

ORGANISING AN INDUSTRIAL ACTION BALLOT DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: THE CASE OF A UK UNIVERSITY AND THE UNIVERSITY AND COLLEGE UNION

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“7th Conference of the Regulating for
Decent Work Network”

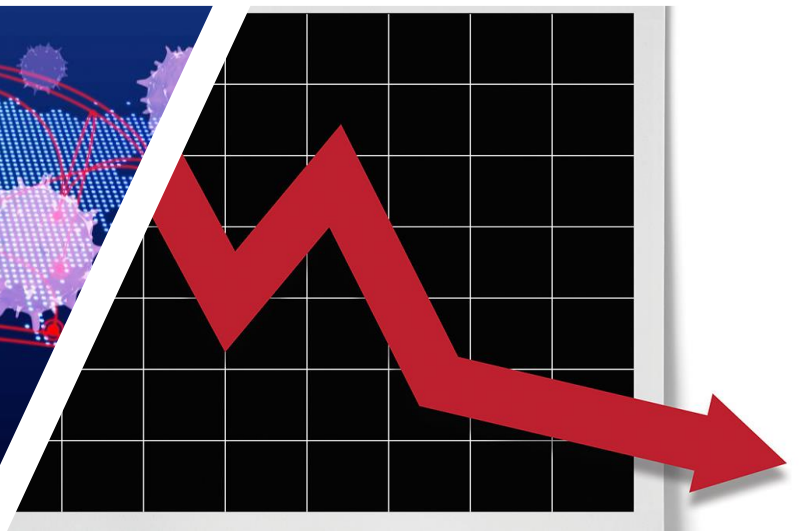
Virtual Conference, International
Labour Office Geneva, Switzerland

6-9 July 2021



The 'problem'

- Large scale redundancy programme at a UK university – 130 jobs/approx. 6% workforce
- 6 months into a global pandemic
- Rising unemployment/shrinking GDP
- Rising sectoral conflict
- Wider higher education redundancies, cutbacks
- 'Working from home' – new and historical workload issues
- Staff adapting to new ways of delivering teaching, i.e., 'blended learning'
- Voting thresholds of UK's Trade Union Act 2016/disrupted mail services
- A minority 'affected' by redundancy plans





Aims and research questions

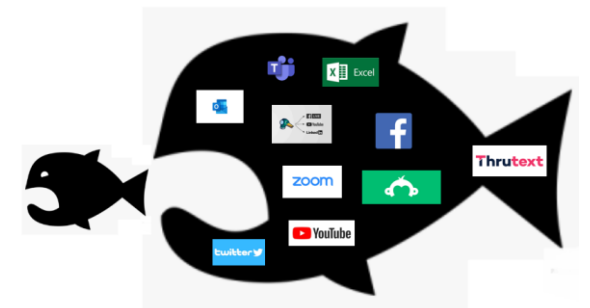
Aim: To explore and extend, theoretically and in practical terms, union organising during a global health and economic crisis, highly restrictive strike laws, and where members are highly dispersed and accessible only via Internet-based technologies.

RQ1: From an organiser perspective, what approaches to organising makes for an effective campaign for industrial action?

RQ2: From an organised member perspective, how important are a range of organising interventions in the wider mobilisation of members?

Organising theory

- Traditional organising
 - Organising and mobilising
 - Group cohesion and identity
 - Density of mechanisms connecting members
- GTVO organising
 - Practical interventions
 - GTVO organising model
- Technological-driven organising
 - Web 1.0 and Web 2.0
 - Density of communications



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Methodology

- Single case study – over 3 month dispute (mid-August to mid-November 2020)
- Interviews with GTVO organising ‘team’ or ‘steering group’ (n=4)
 - Branch Administrator (branch employee)
 - GTVO Organiser 1 and 2 (lay organisers)
 - Branch Development Organiser (FTO)
- Survey of members (n=95)/23.6% of membership
- Focus on ‘organised’ members (n=25)/6.2% membership/9.4% voting in ballot

What was achieved

- 66.1% ballot turnout
- 77% supporting strike action/88% support action short of strike action
- Collective agreement to resolve dispute, i.e., no compulsory redundancies on current re-organisation programme (still ongoing July 2021)
- 40-50 jobs saved
- Fair Work agreement



