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British Jobs for British Workers? Negotiating Work, Nation and Globalisation through the Lindsey Oil Refinery Disputes

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Abstract

This paper explores the relationships between labour organising, globalisation and national identity through an engagement with the 2009 Lindsey Oil Refinery strikes. Some strikers adopted the controversial slogan ‘British Jobs for British Workers’ in response to employers’ attempts to undercut existing wages and conditions with a new migrant workforce. This led to accusations of xenophobia. We make three inter-related arguments. Firstly, we contend that it is necessary to interrogate the spatialised power relations generated through particular forms of labour agency enacted in relation to globalising processes. Secondly, since these responses can be politically ambiguous, success in territorially-based disputes does not always equate with broader (transnational) class agency. Thirdly, relevant to the project of labour geography, we propose that labour scholars and activists be more attuned to the mundane ambiguities in labour agency, and the subsequent need to frame local action within a broader relational politics of global labour solidarity.

Implications for Praxis

The 2009 Lindsey Oil Refinery strikes illustrated how workplace grievances can foster exclusions between workers of different nationalities. We identify three key practical

implications. First, the way xenophobic elements in politics and media quickly appropriated one of the strike's slogans – 'British jobs for British workers' – provides a cautionary tale for workers and unions in developing global labour solidarity. Articulations of demands should be mindful of the intersections of nation and class in order to foster grassroots global solidarities. Second, mismatching state accreditation systems produced differential experiences and exacerbated antagonisms between workers of different nationalities. It is therefore essential that labour movements recognise these differential processes and seek possible solutions to them. Finally, despite the UK's obstructive legislative landscape, we argue that it is still possible for workers to undertake self-organised, 'unlawful' action. The Lindsey Oil Refinery strikes thus indicate how self-managed struggles can be fraught, but potentially very empowering.

Keywords: Nationalism, globalisation, unions, labour agency, migrant labour.

On 28th January 2009, 800 British engineering construction workers walked off a construction project at the Lindsey Oil Refinery in an unofficial wildcat strike. In the following days 3,000-4,000 more walked off similar construction projects around the UK (Booth 2009). The strikes were sparked by the employment of approximately 200 Italian and Portuguese workers by IREM, an Italian contractor. IREM had been awarded a £200 million contract by the French multi-national petrochemicals company TOTAL to complete part of the construction of a new desulphurisation plant at the East Lindsey Oil Refinery, on the east coast of England in north-east Lincolnshire. Engineering construction workers engaged in existing contracts at the Lindsey plant saw this as a violation of existing national agreements (see NJC 2007). There were fears among the strikers, which proved to be well-founded, that the employers were

paying below nationally-agreed wage levels by a range of measures, including eliminating paid breaks and preparation times (ACAS 2009).

The adopted slogan of a significant number of the strikers across the UK was ‘British jobs for British workers’ – a direct quotation from a speech by Gordon Brown, the then Prime Minister, at the 2007 Labour Party conference (BBC 2007). Despite being an unofficial dispute, such language was echoed by senior trade unionists. Derek Simpson, the General Secretary at the time of Unite, one of the two unions involved in the strike, even posed with two models from the *Daily Star* newspaper under the slogan. The unions, however, maintained that the strike concerned the violation of national agreements, discrimination against British workers, and a concerted assault on long-established employment practices in this sector. The dispute was not just debated by the media, politicians and publics in Britain, however. European affairs officers of the largest Italian union, CGIL, signed a declaration contending that “[w]hat’s going on in Lincolnshire is one of these globalised times: English workers against Italian workers” (CGIL cited by Workers’ Liberty 2009: np).

This paper uses the discourses and debates around the disputes at Lindsey Oil Refinery to explore how the relations between work, nation and globalising processes are negotiated *through* labour organising. It begins by discussing the literature concerning labour geographies, particularly concerning agency and labour’s co-articulation of nation and class, arguing that insufficient attention has been made to the ways in which agency can produce exclusionary and differentiated spaces of organising. Next, we outline the methodologies used in the paper. The empirical work is derived chiefly from qualitative analysis of an internet forum, *Bear Facts*, a virtual discussion space established and utilised by strikers. Interviews with strikers, community workers and local government workers from North-East Lincolnshire are used

alongside this online source in the empirical sections. The paper concludes by arguing that engagement with politically ambiguous struggles encourages labour geographers to take seriously the complex articulations and processes on which those struggles are grounded. Attention to the differentiated forms of labour agency and solidarity that these struggles bring to light provides opportunities to nurture forms of engagement that destabilise defensive exclusions, and foster grassroots labour internationalisms.

Transnational Labour Agency, Globalisation, and Spaces of Organising

Jamie Peck has recently argued that labour geography has declared “simultaneous commitments to labour’s agency in the abstract, in normative terms, and in methodological practice” (Peck 2012: 109). Peck acclaims this “as a generative manoeuvre, setting in train a project with a militantly contrarian, if not radical mission.” There is, he notes, no “possibility of mistaking whose side labour geography is on; in declaration and in practice it has argued the corner of what might be called *re-organised labour*” (emphasis in original). Peck’s account, however, questions the terms on which agency has been mobilised through labour geography. He argues that the work of asserting and recovering forms of labour agency, whilst important, is not enough for a critical project. There is, he avers, the need to continue to probe the relational contexts and conditions through which labour geographies are constituted and to ensure that “structure and restructuring” do not become cordoned off as “analytical no-go areas” (Peck 2012: 110; cf Castree 2007).

