact that it can act towards it as though the labour movement did not exist, thereby moving the class struggle back several decades.'

Migrant Workers and Trade Unions

The labour-market has been described as dual or segmented, divided into primary and secondary markets (McGovern 2007; Piore 1979). In the former are skilled, unionized workers to whom employees make concessions and in the latter are those that receive low wages and experience poor working conditions and minimal union protection, if any. As Strikwerda and Guerin-Gonzales (1998: 19-20) note: 'Employers made the development of a working-class consciousness more difficult by confining blacks, women, and immigrants to the secondary labour market'. In practice a compromise ensued between employers and white native-born male workers, represented by their unions. As Strikwerda and Guerin-Gonzales (1998: 20) explain:

Employers agreed to higher wages, job security and other benefits in exchange for industrial peace. White, native-born male workers agreed to overlook the low wages, high turnover, and poor working conditions of a larger part of the labor force in exchange for good jobs.

This goes some way in accounting for the historic hostility, defensiveness and reluctance on the part of trade unions to lead the way in defending one of the most exploited sections of the work-force (McGovern 2007: 228). Virdee (2000) provides a useful reminder of the tension between trade unions as representatives of sectional interests, on the one hand, and vehicles for

realizing universal class consciousness and class action, on the other. He argues that the direction that unions will take at any given time is 'contingent on a wide set of economic, political and ideological conditions and the type of strategy that trade unions adopt to protect their members' economic interests' (2000: 556).

In our research we came across examples of the dualism embedded in this form of trade unionism. Sub-contracting in the public sector has not only expanded the secondary labour-market and worsened conditions in it but it attempts to make the divide between the two sectors even more rigid. Unison, the largest union in the public sector, explained its dilemma. How can it focus on the secondary labour-market, made up amongst others of sub-contracted migrant cleaners, when its 'core membership' in the primary sector, that of direct state employees, is at historically low levels (Interview December 2008)? Another example which reflects the perceived separation between these segmented labour-forces comes from the RMT union. When it first began recruiting migrant cleaners on the London Underground, they all belonged to one branch. It took time and many arguments before the cleaners were integrated into other branches.⁸

However, this is only one part of the story. It is obvious that as one of the most vulnerable groups of workers, it is migrants that most need unions to defend themselves. Indeed, historically, migrants have been at the forefront of union activism (Chomsky 2008; Hardy 2009; Strikwerda and Guerin-Gonzales 1998). This is despite the huge barriers and costs to overcome. In addition to being a newcomer to the language as well as the institutional work culture, there is the risk of losing a job, the very *raison d'être* of migrating. It can be extremely difficult to find another post because jobs are often secured through personal connections, which will be limited and also prone to black-listing (Waldinger and Lichter 2003 cited in McGovern 2007). Again, language, cultural newness and discrimination increase the difficulty of finding new employment. The ultimate fear is deportation. This has become ever more real with new legislation brought in in 2008 (Migrants' Rights Network 2008).

Organized migrant workers pose two of the greatest threats to employers and the hierarchical and divisive way in which the segmented labour-market has been constructed and accepted. Their low wages and working conditions 'offer the greatest potential for worker dissatisfaction and protest' (Strikwerda and Guerin-Gonzales 1998: 20). In addition, if they become integrated into the indigenous union structure, in the process radicalizing it by bringing their raw experiences of exploitation and marginalization, they realize the capitalists' worst nightmare, a united working class. It is for this reason that the political class, including mainstream 'anti-racist' parties, have a vested interest in feeding the discourse of low paid migrant workers as scapegoats for unemployment and heightened racial tension. The academic literature and trade union mythology that has developed around the 'unorganizability' of these workers provides yet further barriers to united

trade union action (Isler 2007). Hardy (2009: 147-48) provides examples that refute these positions including that of Polish agency workers, who refused to strike-break at a distribution depot in Enfield, North London in 2005.

The current wave of UK migrant union activism can be traced back to the Justice for Janitors campaign in the United States, organized by the Service Employees International Union (SEIU). The defining moment came in 1990 in Los Angeles, when predominantly Latin migrant cleaners in the financial district went on strike for several weeks. In the face of police violence, including causing a pregnant woman to miscarry, they went on to win a twenty-five per cent pay rise over three years and fully paid health benefits. June 15 is remembered internationally as 'Justice for Janitors' Day. The US Justice for Janitors campaign has been described as 'the icon of the new labour movement' demonstrating 'the potential for a larger-scale revival of unionism among the burgeoning ranks of low-wage workers' (Erickson et al 2002: 544). It had two key elements. It was organized in the secondary labour market characterized by low pay, non-unionization and migrant labour. Only thirteen per cent of the janitorial work-force is unionized (Herod and Aguiar 2006: 2). Second, it used the bottom-up 'organizing model' of trade unions, which emphasizes membership activism and collectivism as opposed to the top-down 'service model', based on union officials servicing the individual needs of members (Simms and Holgate 2008). In 2000, the British film-maker, Ken Loach, made 'Bread and Roses' based on the 1990 strike. The film in turn has inspired predominantly Latin migrant cleaners campaigning in London in the 2000s.

