

‘Organising in the Air and on the Ground’ – Cabin Crew Resistance to British Airways’ Reconfiguration of Work and Employment

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Abstract

The focus is on the protracted dispute (2009-2011) between British Airways (BA) and its cabin crew and their union BASSA (British Airlines’ Stewards and Stewardesses Association). Against a historical legacy adversarial employment relations, the dispute was triggered by the company’s imposition, in disregard of collective bargaining procedures, of reduced crewing levels, transformed working arrangements and a new ‘mixed fleet’ on inferior terms and conditions. Despite the fact that the company marshalled considerable resources against the union, including a ‘strategy of decapitation’ of the BASSA leadership, the cabin demonstrated a profound commitment to collective action that saw very large ballot majorities and 22 days of strike action. The question driving the paper is how to explain such powerful collectivism given the adverse conditions facing the crew. Specifically, the paper is concerned with how BASSA was able to organise when confronted with a number of spatial problematics, including the residential disaggregation of its crews and the dispersal across the globe of a transient workforce. Drawing on testimony deriving from extended in-depth semi-structured interviews, the paper provides compelling evidence of BASSA’s and crews’ utilisation of internet-based communication to organise members and to help overcome the problems of dispersion and distance. Particular emphasis is placed on the effectiveness of two blogs, the BASSA Forum and Crew Forum. The paper engages with a recent literature on the use of union use of internet-based communication and social media and both challenges those who have exaggerated the importance of their capacity to generate a ‘distributed discourse’ and those who have been overly-sceptical of unions’ ability to effectively use such technologies. In the BA-BASSA dispute of 2009-2011 virtual forms of organising were integrated with the real, although in the final analysis mass meetings and rallied and effective picketing were the fulcrum of action on strike days. Internet-based communication and interaction certainly contributed to successful organising but of most import for collectivism was the structure of union reps and BASSA’s embeddedness in the work lives of their members.

1. Introduction

This paper is concerned with the protracted dispute (2009-11) between British Airways (BA) and its cabin crew and their trade union, BASSA (British Airlines’ Stewards and Stewardesses’ Association), now part of Unite the Union. The catalyst was the imposition without negotiation, and in disregard of agreed collective bargaining procedures, of reduced crew complements across both the long-haul (World Wide) and short-haul (Euro) fleets (Ewing, 2011). BA’s unilateral action stemmed from the company’s resolution to transform working arrangements, to dilute the terms and conditions of contracts for newly recruited crew and remove 1,700 cabin crew jobs. BA’s underpinning strategy was Operation Columbus (British Airways, 2008), which had the wider objective of introducing a ‘mixed fleet’ that undermined inherited agreements and proposed, in effect, a two-tier workforce. For cabin crew, BA’s unilateral action was seen not just as jeopardising the legacy of negotiated working conditions but, inextricably, as dramatically increasing managerial control and marginalising or even threatening the existence of their union.

The dispute was framed by highly-politicised judicial proceedings instigated by BA’s attempt to de-legitimise union action (Prassl, 2011). Initially, cabin crew voted by a huge majority (93 per cent on an 80 per cent turnout) in November 2009 to take 12 days of strike action in December, but a High Court injunction sought by BA against Unite the Union under TULCRA (BA v Unite the Union, 2009) forestalled BASSA’s first proposed action. The judgement raised fundamental questions regarding the right to strike in the UK (Dukes, 2011), although the High

Court subsequently upheld the union’s appeal (Ewing, 2011). After a rebalot in February - 81 per cent in favour of action on a 79 per cent turnout - the union commenced strike action on 20 March for three days. Further ballot votes produced similar majorities as the dispute extended into 2011 and involved 22 days in total. Clearly the commitment to strike action, albeit over an extended period, stands out in sharp relief against the backdrop of low levels of strike activity in the UK (Hale, 2012).

Formidable employer counter mobilisation (Kelly, 1998; Ewing, 2011; Upchurch, 2010) characterised the dispute, with initial efforts directed towards BASSA as an organisation and its leaders and activists. BA withdrew the long-standing facilities agreement, prevented BASSA officers for being de-rostered in pursuance of union business and, shortly into the dispute disciplined and/or dismissed leading union reps and activists, in what has been described as ‘strategy of decapitation’ (Ewing, 2011: 20). The circulation of an anonymous consultants’ document, commissioned by BA, that appeared to recommend such a course of action (Anon, 2006) suggests some premeditation in this course of action. An Employment Tribunal case (*Cook v British Airways plc* 2012), subsequent to the dispute, confirmed the existence of ‘the Leiden Room’ at BA headquarters, at which dispute-related ‘disciplinary cases’ were investigated and administered under procedures the Tribunal deemed to have been illegitimate.