The Lindsey dispute, during which workers and some union leadership figures mobilised around the slogan ‘British jobs for British workers’, presents a set of challenges to any unambiguous commitment to labour agency. It emphasises the importance of engaging with the

terms and practices through which agency is constructed, and through which power relations within 'labour' as well as between labour and capital are produced. The nationalistic and, sometimes, racialised discourses and demands mobilised through the dispute emphasise that labour agency can produce exclusionary spatial relations between workers as well as challenging unequal geographies and landscapes of production. An emphasis on politically contentious and ambiguous struggles can, in this regard, be a key focal point of labour geography's efforts to interrogate labour practices and organisation, and promote genuinely solidaristic and transformative politics (cf Cumbers et al 2008; Routledge and Cumbers 2009).

Attention to the full spectrum of labour struggles is important because labour geographers have tended to write accounts which are broadly supportive of labour disputes and which engage with disputes that they broadly support (eg Castree 2000; Herod 2002). We are sympathetic with these approaches, and elsewhere some of us have contributed to this 'solidarity' approach. But the kind of sustained analysis advocated by Peck requires engagement with, and learning from, the range of expressions of labour agency and their outcomes. Engaging with the Lindsey disputes requires sustained attention to the exclusions, as well as possibilities, forged through collective labour action (cf Cumbers et al 2008; Routledge and Cumbers 2009). In particular, there is a need to think in more 'nuanced' terms about the character of worker identity and agency than has typically been the case in established work in labour geography.

Canonical work in labour geography has, for example, often been rather silent on the intersections between class, race and gender, although a number of studies have addressed such intersections (eg Carswell and Neve 2013; McDowell et al 2012; Perrett et al 2012; Wills 2009). Herod's account of dockers' struggles in New York, for example, overlooks how the negotiation of ethnic heterogeneity shaped the spaces of the International Longshoremen's

Association (Herod 2002: 100). This account thus marginalises the struggles of African American longshoremen to challenge the exclusionary spaces of organising (see Davis 2002: esp. 143; Nelson 1988).

Recent work in labour geographies has, however, extended the sub-field “in novel and overlapping directions”, including an engagement with “new domains of action” and “new modes of organisation” (Coe and Jordhus-Lier 2010: 31). Some of this emerging work has had a much greater sensitivity to the differentiated spatial and power relations constructed through organising practices. Thus Wendy Jepson has argued, in a discussion of the gendered spatial practices of farm worker unionisation, for an attention to the “production of differential spaces in the context of unionisation” (Jepson 2005: 698). She contends that doing so can foreground some of the “contradictions within labour organising, which may be defined by other identities such as cultural and gender identities”. Buckley has usefully applied such a perspective to the geographies of construction labour. She notes that the “point of attending to questions about the politics of ethnicity and race, citizenship, class, or gender is not to map how such social axes are simply attributes attached to particular bodies” but to foreground how the production of space “can depend on the parallel production of complex inequalities and intersecting forms of social difference” (Buckley 2014: 5).

This paper builds on these approaches. We view the transnational labour mobility present in the Lindsey Oil Refinery dispute as linked to the role of global processes, such as subcontracting, in shaping experiences of everyday practices such as work. Global processes that connect disparate places and groups operate unevenly, producing profound inequalities and exclusions between and within localities (MacKinnon et al 2011). State re-regulation of labour markets is one example of how globalising processes operate unevenly to produce flows of labour

migration, often to the detriment of pay and conditions in the labour markets of workers' origin and destination (eg Standing 2009; Wills et al 2010). We use the term 're-regulation' here, not to reify the state as functioning solely to regulate capital's excesses (Purcell and Nevins 2005), but to signal that one of the key issues at stake in the dispute was the operation of regulations and labour laws designed to ameliorate the uneven impacts of the deregulated EU labour market. Whereas accounts of contestation around 're-regulation' practices often counterpose a 'settled' or 'indigenous' workforce against immigrants, reflecting a rather binaristic spatial framing of labour geography when discussing the spatial politics of migration (Rogaly 2009; Wills et al 2010), we position collective labour organising as forged through multiple racialised, gendered, nationed and classed dynamics which are both constituted through, and generate, contested spatial relations (Hardy et al 2012).

In this regard we draw on Stuart Hall's term "articulation" to understand how classed and racialised formations can become co-constituted in particular spatio-temporal contexts (see Hall 1980: 338-9). For Hall, "race" can be "the modality in which class is 'lived', the medium through which class relations are experienced, the form in which it is appropriated and 'fought through'." This position, Hall emphasises, has "consequences in terms of the internal fractioning and divisioning within the working class which, among other ways are articulated in part through race" (Hall 1996: 55). Articulations are also constructed through gendered relations, especially in a male-dominated sector like construction where 'hegemonic' masculinities are pervasive (Datta and Brickell 2009; Buckley 2014).

The Lindsey disputes mobilised the 'British Jobs for British Workers' demand in a context where there has been a profound racialisation of discourses of class and nation among mainstream UK politics (Back et al 2002). Relations between globalisation and communities,

then, have become politicised and mobilised in ways that foreground the nation. As Bates argues, “the slogans adopted by workers at oil refineries across the UK in January and February 2009 marked the continuation of a longstanding tendency in British politics for political actors to draw upon nationalist, exclusivist discourses to explain the problems associated with industrial and post-industrial capitalist society” (Bates 2012: np). This also emphasises, following Peck, the importance of understanding the conditions under which labour agency is constructed and forged (see Doucette 2010: 150).

