Organising, educating, and training: varieties of activist learning in left social movements in Sheffield (UK)

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Abstract

The article is based on activist research working in an anti-deportation social movement, and on sixteen interviews with both experienced and less experienced activists between 2009 and 2011.

The anti-deportation social movement made up of a range of organisations, is identified as a left social movement situated in an historic producer proletarian culture of manual work in coal and steel. South Yorkshire, a heartland of twentieth century social democracy, developed a tradition of workers’ popular adult education integrated with a range of left social movements. Popular adult education institutions emerged post 1945 which ‘educated’ a wide range of labour movement organisers – politicians, union officers and leaders. The institutions were often formed out of popular adult education initiatives by students of past programmes and staff who were themselves politicians, trade union advisers and activists in left social movements.

South Yorkshire was de-industrialised in the 1980s and 1990s and since 2000 has become a destination for refugees, and migrant workers from Central Europe. The anti-deportation social movement is based on experienced activists drawing on the experience and values of a ‘society of purpose’ in South Yorkshire and expressing a ‘politics of outrage’. The organisations within the social movement exploit what remains of the popular adult education traditions but also deploy a range of antiracist and political education methods. Asylum seekers and refugee activists involved in the movement pursue ‘really useful knowledge’ for personal, political and collective liberation. The article sheds light on the interrelationships between organising and educating, and the importance of re-historicising and politicising social movement theories.
The Sheffield People’s College, founded in 1842, was governed democratically by its students; in 1849 its president was a shoemaker. Thanks to the People’s College, observed one radical artisan: ‘There is a peculiarity in the town of Sheffield above all others that I have noticed in that town, all classes of labourers dare to speak out the truth that is within them, ay, and labour while they think’ (Quoted in Rose 2001:190).

Introduction

The article is based on ‘activist research’ in the spirit of Hall and Turay (2006), Walter (2007) and Juris (2008), and constructed in the hope of developing ‘movement relevant theory’ which may be of real use to social movements. As Bevington and Dixon (2005) point out this means adopting a research process that involves dynamic engagement with movements in the formulation, production, refinement, and application of the research. The researcher’s connection to the movement provides important incentives to produce more accurate information, regardless of whether the researcher is studying a favored movement or its opponents. And while movement relevant theory is not entirely new, the present moment offers distinct opportunities for it to play a more prominent role in social movement scholarship (p 190).

Also, it seems to me the present moment makes it urgent that we re-politicise the analysis of social movements. Useful as some of the theorising has been, much recent work has drifted away from the origins of the contemporary analyses – particularly the historic roots of social movement theory itself. I want to re-historicise social movement analysis and to argue for the historical existence and centrality of ‘left social movements’ and their role in mobilising political, class and collective action within and beyond social democratic parties.

I follow Jackson (1995) in using R.H. Tawney’s formulation, as a social democratic theorist and adult educator, of the political economy of adult education.

If I was asked what is the creative force, which has carried forward educational movements, I should reply: the rise of new classes, of new forms of social structure, of new cultural and economic relationships (Tawney 1926: 20, quoted in Jackson 1995: 183).

I also build on the work of Raymond Williams, another adult educator and socialist theorist, and his notions of struggle and learning, and the dialectics of organising and learning.

The struggle to learn, to describe, to understand, to educate, is a central and necessary part of our humanity. It is in itself, a major way in which reality is continually formed and changed. What we call society is not only a network of political and economic arrangements, but also a process of learning and communication (Williams 1966: 19).

I remember the history of those without rights and without property demanding the means to understand and alter their world, of the complicated interaction between their own self-organisation, and not only those who would control and buy them also. Those who knew from direct experience, how hard, disturbing, and endlessly flexible any real learning is (Williams, 1983: 243).
I argue that popular adult education movements in Britain are best seen historically as part of a range of ‘left social movements’ which emerged along with and linked to socialist and social democratic parties and groups as one of a range of agencies of mobilisation. Researching adult education and learning as an activist in a current social movement around anti-deportation campaigning in Sheffield and South Yorkshire, I found significant continuities and discontinuities with this tradition. There is a range of evidence which suggests that the forms in which leading activists within the social movement organisations ‘frame’ their activities (both organising and educating), and their ideology, are heavily determined by the fact that they are operating, and absorb a political culture and discourse, a ‘structure of feeling’, within what Dai Smith has recently described as ‘societies of purpose’ (see Smith, 2010).

The research also suggests that the current nature of popular adult education in the organisations and practices of the anti-deportation social movement are reflective of historical tensions between organising and educating, and at the same time there is evidence of a creative fusion between both. The quest of activists, particularly asylum seekers and refugees, in the social movement for ‘really useful knowledge’ for personal, as well as collective and political liberation and transformation, ‘to get out of our present troubles’ is suggestive both of reworking existing educational discourses and institutions, and of creating spaces and real opportunities for new directions and politics in a changing political economy of popular adult education.

Methodologies

The analysis is developed from activist involvement and is based on interviews, participant observation and discussion, building on ‘activist wisdom’ (see Maddison and Scalmer, 2006). Interviews with both current experienced and less experienced activists are set in the context of investigating the recent history and political economy of popular adult education in left social movements in South Yorkshire, one of the heartlands of post war social democracy in the UK.