Inspired and also assisted by the SEIU, Unite launched a Justice for Cleaners (JfC) campaign in 2004 (Wills 2008a: 313).⁹ It carried over the two key characteristics from the US, an organizing approach in the low pay, low unionized, 'migrant-consuming' sector of cleaning (Però 2008: 85). It targeted the Houses of Parliament, Canary Wharf and the City of London. According to Unite (interview 2008), JfC consists of 'getting back into workplaces from where unions had been absent, or into new industries where unions had not yet been fully present'. In addition to improved pay and conditions, respect for migrant workers is another key aim.

the work of the campaign is giving these people a sense of pride, respect, so they can start to be counted. They are treated as the rubbish that they clean, in their own words. The way they are addressed... they make workers feel they don't matter, they are totally replaceable, totally disposable. There is a lot of aggressive language, not open racism but more sophisticated ways.

The achievements of the campaign so far have been remarkable. It has recruited over 1,500 cleaners and has signed agreements with the major cleaning companies such as ISS, OCS, Mitie and Lancaster (Wills 2008a: 313-14). Unite (interview 2008) explains: 'When the campaign started no

cleaners got sick pay and most only received 20 days holiday a year; now thousands get sick pay and on sites where the union campaigned they get 28 days holiday a year’.

It is perhaps not surprising that between 35 and 40 per cent of membership in the JfC campaign is Latin American. The Latin American Workers Association (LAWAS) is partly responsible for this development, as it has unionized over a thousand members (interview 2008). LAWAS was set up in 2002 as a bridge between British trade unions and Latin American people. Many of the latter had difficulties getting support from the unions for multiple reasons, such as: “communication and language, trust, lack of relationships or links between the union and the Latin American collective and lack of adequate efforts on the part of the union to reach out to migrant workers” (Però 2008: 83). The organisation helps mainly Colombians, Ecuadorians and Bolivians; about three quarters of them are cleaners with the remainder mostly working in catering. LAWAS’s main areas of work are case work, providing English lessons through the JfC campaign and organising and campaigning (interview 2008). However, in September 2009 tensions over the regularization of migrant workers and support for informal disputes came to a head and LAWAS and Unite went their separate ways.

Unison is Britain’s largest public sector trade union with more than 1.3 million members. The number of migrant workers in the areas that unison represents has nearly doubled in the last ten years. Foreign-born employees in education, health and other public services increased from 7.6 per cent of the workforce in 1997 to 12.8 per cent in 2008. There are now around one million foreign-born workers in the public services, a figure that is likely to increase (Moore and Watson 2009: 6). However, migrant workers are underrepresented among activists with only 12 per cent of branches reporting having migrant activists (Moore & Watson 2009: 4). In 2007 Unison set up a two year Migrant Workers Participation Project with funding from the government’s Union Modernization Fund to address this. The project evaluation report (Moore & Watson 2009: 5) noted that it was seen as ‘being at the forefront of work being done across Europe on engagement with migrant workers’. A number of our interviewees took part in it. Wills (2008a: 312) notes that pressure has come from outside of the trade union movement as well, in particular, from The East London Communities Organization (TELCO). Drawing on the Living Wage campaign from the US, TELCO launched a LW in London in 2001, targeting East London hospitals in the public sector and HSBC in the private sector. By 2004, when JfC was launched, it had won a better package for cleaners at HSBC and Barclays Bank and had persuaded Ken Livingstone to set up a living wage unit at the GLA as well as to produce an official annually updated living wage rate.

Migrant Cleaners and the University of London

With this success, London Citizens moved its focus in 2005 to its first university campus, Queen Mary, University of London (QML) in the East

London borough of Tower Hamlets. In July 2005 London Citizens employed student trainees to research the terms and conditions of the cleaners. They found 120 mostly migrant cleaners, employed for two hours a day (6am-8am) at the minimum wage and with no sick pay (Wills 2008b: 14, 10). A Living Wage campaign began to build momentum as cleaners and the University and College Union (UCU) branch on campus lobbied alongside local member organizations of London Citizens. This culminated in the presentation of a short video letter, including statements from key members of the local community as well as the cleaners themselves, to the College Council in April 2006. The Council responded positively and as Wills (2008b: 15) notes: 'Less than a year after the start of the campaign, college officials announced that Queen Mary would be the first living wage campus in the United Kingdom'.