In this regard it is useful to distinguish between concrete struggles, where workers and unions construct agency in particular ways, and at a more general level in which we can talk of labour agency as challenging capital through more potentially transformative, ongoing processes of radical class formation – practices that unite workers across or despite existing territorial and functional divisions of labour (see Cumbers et al 2008; Hardy 2009; Selwyn 2013). Despite localised initiatives that seek to progressively recast relationships between ‘settled’ and ‘migrant’ workers (eg Milkman 2006), in response to globalising processes such as immigration and outsourcing, workers and unions all too often develop responses which are exclusionary and rooted in nation-centric discourses of job protection against ‘external’ threats. Narrow nationalistic discourses – in this case “British jobs for British workers” – are doubly problematic for labour, first because it helps to divide rather unite workers across national boundaries, and second, because it allows the focus to shift away from employer tactics to drive down labour standards globally, to a more regressive nationalistic politics.

We understand these exclusionary organising spaces as actively constructed and entrenched through labour organising. We use the term *nationed* labour geographies to refer to the ways in which such grievances are actively formatted, generated and produced through exclusionary

articulations of the nation (cf Featherstone forthcoming). Through the remainder of the paper we engage with some of the different modalities of nationed labour geographies. We argue that such nationed articulations of labour grievances can be produced both through overt forms such as the use of the slogan ‘British Jobs for British Workers’, but also through everyday understandings such as articulations of construction site safety. This reflects the unconscious “banal nationalisms” (Billig 1995) that pervade public spaces, discourses and political organising. We engage with the more everyday articulations of nationality and work through drawing in depth on *Bear Facts*, an internet forum which was central to the organisation of the strikes.

Researching Labour Struggles Online and Offline

A central element of the strikes was the use of online and mobile technologies to co-ordinate their efforts and disseminate information between often remote, rural parts of the UK. The interface between the material and virtual world is therefore an important locus for understanding the resonance and purchase of everyday forms of nationalism on organising strategies and cultures. In particular, we engage with *Bear Facts*, an internet discussion forum established in November 2008 by a group of engineering construction workers. The forum was designed to facilitate discussion and information-sharing within this mobile workforce, and became a hub of activity during the strikes. Since the largest forum in the sector, *UK Welder*, was strictly moderated, and monitored by employers, the worker-run *Bear Facts* forum became an important mode of communication, integral to the operation of this unofficial dispute.

This paper draws on what has variously been called a “passive” (Holt and Copes 2010: 634) or “observation” (Bainbridge 2000: 57) online ethnography, in which the researchers do not

interact with forum members, instead viewing existing forum content as the empirical data. Analysis was undertaken on more than 200,000 words of relevant discussions on workplace strategy, politics and strike co-ordination between December 2008 and July 2009 – the period beginning shortly before the ‘British jobs’ strike, until the end of a second wave of strikes across the industry in June 2009. The forum offered an opportunity to trace the real-time development of relationships and discussions, and how strikers developed their politics and strategies through individual and collective “cybernarratives”, “grounded in the everyday lives and biographies” of the strikers themselves (Denzin 1999: 108).

This “digital archive” (Rogers 2013), run, populated, and controlled by workers themselves, can shed light on the internal workings and dynamics of the Lindsey strikes. However, taken out of context this archive is problematic, as it constitutes only one – albeit crucial – space of organisation and communication, and privileges ‘readable’ digital content over all else (Rogers 2013). As such, this online research was conducted alongside in-depth interviews with strikers, and several community and local government workers in the local area, allowing us to triangulate between these different spaces in order to more effectively understand the significance of the strikers’ actions.

Engagement with *Bear Facts* allowed us to engage with the ways in which strikers and workers talked about the relationship between work and nation. Detailed discussion of such ‘talk’ has largely been absent from existing work on the disputes (see Barnard 2009; Gall 2012; Meardi 2012). The paper also draws on interviews conducted with key figures in the dispute and on various documentary sources including speeches by prominent union activists. As Parr (2003) argues, it is important not to construct artificial binaries between ‘real’ and ‘virtual’ worlds, and this paper explores the generative traffic between them. In this sense, engaging with the *Bear*

Facts forum also draws attention to underexplored techniques and practices which are increasingly important in shaping the spatial relations produced through labour organising strategies (see Lee 2010).

Despite the possibilities that online research offers, a number of challenges present themselves. The public anonymity afforded to participants on web forums makes it both harder to identify genuine strikers and harder to assess the impacts of public scrutiny on the nature and content of debate. The former is relatively straightforward in most cases, since other messages written by the forum member offer an archive of contextual factors that help verify a member's employment in engineering construction, such as technical knowledge, real-life friendships with other forum members, and other personal narratives and accounts.