The 16 main interviews with activists were carried out between July 2009 and April 2011. During this time also, I had discussions with activists at meetings, and was involved in a range of actions and demonstrations. My thanks go to Stuart Crosthwaite of SYMAAG (South Yorkshire Migration Asylum Action Group) who undertook some of the interviews and actively collaborated in the production of a paper based on part of the research (see Crosthwaite and Grayson, 2009).

The contexts for left social movements: South Yorkshire’s proletarian culture

South Yorkshire people between the 1890s and the 1970s created a ‘proletarian’ producer economy and culture based on the massive exploitation of extractive and manufacturing industry - based around coal and steel. Urban centres were dominated by workers and their cultures and politics in relatively isolated and closed communities where ‘working class society contained the full range of ability, and a pool of able men (mostly men) provided capable leadership for their own class in trade unions, local politics and all the way up to Parliament and government (Offer, 2008:5).

This producer economy and culture was under attack and in decline from the 1970s, but there is strong evidence of the survival of the distinctive features of ‘a
society of purpose', particularly in the continued development of left social movements and embedded institutions, and organisations based on principles and practices of popular adult education. Certainly they seemed to survive down to the 1990s, when the sub-region was finally de-industrialised, with the virtual disappearance of coal, steel and engineering, and the jobs and urban working cultures which went with them. As part of this process the class composition and activist membership of formal political parties and agencies changed, as did their relationship to the state.

**South Yorkshire politics as ‘Solid Labour’**

Much of the region from the 1920s and 1930s was heavily unionised and ‘solid Labour’ (see Grayson, 1996). This classic social democratic model developed, and depended for mobilisation and its sustainability, on the parallel but integral development of ‘left social movements’. The most important of these was the trade union movement, with the NUM (Mineworkers), AEU (Engineering and Steel), TGWU (a ‘General Union’ with members across industry, construction and public services), and public sector unions like NUPE (Public Employees). All of them were integrated with the Labour Party and in some instances the Communist Party. They produced politicised shop stewards, full time trade union officers, councillors and MPs. Even in 2010 the joint leader of Britain’s largest union UNITE had his origins in the engineering industry of Sheffield.

There were of course other left social and cultural movements within the web of social democratic political culture. Women challenged male dominance of the unions and parties in campaigning movements like the Cooperative Women’s Guilds (see Rowbotham, 1992), and in left cultural movements (see Grayson, 1997), and of course in the hugely important Women Against the Pit Closures (WAPC) movement in the 1984/5 Miners’ Strike (Holden, 2005).

Women were also central to other neglected ‘community’ left social movements notably the Tenants’ Movement which played a crucial role in South Yorkshire, allied to the trade unions, as a mobilising agency for the Labour Party, and to a lesser extent communist and other socialist politics into the 1990s (Grayson, 1996).

**Workers’ adult education and Left social movements**

Meshed with the trades unions and other left social movements like the ‘Tenants’ Movement were the organisations and programmes of workers’ adult education. In the steel town of Scunthorpe, in the South Yorkshire district of the Workers’ Educational Association (WEA) in the 1970s there were monthly meetings still of the ‘left’ social movements discussing and driving local Labour movement policies at the Trades Council, with delegates from the local trades unions, the Cooperative movement, and the WEA.

The Extra Mural Department of Sheffield University became the site of hugely influential miners and steelworkers ‘three-year day-release’ courses which, with programmes at Leeds University, influenced the future careers of the leaders of the steel unions in the 1980 steel strike, and the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) in the year-long miners’ strike of 1984/5, and councillors and political leaders throughout the region prominent in confrontations with the Conservative governments of the 1980s as the ‘Socialist Republic of South Yorkshire’. Three of the adult education staff at the University themselves became Labour MPs, and one became leader of Doncaster Council in the 1980s.
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These networks of trade union students as political and union leaders themselves created new centres for workers’ adult education, notably the Northern College in 1979. Northern College’s principal was active in the Institute for Workers’ Control. Other staff held office in Sheffield District Labour Party, they were local councillors, as well as advisers to the NUM in the Miners Strike, and a future Labour cabinet minister chose to immerse herself in this network as an administrator at the College (Ball and Hampton, 2004).

The fact was that the organisers, tutors, even administrators in the worlds of left political adult education themselves were not simply committed to the values and ideology of political parties, left social movements and groups, but they themselves were political actors and often products of the left social movements and their popular adult education. This was the case in South Yorkshire, not just in the heady days of the 1960s and 1970s (Fieldhouse, 1983), but through to the 1990s. Thus popular adult education was both educating and taking on a political organising role.

Contradictions and tensions in the legacy of workers’ adult education

A central contradiction in the history and practice of workers’ adult education in South Yorkshire in left social movements arose in distinctions between educating and organising A distinction drawn by Miles Horton in conversations with Paolo Freire in 1990.

Some argue that organising educates. I said that education makes possible organisation, but there’s a different interest, different emphasis...We do education and they become organised......Basically it’s not technical training. We’re not in the technical business. We emphasise ways you analyse and perform, and relate to people, but that’s what I call education, not organising (Bell et al. 1990: 115–116).

Northern College with its two-year programmes continued a curriculum based on the day release programmes, a radical version of Liberal adult education. Rose’s (2001) revisionist study of the Intellectual Life of the British Working Class demonstrates the ambivalence of this liberal adult education tradition. Much of the tradition had a philanthropic and social control perspective of ‘gentling the masses’. Yet within this tradition Rose argues that ‘Liberal education proved more effective than straight indoctrination in making radicals because frankly, it was more thrilling, more likely to generate the enthusiasm that mobilised students to change the world’ (Rose 2001: 53).