In preparation for and on strike days BA marshalled considerable resources to minimise the impact of the action. It recruited ‘volunteer’ crew from ground staff and pilots and chartered planes at great costs from competitor airlines such as Ryanair. As well as legal obstacles and sustained employer antagonism, BASSA faced government opposition; Prime Minister Brown stated that the crews’ action was ‘unjustified and deplorable’ and transport secretary Lord Adonis condemned the union for holding ‘passengers to ransom’ and declared that a strike would ‘threaten the very existence of BA’ (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/8567409.stm>). In addition, crew faced the job-related problem of a lack of support from pilots union, BALPA.

Nevertheless, against these significant forces, cabin crew demonstrated a profound commitment to collectivism which was evident not just in the majorities for strike action in successive ballot votes but also in exuberant behaviour on strike days. The media reported vibrant picket lines, spontaneous processions of uniformed crew and a carnival atmosphere at BASSA’s strike-day headquarters at Bedfont Football Club near Heathrow (Richards, 2010). Such demonstrable collectivism, even militancy, must be set against the stereotypical depictions of cabin crew, whether as ‘the unthreatening faces of Middle Britain – sensible, orderly, down to earth people, as far removed from stropy left-wing militancy as you could imagine’ (Philips, 2010) or, in the words of a cabin crew respondent, ‘just a bunch of girls or a bunch of gays’ (Denise), as in the ‘trolley dolley’ caricature. The depth and breadth of this collectivism might be considered remarkable given the crew’s apparently fragmented identities, by gender, sexuality, ethnicity and nationality.

Consistent with the acknowledged importance of theorising labour in spatial terms (e.g. Castree et al, 2004; Coe, 2014; Herod, 2001; Herod et al, 2007; McGrath-Champ et al, 2010), at least three spatial factors have been identified that appear to militate further against the success of collective action. First, there is the salient fact that the crew is scattered across domiciles in the UK and Europe (given that BA has multinational crews). Second, as geographically atomised, crew only come together as individuals to form ephemeral collectivities for the duration of the flights, and then disperse on return to Heathrow. Third, and related to transience and the

fragmented labour process, is the fact that the workforce is dispersed across the globe at any particular moment in time.

Explaining how BASSA, its leadership and cabin crew membership were able sustain effective resistance to BA and to undertake collective action in the context of such unfavourable conditions is identified as a central research question. A recent study (Moore and Taylor, 2014) has revealed sources of mobilisation and collectivism lying in the characteristics of the cabin crew labour process and the profound embeddedness of BASSA within the work lives of its members. BA management had been unable to impose direct control and to breach the responsible autonomy of its unionised cabin crew and on-board managers, the Cabin Service Directors. The informal collectivism of cabin crew, as rooted in work solidarities, synergised with BASSA’s role in formal collectivism as joint regulator of working conditions and defender of job controls. This paper complements this previous work by shifting the focus from the factors underpinning collectivism to an examination of BASSA’s organising approaches, methods and initiatives and their effectiveness.

Moore and Taylor (2014) observed *en passant* that, according to cabin crew testimony, social media had played an important role in the dispute, but at that stage did not subject it to systematic scrutiny. This paper corrects that deficiency by investigating BASSA’s utilisation of the internet-based forms of communication. In arguing that there is no Chinese wall between the virtual and the actual, the paper explores also the union’s adoption of ‘traditional’ organising methods and the relationships between them. The concrete spatial problematic confronting BASSA of how to organise this transient, residentially fragmented, and geographically dispersed workforce informs the empirical analysis.