The effects of the forum's public nature, however, are more difficult to 'measure'. Shortly after *Bear Facts* was mentioned on the BBC current affairs programme *Newsnight*, the site administrator issued the following warning:

Our website has just [been] shown and discussed in detail on Newsnight. We are obviously now of high focus and we need to make sure that what is posted on this site couldn't be seen as Racist or Illegal. ('Administrator' 2/2/2009)

It is not possible to identify the extent to which this – and a recognition among forum members that non-strikers could join freely – affected the content posted on *Bear Facts*. In our analysis, we have ensured that quotations used in this paper are corroborated or agreed with by other members elsewhere on the forum. Likewise, it is not possible to ascertain through the forum content alone how representative it is (cf Hardey 2004: 194), in relation to the broader mass of

strikers, especially since a number of forum members noted poor internet access and computer literacy among the strikers. However, the widespread presence of the website's address on placards around the UK suggests that it held some traction among the strikers. Despite the complexities presented by online research, this approach offers important possibilities for exploring the informal agency and discursive practices workers for future work in labour geographies. In what follows, we argue that the rapid proliferation of strikes at engineering construction sites across the UK in January and February of 2009 were decisively shaped by the mobile practices and connections of construction workers. The linkages and solidarity actions that quickly emerged were facilitated by networked technologies at the workers' disposal, including the *Bear Facts* internet forum and mobile telephones.

Exploring Work, Nation and Globalisation

Constructing Unofficial Spaces of Organising

The dynamic spaces of organising during the Lindsey dispute are given vivid expression through the account of one activist involved in the strike:

[Y]ou put it on *Bear Facts*. You get the, one of them [picking up his mobile phone]... Now that then spreads like a bush-fire, and within an hour everybody knew what was happening, at Saltend, from Glasgow, you name it, it just went country-wide 'cos everybody got text messaging. So we got organised with text messages, got organised with emails. (Union activist interview, July 2010).

This account emphasises that this was not an isolated local strike but quickly garnered significant translocal solidarities. These linkages also constituted spaces of organising that were on the whole unofficial, illegal, and outside the formal remit of trade union organising, though numerous shop stewards were sympathetic and/or involved (cf. Barnard 2009). The ability of the workforce to mobilise by quickly escalating the strike to the national scale in a strategically important sector was crucial in bringing the dispute to the forefront of mainstream national politics. It also highlights how workers are not place-dependent but can exercise their own spatially dispersed networks to support ostensibly local disputes (Cox 1998).

The two main unions at Lindsey, Unite and GMB, had been in negotiations since November 2008 regarding concerns over hiring practices. Shop stewards “often (unsuccessfully) advised against walkouts and their continuation because they were advised, in turn, by [employed union officers] that to do otherwise would be to act outside [union-negotiated contracts]” (Gall 2012: 419). Various commentators have suggested that the unofficial character of the dispute, and a lack of involvement from union leaderships partly for legal reasons, contributed to the spread of the ‘British Jobs for British Workers’ slogan (see Gall 2012; Gibson 2009; Meardi 2012). Strike committee member Keith Gibson contended that a “vacuum” was created when the original shop stewards’ committee resigned, “perhaps following instructions from their union Unite ... to stop the union becoming legally liable for the unofficial strike action of their members” (Socialist Party 2009: np). Thus, the legal landscape of UK industrial relations had a considerable influence on not only the growth of networked organising practices among the strikers, but also the power relations between union membership and leadership.

The Lindsey dispute was related to a chain of previous unofficial actions responding to similar grievances. For example, a dispute at South Hook in Wales, over the employment of Polish

workers at lower wages than domiciled workers, involved 250 workers in May 2009 (Gall 2012: 416), and 2,700 workers were involved in solidarity actions. Solidarity actions and strikes for the Lindsey dispute took place here, alongside a large number of others at facilities around the UK (Barnard 2009: 250), involving up to around 4,000 strikers.

The Lindsey strike then, was not an isolated dispute, but part of industry-wide unofficial organising strategies that drew on long-standing cultures of organising in the industry, which employers had targeted through widespread blacklisting campaigns (Ewing 2009). A recent dispute at the site of a new power station in Staythorpe, Nottinghamshire, for example, was regularly discussed on *Bear Facts* and widely considered to have laid the groundwork for the Lindsey strikes. Shortly before the first Lindsey walk out, workers talked of the dispute at Staythorpe – concerning a Spanish contractor on a UK site refusing to employ British workers – as signalling the beginning of a much broader national campaign over access to UK construction sites. One shop steward declared:

I will be sending a large contingent of members to give support to the brave men at Staythorpe [at an upcoming demonstration]. Make no bones about it, this is going to be a fight for the future of this industry. ('Standupandfight', *Bear Facts*, 15/1/2009)

When the first Lindsey strike began, some workers drew direct links between the situation at Lindsey and Staythorpe, with one worker declaring that Lindsey was “Staythorpe number two” ('Proudplater' 28/1/2009) and another reminding strikers of “the place where the current dispute possibly began: Staythorpe” ('The Gaffer' 31/1/2009). Relational connections to other sites were forged by workers as means of generalising the specific, localised struggle at Lindsey through common concerns and experiences elsewhere.

While there were specificities and local contexts in the different disputes, the key grievance concerned the perceived malfunctioning of regulatory mechanisms, while seeking to defend and re-assert the importance of existing bargaining agreements. The UK engineering construction industry is covered by the National Agreement for the Engineering Construction Industry (NAECI) (NJC 2007). This agreement “determines the pay and conditions for workers at all major engineering construction sites in the UK” (ACAS 2009: 3). While signatories to NAECI are technically voluntary, it has considerable strength in the industry, embedded in long-established practices and traditions of labour relations whereby workers are employed on successive short-term contracts to guarantee forms of employment stability (Gall 2012; Cumbers 1994).