The gains were impressive. First, in July 2007 cleaners moved from the minimum wage to the living wage (£5.35 to £7.20 an hour). Then in January 2008 the cleaning service was brought in-house after over fifteen years of sub-contracting. This meant that cleaners received better terms and conditions including full sick pay and access to an employer-contribution pension scheme. As Wills (2008b: 16) writes this was a 'breakthrough for the campaign as a whole'. In late 2008 Wills *et al* (2009a) conducted research to explore its implementation and progress. Overall, the cleaners had experienced a substantial improvement to their working conditions and Wills *et al* (2009a: 20) conclude that their jobs 'now represent the best of the sector in London'. However, critically important to the issue of migrant workers, in the process of moving-in house, immigration status was checked and over half of the original cleaning staff 'disappeared' due to some form of irregularity. In addition to immigration status, this included working illegally long hours and claiming benefits as well as working (Wills *et al* 2009a: 6).

One of the key features of the campaign identified by Wills (2008b) was the non-involvement of the union branch. The campaign did not spring from unionized cleaners. Instead it was characterized by pressure from surrounding community organizations and a uniquely receptive, proactive university authority. Located in an area of high deprivation, it understood that its local and national reputation was at stake (Wills 2009: 20). These features had two consequences. For the union, it meant losing out on active new members with the potential to strengthen and re-invigorate the branch as well as the opportunity to represent the interests of the lowest paid workers. For the cleaners, if they had remained with the private company, they would not have had union recognition and the bargaining rights associated with it to ensure annually negotiated pay increases after the initial living wage agreement. However, because they came back in-house, they were able to benefit from the existing union recognition agreement with the university. In contrast, as we shall see, unionization was central to the SOAS campaign, where the living wage was achieved but cleaning services remain out-sourced.

London Citizens was also central to the second university LW campaign begun in 2006 at the London School of Economics (LSE) or 'London School of Exploitation', as activists dubbed it. Again, it was a sub-contracted workforce of mostly migrant cleaners paid at the minimum wage. LSE students union affiliated with London Citizens and set up a 'Citizens for Social Justice' society. After intense lobbying, particularly by students, the university administration agreed in December 2006 that their cleaners would be paid a living wage from summer 2009 onwards but not be brought in-house. As of autumn 2009 its night shift cleaners were still not paid the LLW (confidential interview October 2009). Unison did not play a key role in the campaign.

In contrast to the first two University of London LW campaigns, unionization of cleaners was central to the campaign at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS). The predominantly Colombian and Ecuadorean cleaners at SOAS were employed by a newly appointed cleaning contractor, Ocean Contracting Services Ltd, on minimum wages and terms and conditions. At the end of 2006 the company was three months in arrears with its wages to a number of cleaners and refused to pay them. '...la campaña que empezó desafortunadamente a partir de tantos problemas, de pagos, que pagaban tarde que no pagaban, cada mes teníamos problemas'. 'The campaign started beginning with so many problems with payment, sometimes they paid late, other times they did not pay. Each month we had some kind of problems' (interview with Manuel).

A algunos compañeros nos parecía humillante que algunas personas se tuvieran que levantar a las 3 o 4 de la mañana para venir a trabajar y la compañía no les pagara sus salarios íntegramente. El trato no se correspondía con un respeto básico al trabajador. Some of us found it humiliating that people who had to get up at 3am or 4am to come to work were not paid fully by the company, this is not treatment that respects the basic rights of workers (interview with Alejandro).

After considerable public protest, the cleaners were paid. However, the incident exposed highly irregular employment practices and the consequent need for an organization to defend the cleaners' most basic rights.

Aquí en este edificio de SOAS las cosas han cambiado. Si no fuera por el sindicato seguirían haciendo lo que tienen por costumbre: no pagar. Por ejemplo usted lleva sus documentos cuando solicita el trabajo, a veces buenos a veces malos, el manager revisa esos documentos, rellena el formulario, y al mes cuando usted va a cobrar entonces le dicen 'sabes que tu pasaporte no vale' y esa persona ha trabajado un mes ... y no recibe dinero. Y esto no es un caso, son cientos. Here at SOAS things have changed. If it hadn't been for the trade union the managers would have continued doing what they were used to: not paying. For instance, when you apply for a job and you show your documents, the manager says 'ok'. After a month's work when you are due to get paid, the manager says 'this passport is not valid' and that person has worked for a

month ... and doesn't receive any money. This is not only one case. There are hundreds of cases like this (interview with Juan).

'Después comenzamos a hablar con los compañeros, a decirles que era necesario agruparse con un sindicato para que velara por nuestros derechos e intereses. Allí empezó la campaña. We began to talk to our workmates. We said we have to come together with a union to fight for our rights. That's how the campaign started (interview with Alejandro). The SOAS LLW campaign was launched in January 2007 with demands for union recognition, the LLW package and for the cleaners to be brought in-house.