The WEA, Sheffield University and Northern College were to build on the radical core within this liberal tradition, embedded as they were in a South Yorkshire ‘proletarian’ culture with a large number of politicians, trade union officers, and public service professionals produced from the courses. These courses retained elements of what Michael Newman has called ‘teaching defiance’ (Newman, 2006). They also serviced and resourced a variety of left social movements in residential short courses at Northern College and through community based courses (see Grayson, 2005). These resources were still available (if vastly reduced) to the current anti-deportation social movement in South Yorkshire (see below).

These institutionalised if collective pathways for adult learning were of course building on rooted traditions of the autodidact, and a world where in Sheffield, even
in the nineteenth century, ‘all classes of labourers dare to speak out the truth that is within them, ay, and labour while they think’ (quoted in Rose 2001: 190). Work and working conditions, particularly in the mines, produced ‘on the job’ collective and self organised ‘skills training’ but often linked to the development of the union where the ‘teachers’ alongside you were often union representatives (Burge, 2000). Interviews with refugee activists suggested that they also were learning through their campaigning work both personally and collectively, learning from and with other activists, developing what Foley (2004) calls ‘incidental learning’.

Training for organising and the labour market

There were constant tensions in left social movement popular adult education produced by the needs and logic of social democratic social movements, institutions and leadership. Shop steward training and later trade union officer training expanded and was orchestrated and controlled by the Trades Union Congress (TUC) Education Department centrally, and by its regional education officers. The pedagogy and curriculum of these programmes narrowed and became primarily economistic and instrumental. The TUC policy was to achieve ‘parity’ with the burgeoning management training and business studies courses in institutions of further and higher education.

Of course these developments in the 1970s were not unrelated to the political economy of adult education at the time, with an international oil crisis and a major restructuring of British capitalism, and some would argue the turn towards neo-Liberalism, towards consumerism and away from social democratic welfarism. The separations between politics, work, culture and ‘community’ always latent in the practice of left parties and left social movements began to become rigid compartments often undermining solidarities in action (Grayson, 2003). Community development training replaced the political activism and resource workshops of the Marxist influenced Community Development Projects. The National Federation of Community Work Training Groups set up its HQ in Sheffield and had a major influence on training in the community. This obsession with training in the 1980s began the slide into an emphasis on a new educational agenda, totally driven by the labour market, and a belief that vocational training, and a skills driven educational agenda was the key to economic regeneration. An agenda which arguably reduced adult education into lifelong learning for the labour market (see Broadfoot, 1996).

Anti-deportation campaigning – evidence from the research

The current political economy of popular adult education

South Yorkshire in 2011 is a classic example of a UK sub-region devastated by deindustrialisation in the 1980s and 1990s, and many parts of the area continued to be amongst the poorest areas in the North of England.

By 2003 it was clear that South Yorkshire was changing rapidly again, this was not surprising. The impact of privatisation and continued loss of manufacturing jobs had created a low paid economy in the service and communication sectors, and growing inequalities. Mollona (2009) in a study based on ethnographic research in east Sheffield, has argued that the remnants of the steel industry have produced small scale enterprises in a survival economy of benefits and casual employment beyond traditional trade union and class organisation. Dorling (2009) sees this class formation
as the poor extreme of a spatially segregated city with growing inequalities – literally a tale of two cities.

In what was the steel and coal heartlands of the UK, where a few African Caribbean and British Asian people came to work in the 1970s, the dispersal of asylum seekers, and new migrants from Central Europe from 2004, produced in Sheffield a cosmopolitan city. In June 2005 there were 1320 asylum seekers receiving National Asylum Support Service (NASS) in Sheffield from 56 different countries of origin. There were around 1500 Slovak and Czech Roma in Rotherham and Sheffield (Horton, Grayson and Petrie, 2007). In the 2001 census Sheffield had 8 per cent of its residents from BME (black and minority ethnic) origins. In 2007, 30 per cent of births in the city were from migrant families (Sheffield City Council, 2007). The global has certainly become local, as Paul Mason has put it:

*A culture that took two hundred years to build was torn apart in twenty...Today in place of a static local workforce working in the factories and drinking in the pubs their grandfathers worked and drank in, a truly global working class is being created* (Mason, 2007: xi).

This rapid economic and social change has created an atmosphere of personal and family, job and economic, insecurities. Political and media discourses, within which popular adult education operates, by 2003, had amplified and channelled fear in communities, with the demonising of the migrant, and the asylum seeker as the root of social ills. The result was the generalising of a ‘common sense racism’ infecting debates and political practice (see Kundnani, 2007 and Lentin and Titley, 2011). Symptomatic of this was the rise of the Fascist Right, the BNP (British National Party) (see Goodwin, 2011). By May 2004, 126,000 people voted for the BNP in European and local elections in Yorkshire, in 2009 a BNP European member of Parliament was elected for the region. In Barnsley, the BNP fielded candidates in most wards in every election from 2004 to May 2011.