An independent report into the Lindsey strikes notes that a “major source of tension underlying this dispute is the Posted Workers’ Directive (PWD) and its application to construction work carried out in the UK” (ACAS 2009: 6). The European Union’s PWD was designed to ensure that migrant workers were subject to the same minimum standards of employment as citizens of their host country. While these measures are ostensibly designed to protect the rights of migrant workers, their effects can be more complex. The PWD is linked to the ways in which WTO-led neoliberal conventions have been applied through particular understandings of the regulation of labour mobility (Barnard 2009). These regulations have been incorporated into UK legislation in “extremely neoliberal” ways (Gall 2012: 426). The UK government interprets these minimum standards only to apply to the minimum *legal* obligations of employers, such as the National Minimum Wage, representing significantly lower standards overall than the minimum conditions under NAECI. The Lindsey dispute is one of several cases in which the PWD has been used to justify the undermining of collective agreements and established working

conditions (Ewing and Hendy 2010; Meardi 2010). Interestingly, other PWD-related disputes have mobilised similar rhetoric to the Lindsey case. Thus some Swedish construction workers mobilised around the slogan ‘Swedish laws for Swedish workers’ during a dispute over the use of Latvian workers by Laval to construct a school in Stockholm (Woolfson and Somers 2006).

It would, however, be problematic to construct the Lindsey strikes as a simple case of a bounded “militant particularist” struggle of ‘local’ workers counterposed against hyper-mobile companies (Harvey 1996; Williams 1989). Unlike the relatively low levels of qualifications and mobility of most settled locals near the Lindsey refinery (ONS 2001), the majority of the engineering construction workers who led the disputes at the Lindsey Oil Refinery were highly qualified and usually very mobile. Jobs on complex engineering projects require a high level of specialisation and, while jobs were often precarious and short-term, the higher-skilled roles were relatively well-paid. Demand for these specialist skills has led to the creation of a (mostly male) workforce that travels between short-term contracts. This mobility is not limited to the UK, and their jobs sometimes take them across Europe and beyond. The strikers also included locally resident Polish workers (Meardi 2012: 113). This mobility challenges the dichotomy that has structured some articulations of labour geography where a mobile, footloose capital is counterposed to more settled organised labour. The density of infrastructure, supply routes and grounded connections in sites such as Lindsey and the Immingham docks on the river Humber suggest there are particular ways in which transnationals become dependent on particular sites (Jones et al 2010). As Anderson argues, transnational corporations “might be understood not only as a series of competing flows, but also as an assemblage of sedimented powers, some of which cohere into scales such as national employment systems and workplace cultures and which constitute both blockages and potential points of leverage” (Anderson 2009: 962).

Indeed, strikers at Lindsey and across the UK were afforded the ability to organise partly as a result of the mobile and networked nature of the engineering construction industry, which has allowed strong translocal solidarities to emerge, contrasting with place-based worker collectivities. Short-term contracts in often remote locations, and reliance on the specialised skills of a relatively elite section of the construction workforce, have necessitated mobility as a means of securing employment. Moreover, the growth in mobile telephone and internet technologies further facilitated the development of networks of communication, friendship and mutual aid among the workforce. While “your ancillary-type workers, your labourers... would be recruited from the local community[...] a travelling core-skilled workforce” from different companies would travel to a site and often live together in local accommodation during a contract, often maintaining communications links after its completion (union activist interview, July 2010). Thus, the effective grassroots organisation and networking of the strikes was linked to the mobility of most of the workers involved. This emphasises how agency and solidarity was constructed through a workforce that had built up deep connections over time, despite being relatively dispersed and fragmented – spatially contrasting with the localised concentrations of collective action one might expect in labour struggles, which stress strong ties to particular place-based occupations (Harvey 1996).

Various forms of mobility were deployed during the disputes. Unemployed construction workers from Grimsby, for example, joined the protests to “help swell the ranks of the protesters at the Lindsey site” (Barnard 2009: 248). A later series of wildcat strikes at Lindsey that spread across the sector in June 2009, heavily influenced by the tactics of the first strikes, was the first significant dispute in Britain since the 1984-5 miners’ strike to see concerted use of ‘flying pickets’. A striker recounted that “we had about thirty sites [...]. We sent out pickets

around the area of Lindsey Oil Refinery. We sent out pickets in the Midlands, and there was also lads in Wales doing picket duty for us. This is the first time we've seen pickets going out from a dispute for thirty years" (Gibson 2009: np). Gibson's testimony emphasises how such spatialities were key to mobilising in ways that circumvented union hierarchies and the legislative constraints under which they operated. A key tension, however, concerns the ways these grassroots, effective spatialities of organising cohered and found resonance through the slogan 'British Jobs for British Workers'.

'British Jobs for British Workers': Nationed Articulations of Labour Grievances

The 'British jobs for British workers' slogan was central to the notoriety of the strikes (eg Legrain 2009; Sunderland 2009). From the outset, however, representations of the strikes were fraught and contested. Early BBC news reports cut a statement by a striker complaining about segregated work conditions to make him appear racist, reporting the striker as saying "These Portuguese and Eyties [Italians] – we can't work alongside of them". The full quote, while using language which is politically incorrect but "not necessarily offensive" (Meardi 2012: 112), clearly has a very different meaning. He continues, noting that "we're segregated from them. They're coming in full companies" (cited by Gall 2012: 423). The BBC was forced to apologise for this depiction, but the incident emphasises how the media portrayed the strike in particular racialised and nationed ways (Holmwood 2009) to achieve a certain discursive construction of the strikers' motivations.