Prefacing the empirical findings, the paper engages with three relevant literatures. First, it reviews the broader political economy of the civil aviation industry, industry employment relations and those specifically at British Airways. Second, it engages with salient themes from the recent theorising on spatiality and labour. Third, it considers work on the utilisation of internet-based communications and social media in the sphere of labour studies, including discussion on the utilisation of these methods by unions. Following an account of the sources and methods employed, the primary data is organised into two main sections, based on the cabin crew and BASSA activist accounts. The perceived effectiveness of both the social media and internet-based communications and more traditional forms of organising are documented. The concluding section includes a broader reflection on the geography of organising and on the status and significance of internet-based tools and social media for labour unions.

2. Political Economy of Civil Aviation, British Airways and BASSA

The transformation of civil aviation, which followed de-regulation in the United States, was the underlaying cause of the BA-BASSA conflict. The removal of state protection sharpened competition, increased market volatility and exacerbated the effects of pro-cyclical demand characteristic of the industry. Over time, the responses of ‘legacy’ airlines to more challenging markets have included merger and acquisition, code-sharing, ‘hub and spoke’ networks, subcontracting and franchising (Blyton *et al*, 2001; Turnbull *et al*, 2004). For example, British Airways is now part of IAG, which owns Qantas and Iberia. Where co-operation emerged through strategic alliances (BA and OneWorld), the paradoxical effect was intensified competition (Dana and Vignali, 1999). New entrant ‘no frills’ carriers have exerted greatest pressure on full service providers (Harvey and Turnbull, 2010) to minimise labour costs in order to close cost and price gaps (Bamber *et al*, 2009: 167).

Labour has been the central focus of continuous restructuring, because it accounts for a significant proportion of total operating costs (Doganis, 2006) and, unlike other costs (e.g. aircraft, fuel), is a ‘variable’ element (Turnbull *et al*, 2004). If labour cost minimisation has been a central driver, then a parallel objective has been to secure service quality from customer interactive staff. Blyton and Turnbull (2004) capture the contradictory dynamic shaping cabin crew labour, of delivering exemplary customer service while intensifying work intensification through cost efficiencies.

September 11th 2001 proved a watershed for ‘legacy’ airlines (Bamber *et al*, 2009) which implemented dramatic cost savings, redundancies, leaner staffing and revised contracts. The post-2001 contexts constrained the extent to which airlines were able to exercise the strategic choice of adopting a ‘high road’ high-commitment, soft HRM model or a ‘low road’ high-control, hard HRM paradigm advocated by Bamber *et al* (2009). Organisational success is not always equated with ‘positive’ workplace relations (Hampson *et al*, 2012), as RyanAir’s profitability demonstrates. The perceived logic for many firms is that, in order to cut costs, they must pursue conflictual employment relations, even if this jeopardises cabin crew’s commitment to service (Curley and Royle, 2013).

BA exemplified the paradoxical logic of fostering employee commitment for customer service, while simultaneously reducing employees’ compensation (Bamber *et al*, 2009: 58). Yet, however much BA oscillated between high-road commitment and low-road high-control strategies (Turnbull *et al*, 2001), labour cost reduction has dominated. The shift to ‘market-led’ realism was manifest in the *Business Efficiency Programme* (BEP) pursued from 1996. Following 9/11, 18,000 jobs were lost (2001-2006) (Bamber *et al*, 2009: 36). In the interests of ‘saving the airline’ BASSA had agreed to BA’s request to remove one crew member per flight but, when conditions improved, this lost complement was not restored. Many believed that BA was using 9/11 opportunistically to impose further rationalisation (Blyton and Turnbull, 2004) and, in 2007, to justify reduced pay, pensions and sick leave entitlement.

Within these industry and firm contexts the adversarialism of BA’s industrial relations and the frequent attempts to marginalise BASSA are evident (Bamber *et al*, 2009; Blyton and Turnbull, 1994; 1998; 2004; Colling, 1995; Grugulis and Wilkinson, 2001; Whitlegg, 2003). In 1989 BA had changed contractual terms and encouraged the formation of the moderate breakaway, Cabin Crew’89, divisive actions which created a legacy of bitterness. The important dispute was in 1997, prompted by BA’s proposed restructure of payments. Significantly, for industrial relations Cabin Crew’89 accepted BA’s offer, leaving BASSA to fight alone. Eighty per cent voted for strike action on a 73 per cent turnout. After management threatened to sack all strikers and to discipline ‘stayaways’, only 300 struck, but more than 2,000 reported sick in what became celebrated as the ‘mass sickie’ (Blyton and Turnbull, 2004). The 1997 strike prefigured 2009-11 in key respects; the threat to de-recognise BASSA; the register of resistance, exemplified by the widely-adopted slogan ‘*Brutish Airways*’; the personal animus directed towards the CEO, Ayling in 1997 and Walsh in 2009-11.