**Social movements around anti-deportation campaigning**

The most recent development of a social movement around anti-deportation campaigning in the UK dates from the late 1990s. There was campaigning in the 1980s, but by 2002 ‘it would be hard to claim that a mass social movement was still in operation’ (Farrar, 2004 p 239). The 1993 Asylum Appeals and Immigration Act, the 1996 Asylum and Immigration Act and the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 opened up an unprecedented deluge of legislation, aimed at ‘anyone fleeing war poverty and mayhem’ (Cohen, 2006: 29).

In Sheffield the development of a social movement around anti-deportation campaigning was a response to the social and political effects of this same legislation, in particular the punitive and at times brutal operation of the legislation creating in Cohen’s memorable phrase ‘the Orwellian world of immigration controls (Cohen, 2006: 29).

In Sheffield the development of a social movement around anti-deportation campaigning was a response to the social and political effects of this same legislation, in particular the punitive and at times brutal operation of the legislation creating in Cohen’s memorable phrase ‘the Orwellian world of immigration controls (Cohen, 2006). The reactions since, in places like Sheffield have, as one interviewee put it, built a social movement around the ‘politics of outrage’.

**Current roots of campaigning in Sheffield**

Some interviews suggested that activists had moved into anti-deportation and asylum rights campaigning from voluntary or paid work in local ‘homelessness’ charities. In 2000 they identified the central government’s dispersal of asylum seekers to ‘spread
the burden’ from the South East of England as a likely recipe for destitution amongst arriving refugees. In 2001 Yorkshire received the largest number of dispersed asylum seekers outside London (Wilson, 2002: 7)

Sheffield had rehoused and resettled dispersed refugees before. In 1974 Chilean political refugees with their families were resettled through a Trades Council Chilean committee. Ugandan Asians arrived in 1972, and Vietnamese from 1979 to 1983. Thus dispersal and resettlement was not a new process for Sheffield. In fact the major refugee and asylum-seeker agency in the city, the Northern Refugee Centre (NRC), was founded to support Vietnamese refugees. The city, almost alone nationally, has from 2004 to 2010, resettled Liberian, Burmese, Congolese and Somali refugees under the UNHCR Gateway Protection Policy.

What changed after 2000 for Sheffield activists was the UK government’s centrally directed ‘punitive Poor Law’ reducing the support and status of asylum seekers almost to that offered to the poor in 19th-century England. Policies towards asylum seekers at a local level meant inadequate housing and vouchers rather than cash support, linked to a growing regime of forced deportation and detention and intimidation of failed asylum seekers reducing them to destitution.

**Continuities and campaigning**

Sheffield’s distinctive leftwing, collectivist political and social movement history (see most recently Price, 2008) was identified by interviewees as a major factor in developing and sustaining the anti-deportation movement. Certainly leadership in the organisations was by people in their fifties and sixties, veterans of earlier radical periods in Sheffield or elsewhere.

Interviewing key activists in various groups within the social movement, it became clear that many had personal experience of the politics around the Miners’ Strike and the ‘Socialist Republic of South Yorkshire’ in the 1980s when Left wing Labour councils had defied central government cuts to services and local spending. One particular activist came to Sheffield knowing its political reputation, but also its reputation as a ‘village’ with a shared culture across classes.

In many ways this is consistent with Raymond Williams’s notion that social actors and activists draw not only on history but have identified with and learn from a ‘structure of feeling’, the lived experience and culture of a particular historical moment. Williams argued that ‘the culture which [the working class] has produced, and which it is important to recognise, is the collective democratic institution, whether in the trade unions, the co-operative movement, or a political party’ (Williams, 1958: 313).

In the 1980s Sheffield University’s Politics department had analysed Labour Party membership in the city, these studies demonstrated the exodus of working class members and the influx of public sector workers and professionals, and the marginalisation of left social movement influence (Seyd and Whiteley, 1992). Another study from sociologists at Sheffield University used Williams’s ‘structure of feeling’ approach to provide a snapshot of the culture of the city in 1996 (Taylor, Evans and Fraser, 1996). The study chronicled the political changes which abandoned Labour’s established welfare urban policies for retail, leisure and high profit private development. These policies presaged the decline of Labour and the eventual loss of control of the city to the Liberals. But the research also noted the continuities of values and deeper political beliefs.

Some of the interviews in Sheffield were with activists who had pursued middle class public sector careers. They were part of a generation which had joined the
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Labour Party in the early 1980s and had since left, taking with them a powerful residual ideology, to reappear in the anti-deportation movement. Some were returning to even earlier root political activities in the new social movements of the 1970s which they had abandoned with the ‘entry of movement activists into the Labour Party as members … and the taking up of paid and co-opted positions within the structures of local government by movement activists’ (Lent, 2001: 7).

In the Labour Party of the 1980s it was these ‘educated working class’ members with further and higher education qualifications who had displaced the influences of the traditional Labour working class member and councillor (Seyd and Whiteley, 1992). In fact this generation had, like previous Socialist activists, constructed and defined the working class as a ‘political class’ (Sassoon 2010: 7–8) within Sheffield’s fertile proletarian culture, but with a disparate range of actual working class experience of gender, and ethnicity in the mines and in small and large factories. This generation could lay claim to the ‘organic intellectual’ label which had been lived out by generations of activists before them.