Table 1 shows the chronology of the eighteen month campaign. Its first public event in January 2007 was to screen British film-maker, Ken Loach's 'Bread and Roses' (2000), a story inspired by the bitter but successful 1990 struggle of Latin American migrant cleaners in Los Angeles. Both T&G and union organizers spoke at it, encouraging the cleaners present to join one of the unions. 'Si se puede' (Yes, we can), one of the slogans from the film, and now popularized by Obama's presidential campaign, was taken up by the audience and chanted at the end of the packed, hopeful meeting. In March 2007 union recognition talks began in what would be a long and slow process. In the SOAS case, unlike Queen Mary's but similar to LSE, the cleaners and their union representatives faced a reluctant cleaning company and university administration. It thus took the sustained mobilization of the whole SOAS community, particularly the student union and the UCU branch, working with the union branch, to put pressure on the employers. This included a teach-in to make the connection between what was taught on poverty and migration at the institution, encompassing one of the world's leading postgraduate centres of development studies, and the working conditions of migrant cleaners in their classrooms.

Table 1. Select Chronology of the SOAS Living Wage Campaign (2006-2008)

Date	Action
15 December 2006	'Ocean Pay the Cleaners Now!' demonstration demanding that the cleaners are paid.
27 January 2007	The LW campaign is launched with a showing of Ken Loach's 'Bread and Roses' (2000) based on the successful unionization of Latin American cleaners in Los Angeles.
March 2007	T&G and Unison representatives meet the managing director of Ocean to begin a process of joint union recognition.
17 March 2007	Public meeting with speakers from other campaigns including Queen Mary, University of London.
1 May 2007	May Day march of 250 people through Bloomsbury.
26 May 2007	Fiesta for a Living Wage.
November 2007	On-line petition initiated in support of the campaign.
November	Consultants commissioned to write a report on contracted out

2007	services.
14 December 2007	Lobby of SOAS Governing Body.
5 March 2008	Campaign meeting to discuss the SOAS Outsourced Contract Review.
30 April 2008	'Teach-In'
6-9 May 2008	SOAS Unison, UCU and Students Union Ballot in which, out of 458 staff and students (97 per cent voted in favour of bring the cleaning staff in-house.
20 May 2008	Protesters interrupt the Resources and Planning Committee meeting
13 June 2008	After three hours of deliberation, SOAS Governing Body decided on the future of the cleaning contract. They voted for the cleaners to be outsourced but on the London Living Wage, a partial victory.
Appendum	
12 June 2009	Immigration raid at 6.30am with forty police in riot gear. Eight cleaners deported including a six months pregnant woman.
15 June 2009	Students occupy the director's office in protest.

Finally, in June 2008 SOAS Governing Body decided that the cleaners would remain outsourced but on the LLW, thus a partial victory. From September 2008, cleaners saw their pay increase by 34 per cent with a new cleaning company. Unison was still involved in making sure that the cleaners were transferred on those conditions via TUPE and that the deal was implemented as agreed. However, what the cleaners achieved at SOAS went much further than these bread and butter gains. First, they achieved visibility. As we have discussed in this article, invisibility is one of the key characteristics of not only the migrant cleaning sector but also the Latin American experience in London and the UK. Echoing Unite on the JfC campaign earlier, this was one of their greatest desires, not to be treated like the rubbish that they disposed of. The recovery of 'dignity' is a recurring theme in the historical and contemporary political imagination of the Latin American continent, and can be found in popular movements from the Zapatistas in Mexico to the piqueteros in Argentina. Here it is expressed by several cleaners, comparing before and after in the SOAS campaign:

Ahora ya no somos invisibles como antes. Gracias a la campaña la gente nos mira diferente porque dicen: 'los cleaners no son cualquiera, saben hablar y saben defenderse'. Mucha gente pensaba que el ser cleaner quiere decir que somos intelectualmente inferiores, que no tenemos ideas. Que muchos no hablemos inglés no significa que no seamos estudiados, muchos tenemos profesiones... Now we are not invisible any more. Thanks to the campaign people think differently about us. They say: "cleaners can speak, they know how to stand up for their rights". People used to think that being a cleaner means that we are intellectually

inferior, that we don't have ideas. Because many of us do not speak English it does not mean that we have not studied and have careers (interview with Eduardo).

Mucha gente se piensa que los cleaners somos incultos pero hemos demostrado que somos gente que valemos, que podemos demostrar a todo el mundo que somos gente de bien. Many people think that cleaners are ignorant but we have shown our worth. They now know that we are not useless. (interview with Manuel).