Figure 1:
GTVO plan
and
campaign

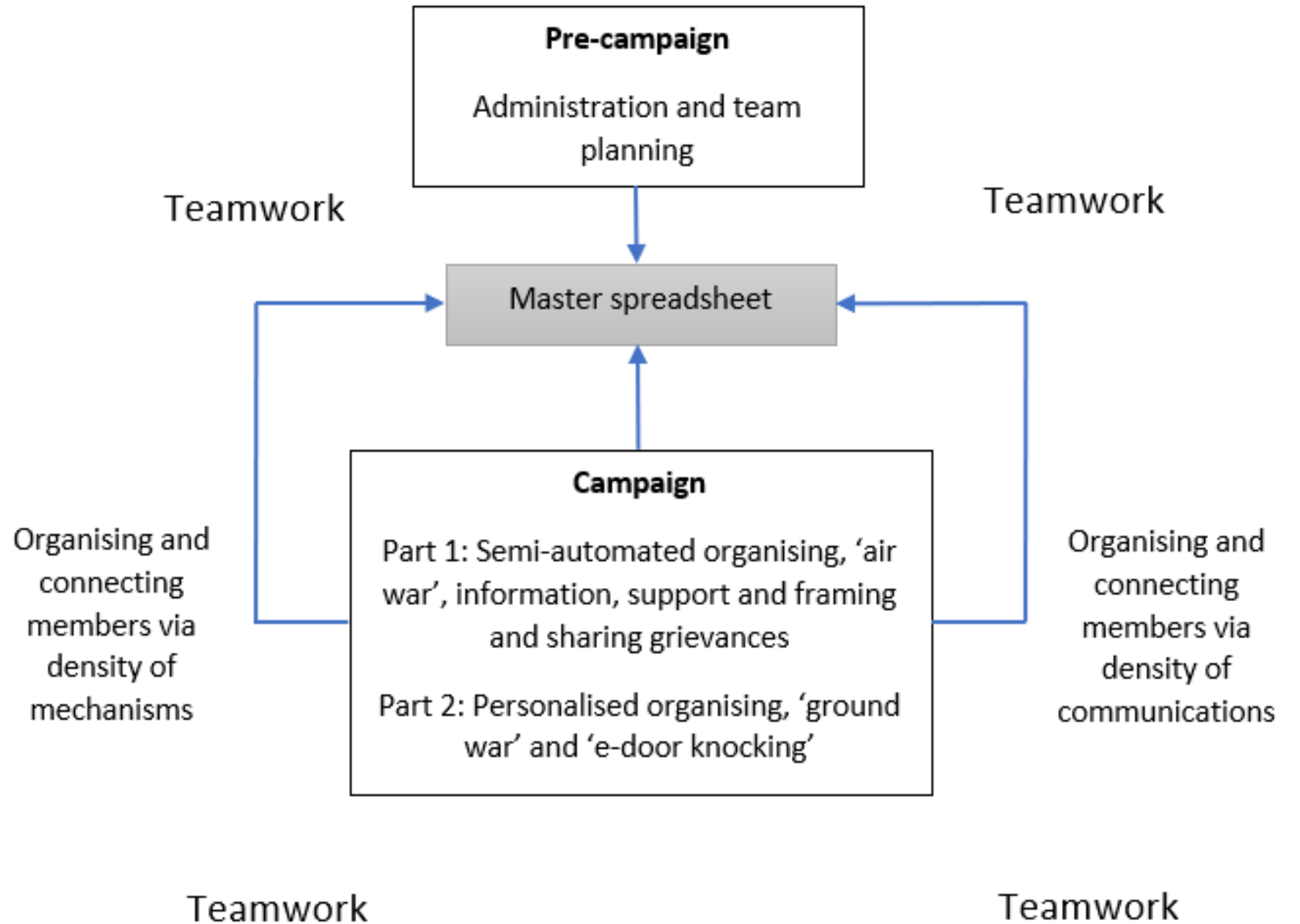
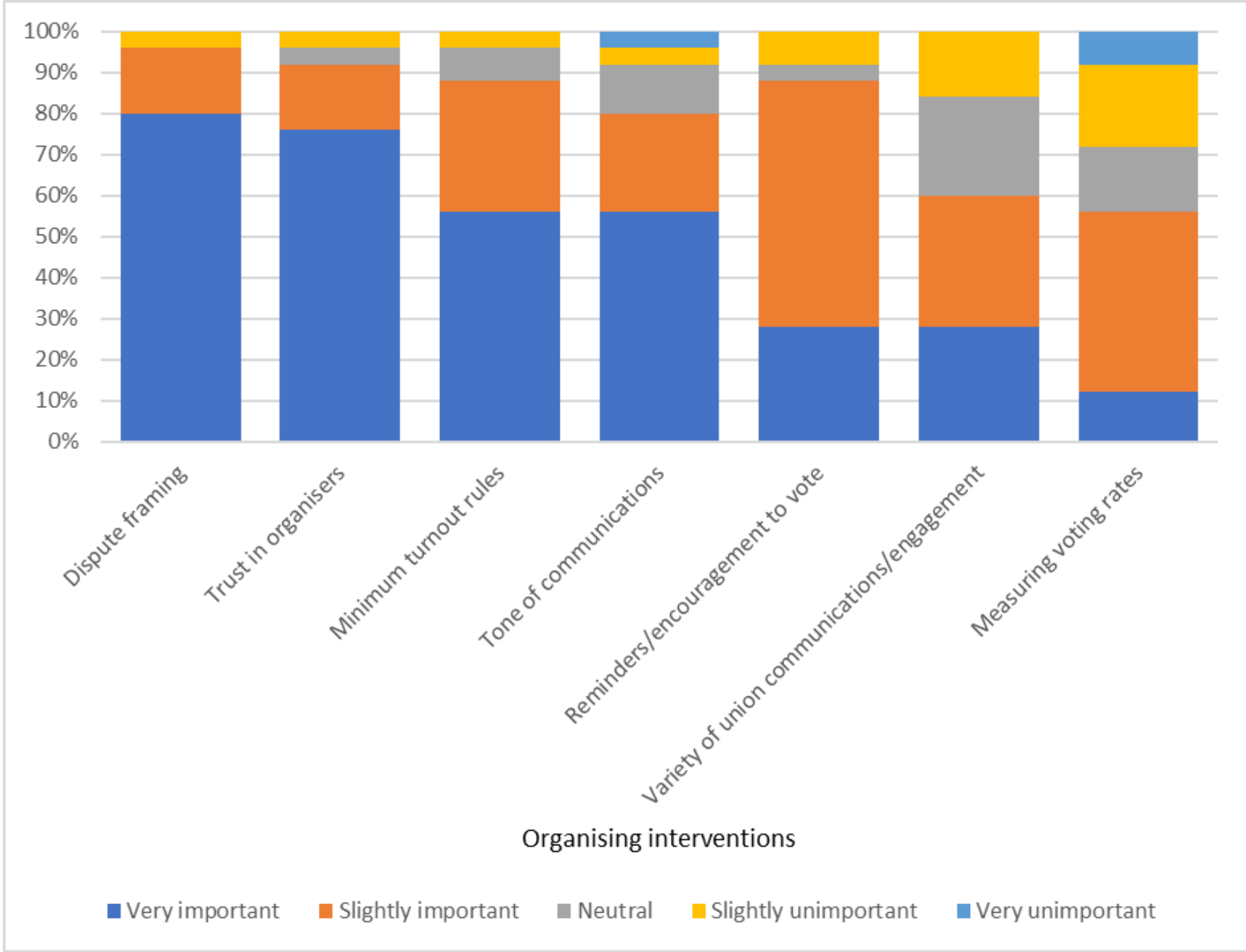