The interviews also suggest that where areas like South Yorkshire have historically generated movements and political activities based on the mobilisation of ideologies, and transformational ideas and theories, they survive in memory. Dai Smith, writing about South Wales, has called these

*Societies of purpose* (where) … *It is then not nostalgic or historical wish fulfilment to work … to retrieve and take forward the values, of what was worthwhile in past lives that particularly speak to us, connect with us* (Smith, 2010: xx).

The crucial findings from the research suggested that the fertile society of purpose in South Yorkshire was still forefronted in activists’ political memory, and also in the wider population of South Yorkshire. In 2005 Julian Baggini chose to live for six months in a nearby Rotherham postcode, which represented the absolute average for the whole of England. He found that ‘despite received opinion to the contrary England’s culture remains predominantly working class’ (Baggini, 2007:20) He cites a visit to the Clifton park museum in Rotherham and its display on the miners’ strike. Over twenty years after the strike, in responses to a visitors survey at the museum, ‘57 per cent of visitors either took part in the miners’ strike or had family who took part in it. Altogether 65 per cent thought that the miners were justified in breaking the law, 73 per cent thought the media did not report the strike fairly, and 71 per cent do not think it is a good thing that the pits closed’ (ibid.: 34).

In the USA, Green, an adult educator engaged in public history work has argued persuasively for the importance of this ‘role of historical consciousness in movement building and in the mysterious processes that create human solidarity’ (2000: 1). Experience in adult education in the labour movement in South Yorkshire suggests that labour and social history teaching and courses have, even to the present, reconstructed a past to build a future.

The interviews with leading activists suggests that this particular group with an educated working class background, and middle class public sector employment, have responded within the political traditions of social democracy. In contrast, previous research in relatively affluent suburbs in South Yorkshire towns like Barnsley where skilled, retired or self employed working class voters live, suggest that it was here where the first electoral successes for the BNP were registered from 2007, typical of other Northern English post-industrial ‘societies of purpose’ (Goodwin, 2011).
Further research may shed light on these apparently polar opposite sets of ideological reactions.

**Remembering grammars and skills of past politics**

Those interviewees with direct left political experience in the past were obviously attracted to a movement with principles which was ‘fighting for peoples’ rights’, even as outsiders to the mainstream world of council and party politics. One interviewee suggested that many individuals who had a Labour Party and/or trade union background had joined anti-deportation campaigning in the tradition of ‘championing the underdog’ disillusioned with what remained of the labour movement and local politics. These activists were actively drawing on experience and activist wisdom of organising gained in formal politics to use in a different world of social movement campaigning. O’Toole and Dale (2010) have found that young, but experienced, BME activists in social movements in Bradford were now rejecting formal politics but using their learnt experience of the ‘grammars’ of politics: ‘While there is evidence for changing political subjectivities, there is a need to take account of the interplay between old and new grammars of political action’ (2010: 126) and ‘the significance of new grammars of action should not be read as displacing conventional or identity politics; rather, these can coexist with them although potentially in reworked forms’ (ibid.:141).

Interviews and observation suggested that although a majority of the experienced activists interviewed identified with left of centre politics in Sheffield, and one was a prominent member of the Labour Party, there was strong evidence of a cynicism about, if not rejection of, local ‘New Labour’ politicians. South Yorkshire has many Labour MPs with prominent ministerial experience between 1997 and 2010 including the present Leader of the party Ed Miliband, an MP in Doncaster. The current (2011) deputy prime minister in the Coalition government is a Sheffield MP and a Liberal Democrat. Anti-deportation campaigning constantly tests established political allegiances. SYMAAG one of the groups in the network which comprises the social movement,3 sees its role as lobbying MPs, seeking pledges at elections on asylum policy, and getting councillors and political organisations involved in campaigns. SYMAAG is a formal organisation with regular open meetings every month or so, and regular executive meetings between open meetings. The lobbying and contact with MPs is reported back and discussed and responses and direct actions agreed. Interviews and observation with SYMAAG activists have identified a range of skills and political grammars; from a retired senior civil servant skilled in writing (and decoding) letters to ministers; and long experience in Socialist groups and the Labour Party from others. Migrant members bring active membership of factions in the MDC (Movement for Democratic Change) party in Zimbabwe, and of the Democratic Party in Uganda. A refugee accountant from East Africa brings real skills in administering campaign emergency funding.

**Methods for organising and learning**

The anti-deportation movement has been able to draw on anti-racist adult education work in South Yorkshire contesting the ‘common sense’ of racist attitudes through ‘myth busting’ and ‘awareness raising’ techniques. From 2003 Northern College, and the Northern Refugee Centre (NRC) in Sheffield organised awareness raising for professionals and voluntary sector workers, working with asylum seekers and anti-racist
programmes for workers in local authorities, including a programme ‘after the Bombs’ in the summer of 2005 in communities where some of the London bombers had lived and worked (see Mycroft, Weatherby and Grayson, 2005). The ‘teach-in’ and ‘public education’ method had been revived in 2004 and 2006 at Northern College with weekly evening sessions led by refugees and campaigners funded by the English Home Office ALAC programme (see Grayson 2010). A 2007 Barnsley based project with BBEMI (Barnsley Black and Ethnic Minority Initiative) and the AdEd Knowledge Company to mark the bi-centenary of the abolition of the slave trade, ‘Remembering Slavery Building Diversity’, organised history workshops and awareness raising events on Roma migrants and modern slavery. These included oral history workshops with Gypsies and Travellers and Roma migrant workers from Slovakia, a workshop on Women and Trafficking with the NRC, and a history and research conference on local migration of European Roma people (see Horton and Grayson, 2008).