Ha habido un cambio de mentalidad. Porque a los cleaners se les respeta más y sobre todo por el alza de salario. Antes no se escuchaba en absoluto a los cleaners pero ahora todo el mundo está en la problemática de los cleaners. There has been a change of mentality. Before they would never listen to cleaners... now everyone is aware of the issues facing the cleaners. (interview with Manuel)

Hubo más respeto, se les trató de manera más cuidadosa porque sabían que tras implicarse el sindicato podía haber demandas. There was more respect, as they knew that the union would get involved (interview with Ruben).

Indeed, this very tangible change in the visibility and respect gained by the cleaners and its impact on their well-being and the institution's culture was the initial impetus for this research.

Second, and closely related to visibility is solidarity. You can only be visible if another recognizes you. In May 2008 hundreds of staff and students voted unanimously in the SOAS quad to bring the cleaners in-house, despite management warning that increased costs could hit staff and students directly by reducing the library budget. For all the interviewees solidarity was key.

Con la campaña la gente empieza a preocuparse por el problema de la otra persona... Aparece una conciencia social solidaria, no tan individualista. (...) La sensación de no estar sola, tener el apoyo de compañeros, estudiantes, profesores... eso te da fuerza para luchar. With the campaign people started to care for others, solidarity became key. (...) The feeling of not being alone and the support of your workmates helped me to keep fighting. (interview with Ana).

'Muchos profesores de gran prestigio en SOAS han hablado a favor de los cleaners y eso ha sido sorprendente para las autoridades de SOAS. Many respected teachers at SOAS have spoken up for the cleaners and this has surprised the university authority' (interview with Oscar).

'Teníamos dos sindicatos ayudándonos, a los profesores, los estudiantes... eso fue lo que marcó la diferencia al final del día. We had two trade unions

giving us support, and also the teachers, the students... this support made a difference' (interview with Ruben).

In its rich history of political activism, including opposition to the Vietnam War and the occupation of Palestine, SOAS in the second half of the 2000s will be remembered for the ground-breaking support shown to members of its own community. Solidarity in this case works on two levels; first, in its vision of a university as an inclusive community. Second, in the section on trade unions and migrants, we argued that one of the worst fears of employers was of a united working class and that capitalism relied on promoting division amongst workers. Despite some initial reluctance, the SOAS union branch was able to find common cause between sub-contracted migrant workers and its existing members. Solidarity between cleaners, between cleaners and other workers and between workers and students was thus forged through trade union-led activism.

Third, a group of low paid migrant workers found power in their own political agency. The non-payment of wages and the contempt with which the cleaners were treated was the fire that lit the fuse. Some have argued that the obstacles facing this group of workers make it almost impossible for them to organize (Isler 2007). The cleaners themselves were only too aware of the difficulties facing them.

El problema es que los compañeros tienen terror, terror. Tampoco tenemos tiempo por nuestro horario de trabajo... Otra cosa es la apatía de algunos compañeros y otra muy importante es la falta de educación. Algunos no saben escribir... otra barrera es el inglés obviamente y el peligro de que vayan a ser expulsados del trabajo y luego del país. The problem is that our workmates are absolutely terrified. In addition, they don't have time because of their shift work, another thing is the apathy of some workmates and the other very important factor is some can't write... another obstacle is English obviously and the danger of being sacked and deported (interview with Juan).

The most active cleaners also described the intimidation that they experienced once the campaign began, in some cases, forcing them to leave the company. 'Dijeron: 'él nos está haciendo daño' nosotros también le vamos a hacer daño a él', y la cogieron contra mí... vieron en mí un peligro y tomaron represalias contra mí... They said: 'he is creating many problems, so we are going to hurt him'. They saw me as a threat, so they took reprisals.' (interview with Ruben).

What then motivated them to fight and what gave them the strength to continue? For those involved at SOAS an *a priori* belief in justice was at the base of their activism.

Tenia mis ideas de que las cosas fueran justas para todo el mundo. Que si uno va a estar contento, que estemos todos contentos, no que uno abuse de otro, como pasaba entonces en el edificio. I had my ideas about

justice. I understood that if some people are happy everyone should be happy. It's not fair that some people impose on others (interview with Ruben).

Cuando experimenté en mis carnes la injusticia sentí que tenía algo en mí guardado que llevaba desde siempre pero no la había querido utilizar. Yo pienso que luchar por la gente es luchar por lo que es correcto. Me di cuenta que tengo que luchar contra lo que es injusto. When I was unfairly treated I felt that there had always been something hidden inside of me that I hadn't wanted to use before. I think that fighting for people's rights is fighting for what is correct. I realised I had to fight against injustice (interview with Eduardo).

The campaign was made up of those who had been activists in their home country and those for whom it was their first experience. Pero (2008: 83) noted a similar mixture of old and new activists in the Latin American Workers Association (LAWAS). For the latter, their UK working conditions ignited their latent sense of justice but coming from another background, they were also able to draw on 'other sets of ideas to both explain and resist their position' (Wills 2008a: 318).