Despite the two decades of cost-cutting that eroded conditions, segmented crew through inferior contracts and intensified work, management resolved to radically re-configure work arrangements and terms and conditions. Initially, in 2007, BA attempted to achieve its objectives through collective bargaining, but negotiations failed. BASSA then planned a 3-day strike after large ballot votes, but the action was called off. Avoidance of conflict merely postponed the reckoning. In Operation Columbus cost reduction was ‘the driving force’ behind

a ‘new fleet agreement’ at Heathrow that would transfer Eurofleet and Worldwide crew to a new ‘mixed fleet’ on ‘closer to market pay and allowance rates’. Most radically ‘brand new agreements and reward structures’ would provide ‘a golden opportunity to break down some of the barriers to change that are a feature of the old agreements and the relationships that accompany them’ (Ewing, 2011). As regulator of these ‘agreements’, BASSA was compelled to resist these changes.

BASSA had considerable influence, 89 per cent membership density by 1989. Of 14,000 cabin crew, 11,500 were BASSA members and 1,500 belonged to Cabin Crew’89 (BASSA, 2012). BASSA was and remains deeply embedded in the work lives of its members who formed a powerful unionate occupational community. It closely regulates ‘rosters and scheduling, pay, hotels, allowances and all working agreements and conditions’ (<http://www.bassa.co.uk/BASSA/WebPages/AboutUs.asp>). Such close affinity had an important ideological dimension for the bonds of trust forged between union and members over many years meant that crew would more readily accept BASSA’s, and not BA’s, version of events.

The dispute was not simply the outcome of BA’s cost-cutting strategy clashing with the immovable opposition of an intransigent union. BASSA made concessions which came close to meeting BA’s targeted £53m. cost savings. Walsh’s rejection suggested the more elemental objective of breaking BASSA. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/business/2010/mar/25/ba-strike-letter-academics-walsh>. A consultative document (Anon, 2006) urging BA to ‘force the issue with BASSA’ by ‘hitting the leadership...where it hurts’ (Ewing, 2011: 8-11) and ‘to prepare for a showdown with the Unite the Union’s flight attendant branch’ provided some confirmation. Most pertinently, the trigger for the dispute was BA’s *imposition* of reduced crews, which betokened its intention to exercise unfettered control over employment relations and to create a new bargaining unit for the mixed fleet. Within this conceptual framework discussed below, the BA dispute can be seen as a spatial contest over the reconfiguration of physically adjacent collective bargaining units.

3. Spatiality and Labour and British Airways

Since Harvey (1982) analysed the spatial unevenness of capitalism and concluded that it was central to the accumulation process, scholars have informed studies of work, employment, gender and resistance with insights from geography (e.g. Massey, 1984; Peck, 1996; Hudson, 2001). The fertile engagement between geography and labour studies (Castree et al, 2004; McGrath-Champ et al, 2010; Rainnie et al, 2007; Ward, 2007) has continued to foreground the rescaling of economic life and how spatial and scalar relationships influence work and employment (Herod et. al, 2007). Important territories have been marked out concerning the scale at which labour should best organise against global TNCs. We concur with Herod’s (2001; 2002) important argument that union strategies to counter TNCs should not be sharply counterposed between ‘organising globally’ and ‘organising locally’, and that ‘organising at both scales simultaneously’ may best serve their goals’ (2002: 83). It follows that the mobility of jobs and the extent to which they can be relocated internationally, or have to be performed *in situ*, is important. Where jobs are immobile, but within TNCs, connections can be forged between workers across space, but capital cannot lever advantage from intensified competition (Anderson, 2009: 960).