Discuss the issues, organise resistance
A central strategy of the anti-deportation campaign has been to mobilise, through popular adult education, public sector professional workers and staff and students from the two local universities, influenced by the ‘politics of outrage’. Professionals working ‘in and against the state’ (Barnes and Prior, 2009; and London Edinburgh Weekend Return Group, 1980) have been involved in Sheffield campaigns on asylum seekers’ healthcare and the children of asylum seekers, mobilised through large public meetings organised by SYMAAG.

A public meeting organised by SYMAAG and City of Sanctuary in April 2009 was entitled ‘Atrocious Barbarism’ quoting a Lancet journal description of the government’s proposals to restrict access to health services for asylum seekers. Flyers for the meeting, aimed at health and medical workers, invited them to ‘Discuss the issues and organise resistance’. A hundred workers and campaigners turned out and a branch of the action group ‘Med Act’ was formed by medical students attending. Another public organising meeting highlighting the treatment of children in the asylum system was held later in 2009. The meetings included invited speakers from the local council and the UKBA (UK Borders Agency) deliberately to hold them to account as part of the campaigning.

The ‘teach in’ model was used by SYMAAG and STAR (see footnote 3) in March 2010 for a meeting on ‘Asylum Law and Justice’ at Sheffield University, with well-known national and Sheffield based immigration lawyers. Over seventy students, lecturers, local solicitors, refugees and asylum seekers attended and started the process which established South Yorkshire Refugee Law and Justice in 2011 to mobilise and train volunteer legal advisers and researchers for individual anti-deportation cases.

The most interesting revival in left social movement organising and educating was perhaps the organising of an election hustings by ASSIST and SYMAAG in April 2010 before the General Election with local candidates debating the pledges on asylum SYMAAG had asked candidates to support. Around 300 people packed a central Methodist hall – by far the largest political education hustings meeting held in Sheffield.

Refugees, their political organisations and popular adult education
The WEA in Sheffield using funding programmes to improve citizenship and regeneration, has continued work with refugees. Discussion and English language classes in 2003 in Darnall, the old steel works area of Sheffield, attracted asylum seekers from the Cameroon. In 2004 the WEA worked with Liberian refugees from camps in Guinea,
and other people from Cote d'Ivoire, to organise a ‘citizen education’ programme with study visits to the Liverpool slavery museum and to Parliament in London as background to workshops on colonialism and British democracy.

In 2005 a WEA Africa history course was developed with a group of Congolese men who were refugees and asylum seekers, based in their homes in Rotherham. The group was from Congo (Brazzaville). One of the group went on to Northern College, and later a ministry college. Another went on a ten day course, with a residential weekend, leading to a Northern College study tour for refugees to a folk-high school in Malmo, Sweden; then to Northern College and a business degree at Sheffield Hallam University. Another Congolese group, this time from the DRC (Democratic Republic of the Congo) strengthened their political organisation through WEA classes on African history. The activists had already organised their own ‘Africa Time’ group organising ‘awareness-raising’ events and workshops around HIV AIDS, and ‘War and Rape in the DRC’. They collaborated with research academics at Sheffield University who were working on the DRC. The Sheffield University Lifelong Learning Department responded to the group by recruiting one as a tutor for an Africa course and by organising a course on Migration. The DRC Africa Time group was constantly drawn into anti-deportation campaigning to defend members of the group, and at the same time organising as part of a DRC opposition in exile. The group, as a fundraiser for an anti-deportation campaign in 2011, showed the film ‘Lumumba’, with an exiled speaker from the DRC based in London. One of the leaders of this campaign, and a student at Sheffield Hallam University, suggested that he had won back his confidence and self esteem from working with these political activists, and it enabled him to undertake an MA course at university.

Asylum seekers and refugees from Zimbabwe, Eritrea, Libya and Iraqi Kurdistan in Sheffield combine this pattern of political activists in exile with personal and collective anti-deportation campaigning in Sheffield. Constant threats to deport asylum seekers back to Zimbabwe have produced Sheffield demonstrations, organised with SYMAAG, which have involved the Zimbabwe issue being raised, with speakers from the churches, politicians and trade unionists. In fact the ‘expressive’ aspects of the anti-deportation movement are best represented in the very frequent demonstrations outside the town hall and marches down the city to the UKBA regional headquarters. All anti-deportation groups see this direct action and occupying of public space as a way of educating and raising the profile of their causes and campaigns. Many activists spoke of the real courage needed to be involved in these public actions and to be identified ‘back home’ as dissidents. SYMAAG itself was launched fully in 2008 through a weekend march across South Yorkshire from Sheffield to a detention centre in Doncaster. The march was routed through working class areas and council estates to allow face-to-face discussions with local people about asylum issues.

SYMAAG has created a ‘safe space’ in a discussion centre for political activists in exile. At each of its meetings there is an agenda item ‘country reports’ where exiled activists report on current political and human rights issues in their home countries and assess whether local Sheffield educational campaigns would be useful – by letter-writing, lobbying MPs or organising events and demonstrations. Thus self-education, political education, and training for organising are combined in the activities of the social movement. One African politician refugee active in SYMAAG attended a political strategy residential course at Northern College, two Refugee Council organising
training workshops, and is undertaking a Chartered Institute of Housing qualification as a volunteer worker in a local housing association.