The demand was articulated in a range of ways among strikers, and was debated extensively, eventually leading to its abandonment by many involved. That the identification of certain jobs as British seems to have been crucial in uniting the workforce and 'branding' the struggle in

popular discourses, however, gives a sense of its resonance. The range of different interpretations and articulations of the slogan can be illustrated by debates on the *Bear Facts* forum and beyond. Some strikers argued that they were simply throwing the phrase back at Gordon Brown, forcing him to ‘eat his words’. Some called for Brown to “honour his promise” (‘Philadelphia’ 30/1/2009), and “to defend the fundamental right to access employment in their own country” (‘standupandfight’ 1/2/2009). It is clear, however, that anger or resentment towards ‘foreigners’ in general was a motivating factor in some strikers’ participation. In one example, ‘Rigger’ conflated the present struggle with a deeply racialised vision of ‘foreigners’ as an amorphous mass, declaring:

I think they should fuck [sic] off back home and take their sponging gippoⁱ families with them. [...] My family has fought in world wars for this country, and I bet they didn't do it so we could be shafted by ethnics and eastern Europeans. (22/3/2009)

Although this was a minority opinion, ‘Rigger’ was not alone, and the overwhelming concern among activists online and on the picket lines to combat accusations of far-right support among the strikers was an indication of the presence of this very small but vocal minority. Combined with a flood of images in the media of strikers displaying English flags and Union Jacks, attitudes such as this served to confirm the fears of many potential supporters about the dubious politics and motivations of the strikers.

Whereas the nebulously-defined ‘British jobs’ slogan was an effective means of gaining quick media exposure when the strikes first began, some activists quickly acknowledged its problematic connotations and sought to back away from it. “[A]fter a week outside LOR,”

some strikers were “getting sick” (‘Neil’ 12/2/2009) of the slogan and the Union Jacks that accompanied it. Although ‘Neil’ was in the minority at this early stage, others alternatively offered that strikers should “add a footnote to it like ‘Equality for all’” (‘weststreet’ 11/2/2009) in order to soften jingoistic undertones. Another forum member directly challenged the above quotation from ‘Rigger’ as “the type of nationalist crap u can expect to read on a BNP [British National Party] leaflet” (‘Gibbo’ 19/5/2009).

Activists also contested racist imaginaries on picket lines, and far-right BNP members who sought to exploit the strikes were turned away, as one striker explains:

I said [to a BNP activist] “I’m asking you to leave”. So this fella says “what happens if I don’t?” So I said... “there’s 2000 reasons behind me why you should go, because... they’re not gonna be as hospitable as I am”. (Union shop steward, June 2010).

This same respondent also emphasised how he used connections with officials in the GMB union to circumvent a racist discourse developing around the dispute:

I fetched [the union general secretary and a press officer]. I got them involved 'cos... it was starting to look like it were racial with the Italians being there, and there was no racial intent at all, not one bit. I mean, you’re not going to stop the Posted Workers Directive, the free movement of workers around Europe... And anyway, I worked in Europe, so it’d be hypocritical for me to try and stop somebody. (ibid)

As this account emphasises, activists were involved in challenging the terms on which the dispute was popularly configured. This was partly done through brokering relations with senior union figures, strategically engaging the hierarchy that they had hitherto all-but-ignored, for articulating their struggle in opposition to the bourgeois transnationalism of the free market. The above account also emphasises the mobile trajectories of workers themselves and how this shaped their understandings of the issues raised by the dispute. As mobile specialists working across Europe and beyond, strikers seemed well aware of their own positionality as part of the transnational labour mobilities against which they were fighting (cf Koefoed and Simonsen 2007), and this fact arguably limited the traction of xenophobic sentiments.

The initial resonance of nationalistic discourse is illustrative of the way that labour agency can be problematic and divisive in its operationalisation (see, for example, Bengtsson 2013). Engaging with how such relations have been negotiated in different but not dissimilar contexts emphasises, however, that the kinds of conflicts and discourses structuring elements of the Lindsey disputes are far from inevitable. Meardi, for example, stresses that there have been important attempts to challenge forms of segregated work patterns through trade unions' recent organising work with "migrants in the UK which included innovative practices, such as co-operation with ethnic associations (eg. with the Polish Catholic Association in Birmingham) and setting up Polish-language sections (in Southampton and Glasgow)" (Meardi 2012: 109). During the Irish Ferries dispute in 2005 when 'Irish workers' were replaced by 'Latvian workers' to undercut the existing workforce, transnational solidarities between Irish and Latvian unions were mobilised and alliances between Irish workers and diverse immigrant groups were made central to the campaign (Dundon et al 2007).

There were attempts to generate more solidaristic linkages between different workers during the Lindsey dispute. One *Bear Facts* member, for example, welcomed “the last statement of demands from LOR which is moving this struggle [from] a simple ‘British jobs for British workers’ to a more inclusive demand to unionise all ‘foreign’ workers [and] prevent companies outsourcing labour overseas by agreeing to all wage contracts” (‘enrico’ 3/2/2009). These demands included: “all workers in UK to be covered by NAECI Agreement, Union controlled registering of unemployed and locally skilled union members, with nominating rights as work becomes available”; “Trade Union assistance for immigrant workers - including interpreters - and access to Trade Union advice” (cited by Libcom 2009). One participant noted that there were efforts among the strikers to bring IREM’s workers into the unions to strengthen both British and non-British workforces. Asserting that IREM’s workers were “exploited and bullied”, he noted that “We tried to get them in the union. [...] We got all the Italians together in a, in a marquee, and we got all the Portuguese workers in a marquee, and we got interpreters down” (Union activist, interview, July 2010).