Figure 2:
Member attributions of importance to organising interventions



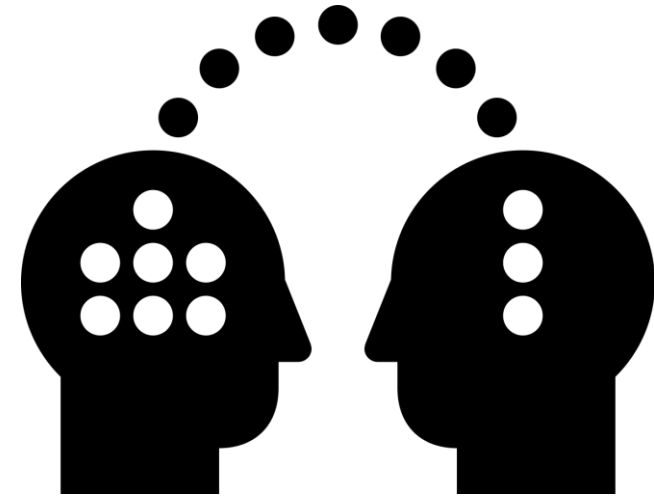


Contribution (theory)

- Empirical – one of very few studies to capture the successes of unions during the pandemic
- Debates – an addition to the many and intersecting challenges faced by unions (e.g., Covid/anti-union legislation/dispersed workforce)
- Organising
 - Extended notions of organising and mobilising
 - Extended GTVO organising model
 - Notion of ‘organising’ mechanisms and technologies

Contribution (practical)

- Traditional forms of organising can be replicated in the most challenging circumstances
- Points towards 'hybrid' forms of organising
- Nuanced understandings of 'organised' under anti-strike laws
- Importance of unions investing in technology/training
- Organisers make strategic choices concerning technology used in campaigns – connecting and communicating with members



What Next?

- Earlier GTVO paper under second review
- Presentation to BUIRA 2021 (July)
- Submit current paper to IRs journal later 2021
- Continue building impact case study – support UCU branches/EIS
- National pensions dispute expected 2021/UCU
- **Looking to extend research with other unions, larger bargaining units, different occupational groups**