A large number of asylum seekers and refugees volunteer in organisations within the social movement. ASSIST (see footnote 3 for this and further acronyms) has at present (April 2011) around 150 active volunteers with around ten new ones per week. A large percentage (probably around 50 per cent in the main organisations), of these are refugees and asylum seekers, as are many of the officers. Most of these volunteers have shown themselves willing to mobilise for anti-deportation actions at very short notice. Estimates of volunteer numbers from the research suggest that there are between three and four hundred activists in the core organisations of the social movement and many more are active in overlapping or linked organisations. SYMAAG which focuses on direct political mobilisation, sent out twenty e-mail bulletins in 2010, thirty one in 2009 to a network of 483 individuals or organisations in 2011. The ‘open’ and discussion monthly meetings of SYMAAG have consistently recorded attendance of between fourteen and twenty between 2009 and 2011, with a growing percentage of women and migrants. All the other organisations (ASSIST, City of Sanctuary, CDAS, STAR, Refugee Law and Justice) record consistently strong support and involvement.

**Conversation clubs, ‘voice’, and campaigns.**

The Sheffield branch of CDAS (Campaign to Defend Asylum Seekers) was established in 2000 and is the main focus for individual anti-deportation campaigns within the social movement. It is linked to what in other centres is simply volunteer English language drop-in centres. In 2002, with STAR and the NRC, a network of ‘conversation clubs’ were established in various parts of the city. Here students and volunteers work with asylum seekers on improving English language skills but also in Freirian-style open up a dialogue, giving a space and confidence for those who wish to fight deportation, and go on to a CDAS meeting to start a campaign with a small group of CDAS volunteers. They themselves initiate the campaign and learn the skills with more experienced volunteers. CDAS at its regular meetings emphasises giving ‘voice’ to individual life stories and sharing experience from each campaign. The group has campaigning skills training sessions some coordinated with the national organisation NCADC (National Coalition of Anti Deportation Campaigns). CDAS has developed an impressive network by listening to refugee activists. In March 2011, responding to campaigners at short notice, it organised ‘a no deportation to war zones’ campaign, with forty activists from eight different countries present at the launch meeting.

This campaigning and educational strategy using ‘voice’ and storytelling has been developed extensively by the Actors for Human Rights organisation, Ice and Fire, which have their Northern base at the NRC. They work extensively with the social movement in South Yorkshire and do extensive educational readings and events in community and conference settings. They have over 300 professional actors who volunteer for readings and plays based on interviews and testimony from asylum seekers and migrants. Cultural campaigning has also included film screenings with discussions at the local council funded Showroom cinema.

**Churches, unions, and previous migrants**

Interviews also emphasised the links of individual campaigners with faith groups.
Many of the activists have a Christian church background. Sheffield has a reputation again borne out by its history of ‘mixing Methodism with Socialism’ (see Price, 2008). Anti deportation campaigning has sucked in a whole range of radical and political clergy, ministers and congregations going beyond the established philanthropic or charity approaches. This is not surprising for many of the asylum seekers fighting deportation are themselves active members of Christian churches.

Solidarity has meant a Quaker couple donating their life savings to buying two houses for use by ASSIST. Local anarchist squatter groups have run training workshops for the organisations determined to occupy empty properties for asylum seekers. A Catholic nun has been involved in campaigning and opened up a local church particularly to Eritrean and Ethiopian asylum seekers, many of them Muslims. A Methodist minister opened up a small night shelter for destitute asylum seekers. A Baptist church rented a house for use by a failed asylum seeker family forced to go underground to avoid deportation. The congregation debated whether this was illegal but as one of the interviewees put it, ‘I told them it was God’s law we were obeying not the government’. The strong ethical approach which Christian activists evidenced in interviews suggests that the social movement activity was drawing on a morality beyond the ‘politics of outrage’, but also a secular ‘moral economy’ rooted in Sheffield political cultures as well as religious belief (see Bagguley, 1996). This political campaigning role for local churches on asylum seekers developed from existing social action networks like Church Action on Poverty (CAP) and the Catholic Justice and Peace network.

The anti-deportation movement leading activists were from overwhelmingly middle class occupations but interviewees also saw trade union networks and working class activists as important in contributing to anti-deportation campaigns. In 2007/8 UNITE helped develop a Migrant Workers’ Support Network with SYMAAG and other Sheffield voluntary agencies which monitored raids on unionised factories for ‘illegals’, in one case Iraqi Kurdish asylum seekers. The union also supported a joint steward /campaigner workshop with the NRC. The TUC ‘Let Them Work’ campaign was seen by one interviewee as very important in giving real public legitimacy to the campaigns. Members of the Public and Commercial Services union at the Sheffield UK Borders Agency itself have offered support through their ‘Not A Number’ campaign. SYMAAG and City of Sanctuary have built strong links with Unite Against Fascism (UAF) in South Yorkshire, which is largely financed by the education unions and jointly organised with Trades Councils. In Barnsley, in 2008, the Trades Council with teachers unions and the miners sponsored a SYMAAG Solidarity with Asylum Seekers conference on May Day symbolically held in the Miners’ Hall.