The terms in which the Lindsey dispute was framed, however, clearly posed challenges to the construction of such solidarities. The dispute drew vehement condemnation from Italian left wing newspapers such as *Il Manifesto* and *L’Unitá* which “compared the protests with the concomitant rightwing anti-immigrant actions in Italy” (Meardi 2012: 113). The largest Italian unions CGIL and CSIL reacted with indignation. As the introduction noted, the European affairs officers of the largest Italian union, CGIL, signed a declaration condemning the dispute. They noted, however, that “the firm, on these questions, has enormous responsibilities. What’s more, we want to make the point that this is a non-unionised firm. Which says a lot about its approach to industrial relations” (cited in Workers’ Liberty 2009). Indeed, the unofficial strike committee received messages from some Italian unions in solidarity with the dispute against

IREM on these grounds. These actions highlight the awareness that racialisation is a strategy of capital which can be challenged.

Nevertheless, the ‘British jobs’ slogan remained a prominent part of the public discourses around the strikes, and it had traction among large numbers of the strikers, even if they had widely differing interpretations of it. Clearly, while nation and class were articulated in both internal and public discourses around the strike – they did so in far from banal ways; indeed, a major outcome of the strike was to bring these grievances to the forefront of political discourse. On the other hand, in terms of the workers’ demands, a compromise deal was brokered at Lindsey Oil Refinery, where 50% of the jobs on IREM’s contract were earmarked for British labour. A statement on the dispute was made by Gordon Brown on 4 February 2009, noting that

the construction and engineering association has issued new guiding principles for companies to consider when using non-UK contractors and labour on engineering construction sites... [I]t now states in the new advice: Always consider whether there are competent workers available locally. (cited by Barnard 2009: 252).

Brown’s statement demonstrates that the strikes were effective in getting the dispute onto political agendas. It also signals the uneven effects of that agency, and the way that the terms on which the disputes were framed intensified demarcations between ‘national’ and ‘non-national’ labour. Many strikers seemed happy that the immediate issue had been resolved, but some felt that the dispute should have continued. Thus, on *Bear Facts*, ‘dustbuster’ argues that the deal was “just a minor victory and will all get brushed under the carpet till next time[. Why not nip it in the bud now and stay out[?]” (20/5/2009).

For some on the unofficial strike committee the strike was rooted in “pure and simple class issues about bosses attacking workers” (Gibson 2009: np). This assertion is significant, but it has the potential to play down differential effects on unevenly positioned workers and the missed opportunity to develop a more internationalist agenda through the relational co-articulation of class and nation. A view that foregrounded IREM’s role as an unscrupulous employer in Italy could have garnered broader solidarity and potentially a more favourable outcome for the workers. As we have seen in this section, material questions of class were prominent, but they also articulated with national and occasionally also racial identities, which proved to be both strategically and politically problematic. The next section considers how discourses around skill were used to demarcate further between differently located workers.

Nationed Hierarchies of Skill and Safety

This section considers the terms through which discussions of skill and safety were used to produce and reproduce demarcations between British and ‘other’ workers. Media debates around the Lindsey dispute were generally framed in a rather stark fashion, concerning whether the dispute was “racist”, “xenophobic” or neither (Gall 2012; Milne 2009). Engaging with the ways in which workers configured discussions of skill and safety, however, can demonstrate how demarcations grounded in national identities through work took place in more routinised and banal (Billig 1995) ways than such simple framings suggest. Datta and Brickell’s (2009) work has shown skill to be a powerful relational means through which workers understand their positions and reinforce ethno-national divisions. There are also long-standing associations between conceptions of skill and exclusionary notions of masculine labour (Clark 1996).

Differential experiences and understandings of skill often structured the way in which national difference was constituted. A disconnect between British and non-British workers across the engineering construction industry was articulated through different forms of government-authorized accreditations and qualifications. Thus an interviewee commented “We asked for their skill qualifications and they couldn’t give them us. So even people who were paid Grade 5 money, they couldn’t prove that they were Grade 5 workers” (Shop steward interview, July 2010).

This ambiguous relationship between UK and Italian accreditations nurtured an atmosphere of distrust between nationalities. This was aggravated by a context, in the UK and elsewhere, where the use of migrant workers is routinely justified by employers – and at best uncritically accepted by policy-makers – by arguments around skill shortages (CIB 2010). It is one process through which racialisation and labour market segmentation is achieved, and can have very real consequences. Meardi notes, for example, how the death of a Polish construction worker in London resulted in a mere £750 fine for the employer because “no organisation had taken up the case” (2010: 14; cf Donaghy 2009).

