The union organising turn in Ireland?
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Summary
This paper explores the shift to an “organising” agenda in trade unions in the Republic of Ireland. Drawing on extensive case study research that included 69 interviews with union officials in five trade unions across various sectors, the paper charts the trajectories taken by the unions in their moves to develop an organising agenda. The paper situates the unions’ engagement with organising within the broader social and political context, including the demise of social partnership, the deregulation of the labour market and the halting and hesitant attempts of the peak trade union confederation to engage with the “organising model”. The paper demonstrates and seeks to account for the fragmented and piecemeal manner in which the organising agenda has been adopted among Irish unions.

Substantive content
From 1987 to 2009 Irish unions operated under relatively benign conditions. The economy was buoyant; unemployment was low; wages and living standards rose appreciably; state supports for wage settlement arrangements (in the form of a National Minimum Wage, Employment Regulation Orders and Registered Employment Agreements) were well-established and supported union influence; and union leaders played a key role in national economic and social policy-making under the auspices of social partnership. However, these favourable conditions were suddenly and abruptly challenged with the onset of the global economic crisis in 2008. Social partnership collapsed in 2009 and employers and elements with the government and state agencies became increasingly hostile to the legal framework supporting wage regulation. These changes, along with the absence of statutory procedures for union recognition or collective bargaining, have made the Irish context an increasingly challenging one for trade unions.

Outside of Ireland, many unions have given increased attention to their membership levels, and have in recent years been drawn to looking at "union organising models. Such models gained increased prominence in the US in the 1980’s and in the UK in the late 1990’s (Simms et al, 2013). It is only comparatively recently in 2005-8 that Irish unions sought to incorporate union organising into their agenda. In contrast to the TUC in the UK, which established an organising academy, the Irish Congress of Trade Unions has played a relatively peripheral role in supporting unions in adopting an organising model. Rather Ireland's largest union, SIPTU, has sought to champion the move to union organising, and has shared its expertise and training - provided to it by US partner unions - with other Irish trade unions.

In the late 2000s, two unions in Ireland sought to make ambitious changes to their structure and operations to incorporate an organising model. They were the general union, Siptu, and the retail sector union, Mandate. Both embarked on radical changes with the intention of reallocating significant resources from traditional membership servicing function to the adoption of an organising approach. In both cases the intention was to organise greenfield sites as well as to build density and organisation on sites with existing members. Two other case study unions, electrical and specialist union TEEU, and the communications industry union, the CWU, created specialist organising departments focused on greenfield recruitment. In contrast, the public sector union Impact, sought to build membership by recruiting
specified staff groups and providing specialist servicing officials for these new members rather than building activism and capacity within the workplace or sector.

**Methodology**
The research was designed as case studies of 5 Irish trade unions. It included interviews with 69 trade union officials including the general secretaries of the 5 case study unions, servicing officials and union organisers. In addition interviews were conducted with officials at the Irish Congress of Trade Union. Preliminary findings were reported to 4 distinct groups of participants, the general secretaries of the 5 unions, senior organisers, junior organisers and to the ICTU directly. At each session, which lasted ½ to a full day, participants were asked to feed back their views on the research in a focus group setting which offered greater scope to compare, contrast and investigate the interconnections between unions, and the variations in their approach to organising.

**Conclusion**
In recent years, a number of Irish trade unions have sought to incorporate an organising model into their operations against the backdrop of an inhospitable economic climate. This paper appraises these efforts and seeks to account for the varying trajectories followed by the various unions and the variable success they have had in adopting an organising approach. Critical factors identified include:

- A lack of central support and a consequent difficulty in sharing practice and experience across union and among union organisers.
- Resistance within unions, which was exacerbated in a context of diminishing resources
- Inter-union rivalry
- Employer postures
- The 'status' of organisers. Most organisers were relatively young, recent recruits with few, if any, well-established links into the wider trade union movement. This resulted in them, in many cases, operating as experimenting islands lacking critical supports from within and outside their unions. This further reduced the capacity for inter-organisational learning.

**Bibliography**
Simms, Holgate and Heery (2013) Union Voices: Tactics and Tensions in UK Organising