It is also significant that the organisations of first-generation migrants from the Caribbean and Pakistan have rarely been visible in anti-deportation, and traditional race relations organisations like the local Council for Racial Equality have been sidelined by new agencies mobilising large numbers of volunteers and activists. Activists in important social movements from the 1990s like the SAYM (Sheffield Asian Youth Movement) (see Renton, 2006) can now be found as councillors or integrated into mainstream ‘race relations’ roles. (see Farrar, 1999 for a similar pattern in Leeds) An exception to this is the local Chilean refugee community, from the 1970s, which has continued solidarity action and joined recent anti-deportation campaigning.
Conclusions

The paper reflects to an extent a work in progress and are preliminary findings from a process of activist research. I am already engaged in revisiting my notes and collecting current data to engage with and test out some of the emerging work in the field of migrants' social movements by Anderson (2010) and Pero (2008), and the emerging work on resistance in migrants movements (Sawyer and Jones, 2011).

These interviews and observations, particularly using an historical gaze, have perhaps not taken the theory of social movements into a higher stratosphere than where they presently float, but certain insights have I think been gained, and I trust will be helpful to activists and adult educators alike. I hope I have captured Lawrence Cox’s ‘movement milieux of reflexive lifeworlds’ without falling into the trap as a political activist myself of over dramatising the political (Cox, 2009).

The experienced activists interviewed suggested that their political and strategic learning had been influenced by drawing on the historical resources offered by the distinctive political institutions, movements and culture of South Yorkshire and Sheffield in particular. Learning and organising in social movements thus needs to be spatially and historically placed. Sheffield, its political culture and its political economy of adult education has been a crucial frame for mobilisation and actions in the social movement. It is certainly the case that in places like Sheffield remnants of popular adult education institutions and organisations have been exploited, perhaps in their dying days - like the WEA and Northern College. The Universities in Sheffield seem to be providing a new resource in students mobilising within the ‘politics of outrage’ but a very marginal one in terms of popular adult education interventions or programmes.

Miles Horton’s distinction between organising and education has perhaps been lost amongst the sheer eclecticism of the methods and ideological approaches within the social movement. The research findings, none the less, suggest that the distinction can be useful. Insights from studies of activists’ wisdom and Foley’s (2004) commentaries on incidental and informal adult education in social movements are certainly replicated in the South Yorkshire research. Michael Newman quotes Horton’s observation that ‘You only learn from the experience you learn from’ (Newman, 2006: 240) and suggests that this emphasises the importance of the intervention of an educator or social movement to ensure that ‘action can lead to learning and learning to action’ (ibid). The varieties of training which are emerging in the anti-deportation movement are certainly nearer to Newman’s ‘teaching defiance’ mode than to models current in capacity building or approaches based on generating skills transferable to labour markets. Newman’s arguments find resonance in the research when he argues that ‘the challenge for the activist educator is to help people translate their anger into forms of action whose impact will be useful’ (Newman, 2006: 50). The experience of activist learning in the interviews and observation certainly support the approach of Jane Thompson to popular adult education. She speaks directly to the experience of activists in the anti-deportation social movement when she rejects starting learning programmes for action from fashionable notions of ‘inclusion’ and ‘exclusion’, as she says, ‘It would be more appropriate to begin from a sense of outrage’ (Thompson, 2000: 182).
Notes

1 Letters to the *Poor Man's Guardian* in 1834 put the case for learning for action ‘A man may be amused and instructed by scientific literature but the language which describes his wrongs clings to his mind with an unparalleled pertinacity’ or more bluntly. ‘What we want to be informed about is – how to get out of our present troubles.’ (Johnson, 1979: 84).

2 It is an interesting continuity in workplace adult learning in social movements that one of the experienced left activists I have worked with in recent years in anti-racist movements is himself a trained ‘Learning Representative’ for his union at his workplace.

3 The anti-deportation social movement is a loose coalition of five main organisations: ASSIST (Asylum Seekers Initiative – Short Term) a volunteers organisation assisting destitute asylum seekers with accommodation and basic support, CDAS (Campaign to Defend Asylum Seekers) an organisation mobilising support for individual anti-deportation campaigns, SYMAAG (South Yorkshire Migration and Asylum Action Group) an organisation focussing on political lobbying, campaigning and direct actions, STAR (Students Action for Refugees) campaigning for refugees and asylum seekers, Northern Refugee Centre an advocacy and advice organisation with a range of paid staff and volunteers and City of Sanctuary, the Sheffield group which launched a national voluntary movement to create cities welcoming those seeking safety and sanctuary. Other organisations have intermittent roles in campaigns and or/links including Sheffield and Barnsley Trades Union Councils, Unite against Fascism in Sheffield and Barnsley, and Amnesty. And a range of South Yorkshire based refugee political organisations including Iraqi Kurds, Eritreans, Congolese (DRC and Brazzaville), Zimbabweans, and Sudanese (Darfur).

4 Graham Birkin himself a long-standing campaigner for refugees and a WEA tutor kindly gave his time for a long interview which has informed this section. Graham was the tutor / facilitator for many of the courses.

5 David Blunkett a current Sheffield M.P. and a former Labour cabinet minister was born in Sheffield and emerged as council leader in the 1980s. He has said that his inspiration ‘came from Marx and Methodism’ (Jordan, 2010 p.61).

6 Piper (2009) gives examples of other engagement with migrants’ campaigns by trades unions.

References


Organising, educating, and training