Precisely because there is enormous variability in the configuration and spatial location of economic activity, work and employment by TNCs, there can be no ‘one size fits all’ organising strategy. Within the global value chain (GVC) literature, a focus on governance forms and the

degree of disintermediation has produced helpful schema (Gerreffi et al, 2005) that depict the range of possible arrangements as lying between hierarchy (in-house provision) and market (outsourcing). Insofar as British Airlines might be considered a TNC, and with specific reference to its cabin crew ‘services’, it is located at the hierarchy end of the spectrum. Moreover, there is the sectoral and firm peculiarity that, although a global transport services provider, its operations remain highly centralised at its Heathrow headquarters and terminal airport. While its core cabin crew form a highly mobile workforce, they are only temporarily dispersed. Having been ‘down route’ they return to their domestic UK base¹. For British Airways and its cabin crew the dialectical tension between ‘spatial fixity’ and ‘spatial mobility’ (Harvey, 1982) is played out in a particular manner.

To adopt Herod et al.’s (2007) terms, British Airways and their cabin crew are economic actors who, in one sense are ‘contained’ by a particular spatial unit but, in another sense, transcend this spatial constraint through operating at a global scale. The combination of the transience of the workplace and the centralisation of corporate location shapes employment relations and work and employment practices. The latter has profoundly influenced the ‘scale’ of collective bargaining which has remained nationally (i.e. UK) based and structured around highly centralised arrangements between BA and BASSA. The distinctive characteristic, if not contradiction, of nationally determined pay and conditions at ‘local’ level for a mobile workforce working for a ‘global’ TNC, but who also are spatially tied, profoundly influenced BASSA’s organising efforts in the 2009-2011 dispute. The evidence confirms Jessop et al’s observation (2008: 389) that an excessive preoccupation with the ‘spatial turn’, that is ‘the privileging, in any form, of a single dimension of socio-spatial relations, scalar or otherwise’ must be questioned.

4. Information Technologies, Social Media and Labour Organising

The evidence below demonstrates how internet-based communication and engagement were utilised by BASSA and, relatively autonomously by cabin crew, to overcome the spatial difficulties of workplace transience and dispersion, and residential diffusion. A flurry of recent studies have been preoccupied with the internet and social media and their consequences for labour agency. Work blogs by anonymous posters have been identified as spaces enabling workers to comment critically on their work experiences and corporate discourses (Ellis and Richards, 2009; Richards, 2008; Richards and Kosmala, 2013, Schoneboom, 2011). While conceding that work blogs have the capacity to critique the labour process, generate counter-cultural values and develop networked ‘resistance’, albeit in the loosest of senses, those researched and discussed in this literature certainly tend to individualistic, attitudinal opposition, and are dissociated from labour organising agenda that can connect to a wider collective purpose.

At the same time, internet-based communications and social media have been seen as presenting unprecedented opportunities for collective action. Seminal contributions by Lee (1996) and Shostak (1999) championed the potential of the internet for intra- and inter-union communications and labour activism, particularly at the transnational scale in what was held to be the new era of globalisation. The outcomes have been the proliferation of labour websites, such as the pioneering LabourStart and more recent Union News and the universal, if uneven, adoption by unions of websites and multimedia.

Academic contributions, often from a critical Foucauldian tradition, have made grander claims for the emancipatory potential of web based technologies. Greene et al (2003) suggest that the

internet can facilitate a ‘distributed discourse’ in the face of Michel’s iron rule of oligarchy, by which unions are dominated by a small group of bureaucratised officials whose conservative interests are opposed to those of the wider membership. ‘E-collectivism’ may offer a countervailing force to bureaucratic control, which is underpinned by inequality of knowledge, differential control over communication, the time, energy and space poverty of ordinary members, and the uneven distribution of communicative skills (Greene et al, 2003: 284). Of salience to the cabin crew dispute is that ‘E-forms allow the time and space considerations of trade union participation and activism to be reconfigured, overcoming requirements to physically meet by offering electronic proximity in virtual space’ (2003, 286). Meeting in ‘virtual’ time and space can facilitate communicative skills and confidence to be developed ‘in safe spaces’ and for solidarity to be enhanced.

Hogan et al (2010) propose that ‘the conditions of physical adjacency and interaction which gave rise to traditional patterns of solidarity have new counterparts in electronic space’. Connectivity removes spatial separation and ‘alters the existing contours of power through highly distributed access to the information infrastructure critical to the functioning of the emerging global economy’ (Little and Grieco, 2010: 73). The research presented here builds upon this in revealing the transformation of an on-line forum based upon occupational identity into a media for collective mobilisation. For Hogan et al. a key characteristic of internet enabled communication is to provide a material base for solidarity, providing the conditions for ‘the transformation of membership, voice, action and direction’ (2010:36), allowing a geographically dispersed rank and file to challenge hierarchical organisation.