Vengo de una clase media que siempre ha luchado por la igualdad de condiciones para todos allá en mi país ... yo fui el único de mi familia a quien no le gustó la política ... pero siempre he llevado eso en la sangre y ahora llegó la oportunidad. My middle class family always fought for justice in my country. I was the only one who was not involved in politics. But those ideas were always part of me and with the campaign the opportunity to express them arrived. (interview with Eduardo).

Mi papá era sindicalista asesinado. Claro, tengo muchas de esas enseñanzas sobre la política pero activamente no. Estudiaba derecho en la Universidad ... pero nunca tuve la necesidad de actividades sindicalistas. My father was a murdered trade unionist. I had learnt many things from him about politics but I did not put them into practice. I studied Law at University... but I never had the need to become a trade unionist myself. (interview with Ana).

Wills (2008a: 317-18) explores some of these questions in her interviews with contract cleaners and frames the findings within the wider context of class and race. Her analysis is worth citing at length.

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 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... Many workers

similarly explained their labour market position on the basis of race ... joining a union and supporting the living wage campaign was a means to resist racism and marginalization.

The experience of union activism at SOAS was transformative for many of those who took part.

He aprendido mucho porque nunca antes había podido compartir o hablar en un grupo de personas o hacer una queja acerca de algo, contra los jefes o cosas por el estilo... Me siento ahora como más seguro, más fuerte. I have learnt lots of things in the campaign because I had never had the chance to speak in front of a group of people or complain against something. Now I feel stronger and more confident (interview with Eduardo).

Fue una experiencia nueva que me enseñó muchas cosas en el camino, dejó algo muy bueno en mí. Porque no hay nada más bonito que saber que uno tiene derechos como trabajador y que nadie puede abusar de uno ... lastimosamente como lo hacen tantas empresas en esta ciudad con tantos inmigrantes. Fue una experiencia espectacular que recomiendo a todo el mundo. It was a new experience that taught me many things. It's great to learn that you have rights as a worker and to know that nobody should treat you unfairly. Unfortunately, that is how many companies in this city treat immigrants. It was an amazing experience that I would recommend to everyone (interview with Ruben).

Indeed, others followed. In March 2007 Birkbeck University union voted to launch a LLW campaign and was joined by Unite, UCU and the students union. Despite protests and petitions, progress was slow. However, with the cleaners' victory at neighbouring college, SOAS, in June 2008, pressure on the administration began to build. In November 2008, as an alumnus of Birkbeck, John McDonnell MP spoke in favour of the LLW. His own mother had been a cleaner and he had experience of fighting against subcontracted working conditions dating back to the 1980s. The profile of the campaign was raised further in January 2009 when Ken Loach wrote a letter in the *Camden News* condemning the poverty pay at Birkbeck. Finally, in March 2009, two years after the campaign was launched, and with a picket outside its meeting, Birkbeck Governors agreed to pay the LLW to both its outsourced cleaning and catering staff. SOAS and Birkbeck are two of a number of University of London colleges that are located in Bloomsbury. A Bloomsbury LLW group was launched to coordinate actions amongst them. In May 2009 it organized a May Day protest with speakers including a Green Party MEP. Just two days before the march the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine agreed to pay its staff the LLW, making it the fifth LLW University of London college.

Queen Mary, LSE and Birkbeck were all pioneering institutions at the forefront of late nineteenth century social reformism in the UK. Queen Mary,

partly located in the notorious poverty of the East End and Birkbeck, uniquely providing evening classes, were dedicated to the 'education of working people' while Beatrice and Sidney Webb, founders of the LSE, were early proponents of the minimum wage.¹⁰ Today, SOAS and the London School of Health and Tropical Medicine have some of the most culturally diverse student populations in the world with a strong focus on poverty in the global South. There are ongoing campaigns at UCL, Senate House, the Institute of Education and Kings College. Outside London, there are LW campaigns at Oxford and Cambridge universities. The university sector was reminded once again that it has the choice to play a progressive role in society with regard to paying a living wage to its poorest workers in an article in the *Times Higher Education* in July 2009.¹¹ As the Chief Administrative Officer at Queen Mary observed: 'If we are not going to do something like that, who is?' (Wills et al 2009a: 20).

Conclusion: Learning the Lessons

Ninguna guerra se gana sin sangre. Sabíamos que iba a haber muchas caídas, muchas pérdidas. No war is won without blood. We knew that there would be many casualties, many losses (interview with Eduardo).