Members of the *Bear Facts* forum were almost consistently concerned by the quality of work undertaken by migrant workers, linking perceived weaknesses not necessarily to ethnicity but to national citizenship and regulatory frameworks. ‘Handsomebob’ (21/1/2009) wrote of migrant workers “[l]ifting great sheets of fabricated plate with just plate grabs, that was another no pinkies, no chains, no shackles, unbelievable. This is par for the course with these so-called skilled men, we’ve all seen them, in my opinion they are at best semi-skilled, at worst killers”. Concerns about the skill and safety awareness of migrant workers regularly became imbued with discourses of national pride in British construction workers being the “best trained

workforce” on the market (‘one one eight’ 26/6/2009). ‘Rodofgod’ (1/2/2009) likewise bemoans the replacement of British labour with a “less skilled, less safe workforce” from overseas in order to reduce labour costs. On the other hand, these cost-cutting measures can back-fire, and ‘Darling’ (19/2/2009) hyperbolically asks “[h]ow can they be heralded as being more productive when their work always needs doing again?” These quotes emphasise how the integration of workforces amplified the perceived national differences in ‘workmanship’, and how national difference became represented through perceived hierarchies of skill and safety.

Although some stories blame the workers themselves, others recognise the ways in which these lower-skilled workers are consciously sought-after to be “exploited, by unscrupulous employers” (‘owlman’ 3/1/2009). Many stories on *Bear Facts* are empirically unverifiable without careful analysis of construction site incident reports, but the sheer number of them suggests that there are genuine concerns about skill levels and safety awareness, even if the subjects of the stories are not necessarily representative of migrant workers in general. Differing skills levels also related to employers’ strategies of substituting less formally skilled workers for more highly qualified ones, using differing qualification regimes as a smokescreen for this substitution (which we note below). The important point here is that difference is structured partly through these experiences, and workers’ online story-telling is an expression of this process, interweaving virtual and material differential spaces of labour (Jepson 2005; Parr 2003).

The bringing-together of differently placed workers under one national system of accreditation, then, instead of unifying them under that system, actually rendered their differences more visible. Transnational interactions in place can be the terrain on which national differences can be accentuated and intensified, with significant implications for spaces of labour organising (cf

Datta and Brickell 2009). In order to win the contract by offering the lowest price, it transpired that IREM had recruited workers on lower skill grades and gave them higher grade tasks to complete, as one shop steward notes: “There was too many Grade 3s on the job and not enough Grade 5s. So we were like “how’re you getting this work done?” “Well the Grade 3s and they do this, that...” Well they were doing a Grade 5 job at Grade 3 money.” (Shop Steward interview, June 2010).

Here, openness to competition in the EU labour market played an important role in fostering conditions that divided workers at Lindsey. IREM utilised the mismatching regulatory frameworks of the UK and Italy as a means of tendering more competitively for the contract. The ambiguity between different kinds of training undertaken by workers from different countries produces a terrain on which groups of workers are pitted against one another, positioning them differentially as ‘good’ or ‘bad’ (Datta and Brickell 2009; McDowell 2008). These differentiations are tied to state regulatory frameworks within the EU single market, fostering difference through the different forms and scales of de-regulation and re-regulation in what is ostensibly the same labour market.

Conclusions

During the unofficial wildcat strikes across the UK engineering construction industry in 2009, strikers partly mobilised around exclusionary nationalist discourses and slogans. We have argued that it is necessary in this case, and others like it, to interrogate the diverse ways in which nation, work and globalising processes co-articulated through workers’ organising strategies. The unofficial, networked agency of the workers was successful in getting significant labour grievances on the national political agenda. The terms on which some

workers did this, however, intensified demarcation between different groups of workers, reinforcing exclusionary policy and media discourses around ‘getting tough’ on migrants. Understanding the routinised, everyday ways in which such nationed imaginaries can emerge is crucial. We have shown how regulatory frameworks, although representing efforts to ameliorate the human costs of a deregulated labour market, can be a major factor in fostering banal nationalisms (Billig 1995). In light of this example, it is important that state regulation is not uncritically assumed by scholars to be a necessarily progressive ‘golden bullet’ to counterbalance free-market capitalism. Indeed, the ability of the strikers to partially circumvent the UK’s repressive anti-union legislation through unofficial worker-led organising is indicative of the potential for workers to enact strategies of collective organisation beyond state-circumscribed bargaining structures.

In terms of academic debates, this analysis of the strikes contributes to debates in labour geography by emphasising the differentiated forms of labour agency constituted through the internally-contested unofficial spaces of organising. We encourage scholars to pay attention to the ways in which labour organising can generate exclusionary as well as progressive spaces of agency, shedding light on the differentiated forms of agency that operate through struggle. Distinguishing between the agency to undertake concrete struggles over particular ‘defensive’ grievances, and agency in the broader and more politicised sense of radical class action and solidarity, may help us in this task, although we have shown how the two can be entangled with one another in practice.

The findings of this paper have clear implications for organising practices that seek to form alliances between such differently positioned workers (cf Featherstone 2012). Workplace cultures of skill and safety affected the terms on which organising practices were imagined,

illustrating how demarcations and divisions between workers can become entrenched and reproduced through banal discourses around working practices. In terms of union strategies, rather than merely ‘defending’ the terms of existing national agreements, it is necessary to envision how defence of such agreements can be articulated in ways which foster solidarities with differently located workers and their unions. Union strategies based on nation- or state-centric models of organising and bargaining can thus be problematic, and building discourses and structures that nurture grassroots, relational forms of labour internationalism is a pivotal task for labour scholars and activists in global times.

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ⁱ 'Gippo' is a derogatory British slang word for 'Gypsy'.