Clearly, low paid unionized migrant workers fighting back with wide-spread support is anathema to employers and what we have seen since 2008 is a series of reprisals. The first casualty was the SOAS Unison branch chair. An Ecuadorian lawyer, who had joined the Estates department in 1999, he was central to the LW campaign. As a bridge between the Spanish-speaking cleaners and the local union branch, he was instrumental in bringing the issue of the non-payment of cleaners to the attention of Unison and encouraging the cleaners to join the union. He was one of the most well known and well respected members of staff both amongst colleagues and students. In October 2008 he was suspended on charges of gross misconduct and despite national union representation and dozens of individual character references he was dismissed in March 2009. He received an avalanche of support and protests were held, including a strike in May 2009 by Unison members, calling for his re-instatement. In October 2009 he was voted honorary president of SOAS students union in recognition of his services to the School. He remains without full-time employment.

The sacking of the unison branch chair was followed three months later by the deportation of eight cleaners. On Friday 12 June at 6.30 a.m. SOAS cleaners were called to a meeting by their subcontracted cleaning company, ISS. Some minutes into the meeting, with no warning from their employers, forty police in riot gear sprang out from behind the furniture in the lecture room. They arrested nine cleaners, some of whom were Unison members. They were denied any legal or trade union representation. Six of the cleaners were deported within hours, including a woman who was over six

months pregnant. The immigration raid took place the week after the cleaning company had signed a recognition agreement with unison and on the same day that a protest had been planned to support the reinstatement of the sacked unison branch chairperson. UCU president, Sally Hunt, addressed a rally at SOAS on 19 June 2009. However, the most decisive action came from SOAS students. Some forty students occupied the directors' office on 15 June 2009, ironically, the beginning of national refugee week. After two days of intense negotiations, the students and director agreed a joint statement.

In September 2009 an Ecuadorian cleaner at University College London (UCL) was sacked. As a member of Unite he had been involved in the Justice for Cleaners campaign and was warned about his trade union activities by the cleaning contractor, O&G. Despite public protest and support, he is still fighting for reinstatement at UCL, where the students union had just voted to support the LLW campaign. In an article entitled, 'Is there pattern in raids on cleaners?' Cookson (2009) points out that cleaners, who have organized LLW campaigns outside of the university sector have also lost their jobs and been deported. There have been immigration raids on cleaners working on the London Underground as well as insurance company, Willis. One worker who had lost his job observed: 'It seems we win union recognition and then a few months later we have an immigration raid. The companies seem to be trying to discipline their workers'.

It is not surprising that the most high profile, committed and successful migrant trade unionists are being picked off in a wider campaign to intimidate other potential migrant trade unionists. However, if the British trade union movement is encouraging migrant activists among its ranks, there are important lessons to learn from the cleaners' experiences. It is not enough to be able to organize a successful campaign around union recognition and pay and conditions, unions must also be in a position to protect their activists. First, they must *anticipate* aggressive employer responses and have *effective* legal and campaigning strategies in place that can tackle the specifics of the victimization of migrant activists, in particular linguistic discrimination and other forms of racism. As Heyes (2009: 186, 187) notes:

The vulnerability of migrant workers to ill-treatment cannot be explained wholly in terms of language barriers, but workers who have a limited ability to understand and speak English are likely to be additionally disadvantaged... migrant workers who are unable to understand and communicate in English may be more likely to encounter discrimination at work and become a focus for racist attitudes.

This applies not only to migrants who have little English language but also to those who speak well but not the Queen's English, whose 'Englishness' can then be put on trial.

Second, unions need to decide where they stand on the regularization of irregular workers. The greatest defence of migrant workers that the trade union movement can make is to publically argue for regularization. The appalling dilemma at the heart of the LLW campaign is that in its fight to improve the pay and conditions of the lowest paid, the most vulnerable - those without papers, could lose their jobs and be deported. This is how one cleaner explained the difficult decision that they were faced with.

Nosotros teníamos que tomar una decisión: o nos quedábamos sin hacer nada o hacíamos la campaña sabiendo que algunas personas perderían. Seguimos la campaña pero lo hicimos pensando en el futuro. Sabíamos que 25 o 30 familias perderían pero teníamos que mirar al futuro y conseguir mejores condiciones para todos. We had to make a choice: either we do nothing and our conditions stay the same or we start the campaign, knowing that some people would lose out. We knew that 25-30 families might lose out now but we had to look to the future and organize better working conditions for everyone (interview with Eduardo).

As we have seen at Queen Mary, University of London, bringing the cleaners in-house meant that half of the original labour-force was lost, due to some form of 'irregularity' and at SOAS cleaners not only lost their jobs but were deported. Wills et al (2009c: 5) conclude: 'Thus although the living wage campaign has been able to secure greater money for contract cleaners ... the campaign needed to secure the legal rights of many of those workers doing the work'.

The follow-on to the LLW campaign has been a campaign for 'earned' regularization. 'Strangers into Citizens' was launched by London Citizens in 2007. This would allow migrants who had been in the UK for at least five years, without a criminal record and with references from employers or a recognized community leader to be given access to citizenship (Wills et al 2009c: 5). It is estimated that some 60 per cent of the 725,000 irregular migrants would be eligible (Migrants' Rights Network 2009). However, as organizations such as No Borders and Campaign Against Immigration Controls argue this would divide irregular migrants into good and bad categories, legitimizing the deportation of the most vulnerable, the 40 per cent who are not eligible. Instead, they argue that 'No-one is Illegal' and propose unconditional regularization. Although the conservative mayor of London is in favour of conditional regularization and some unions such as Unison and Unite support the 'Strangers into Citizens' initiative, the union movement as a whole is still reticent to argue against the immigration controls that make the working lives of their weakest members a misery. It is not seen as 'popular' with either the public or the Labour Party that they fund. There are some exceptions. The RMT voted for the regularization of all cleaners and proposed this to the TUC in 2009.

The LLW and regularization campaigns contain, like most social movements, often contradictory, reformist and revolutionary tendencies. Gill (2010) has

analysed these tensions within asylum activism in the UK. The LW is a very modest demand and many would question the extent to which it is, at less than £16,000 per year, a 'living' wage. The conservative mayor of London is its official advocate despite the reality that sub-contracted cleaners at London Underground still do not receive it. However, at the same time, we believe that aspects of this 'struggle for immigrant rights' do 'challenge the class relations that are at the very core of global capitalism' (Robinson 2006: 89). We concur with Robinson (2006: 89) that the migrant employment relationship in all its precariousness encapsulates the particular form of cheapening and disciplining of labour that lie at the heart of contemporary global class relations. Similarly, Wills (2008b: 2) argues that 'subcontracted capitalism is becoming paradigmatic today'. Having studied a number of struggles against 'subcontracted capitalism', including at Queen Marys, University of London, Wills (2008a) asks if cleaners might be a 'new urban vanguard'. This is only possible if migrant workers in the future know that they can rely on the union movement to back them up so that they too can experience the transformatory power of collective action and solidarity in the workplace as expressed by the following cleaner.

Yo gané, yo crecí como persona, tengo otro punto de vista acerca del 'tabú' del sindicato. A todos nos dejó una enseñanza, me gustaría que mucha gente fuera parte de ella, pero muchos por el temor a la palabra sindicato no lo hacen, pero la gente no debería tener miedo. El sindicato es algo bueno. I've grown as a person. I have a different view-point about the 'taboo' of trade unions. This has left us with a lesson that I would like many to learn from but they are scared by the word, 'union'. They don't need to be scared. A union is something good (interview with Ruben).

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Notes

¹ Our study involves both 'migrants', who hope to return home and 'immigrants', British citizens who have settled in the UK. Neither 'migrant' nor 'immigrant' is an unproblematic term. The latter has a long history, particularly in the post-war context as a term of abuse hurled at former colonial subjects coming to the UK. It is an intrinsic linguistic part of the violent racism that they experienced on their arrival and in subsequent decades. The term 'migrant', which has come to replace it in the academic and policy literature does not carry the same connotations. However, it can be argued, that conceptually it is weaker because it suggests, possibly prescribes, that workers will return home. I am grateful to a workshop at the 'Defend My Workmate' conference held at SOAS in October 2009 for raising this.

² The LLW is calculated annually by the Greater London Authority. In 2009/10 it is £7.60 per hour, http://www.london.gov.uk/mayor/economic_unit/workstreams/living-wage.jsp

See www.geog.qmul.ac.uk/livingwage/ for the most comprehensive academic research on it.

³ The University of London is a federation of nineteen self-governing colleges and a dozen institutes, with a population of 120,000 students with a further 45,000 studying by distance learning, <http://www.london.ac.uk/aboutus>.

⁴ SOAS Living Wage campaign email, 9 December 2009.

⁵ This article focuses on Spanish-speaking Latin Americans, particularly Colombians and Ecuadorians.

⁶ See McIlwaine (2009) and Migrants' Rights Network (2008) for a discussion of the terms, 'irregular' and 'undocumented' migrants. We use the two interchangeably.

⁷ As a journalist working with the Latin American community, Monica Bergos has written for both the print and radio media in London over a number of years as well as having been press officer for the *Carnaval del Pueblo* in 2008.

⁸ 'Defend My Workmate' conference held at SOAS in October 2009.

⁹ Unite union is the UK's largest trade union with two million members and was formed by the merger of the Transport & General Workers Union (T&G) and Amicus in 2007. The JfC campaign was initiated by the T&G in 2004.

¹⁰ 'History of Birkbeck: 1700s/1800s', http://www.bbk.ac.uk/about_us/history/1800s.

¹¹ Philips, M. 'Group reminds Institutions of Duty to help Lowest Paid', *Times Higher Education*, 23 July 2009, <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?sectioncode=26&storycode=407492&c=1>.