Studies have examined internet-based communications in the context of specific disputes. Hogan and Greene (2002) researched the 2002 fire fighters pay dispute, focusing on the unofficial website (<http://www.30kfirepay2.co.uk/>) established by an FBU activist outside of official structures, and which included a chatroom and forum. This unofficial site had more hits than the official site leading Hogan and Greene (2002) to conclude that it provided ‘a communicative space for the multiplication of voices in a manner that could not be achieved in real time and space’ outside of official structures. The task and cost of managing the site are distributed, from the many who supply information to the few who remotely moderate it. The site was a space for skill development, such as document analysis and drafting templates of letters for the local press, but it also encouraged transparency and became a means by which to hold the union leadership to account. Hogan and Greene (2002) suggest that the internet’s greatest challenges to conventional trade union activities are found outside of official structures, within lay or ordinary member locations. Carter et al (2003) examined the unofficial 28 month Liverpool Docks dispute. LabourNet mobilised an activist network and international support for the dockers, although the site disseminated information, rather than being an interactive on-line forum. Carter et al. argue that ‘the internet offers the possibility for polyphonic organisation to emerge, which has significant implications for the practice of unionism’, providing a space for different voices and a discourse that is not ‘colonised’ (2003: 295).

Martínez Lucio (2003) in the context of Spanish unions, demonstrates that engagement with the internet reflects the realities of union politics and the dynamics of worker representation, including ideology and identity as well as decision-making processes and an internal democracy tolerating opposition. ‘Communication systems even within unions must be understood as discrete sites of power that are contested. In effect this requires an awareness of the purpose and identity of individual trade unions: thinking in terms of a simple binary of

‘unions’ and the ‘internet’ may be problematic’ (2003, 335). He proposes that union responses vary due to four factors: their integration with communication strategies; their link to union identity; their relationship with internal democratic and decision making processes; and the impact of organisational contingencies. Martinez Lucio (2003) cautions against the reification of a simplistic leadership-membership binary.

5. Research Methods

Methods centred on in-depth semi-structured interviews with 50 cabin crew, who were all BASSA members. The majority were union representatives or activists but included a significant minority who thought of themselves as good members but not necessarily activists. Access was gained through BASSA and interviews were conducted between September 2011 and September 2012. Respondents were equally split by gender. The gender, sexuality, race, ethnic and age profile are broadly consistent with that of BASSA reps, although not with the more diverse overall membership. BASSA’s gender composition reflected that of the overall BA workforce - 64 per cent women and 36 per cent men (BASSA, 2012) - although reps are disproportionately male. Nevertheless, several women hold leading positions including the BASSA Chair.

Roughly two-thirds (33) of the sample worked long-haul (WorldWide), one-third short-haul (Eurofleet) and one worked the single fleet at Gatwick. Forty respondents held senior positions (19 Cabin Service Directors and 10 Pursers), while 21 were main cabin crew. Testimony may disproportionately reflect the BASSA representative/activist base, but the specificity of this sample provides privileged insight into the use and effectiveness of organising methods.

Interview schedules included questions on work histories, job content, trade union activity and experience during the dispute. A focus was on the methods of organising adopted by BASSA and their effectiveness. During these responses interviewees were probed on specifically on their perceptions of the impact of internet-based forms of engagement. Two further interviews were conducted with Unite officers with responsibility for BA during the dispute. Face-to-face interviews took place on union premises, in rooms in hotels and restaurants and in participants’ homes. Interviews were recorded and transcribed and analysed inductively and thematically. Informants are identified by pseudonyms. To ensure triangulation primary qualitative research is supported by observation of BASSA meetings, analysis of membership data and scrutiny of key company and union documentation.

6. The Role of Internet-Based Communication in the BA-BASSA Dispute

6.1 Multiple Forms of Internet-Based Communication

As is demonstrated fully below, the two forums used by the crew, the BASSA forum and the Crew Forum (CP), played distinctive roles in organising, but the BASSA leadership utilised additional forms of internet based communication, in order to maximise member participation in the strikes. In part, BASSA’s enthusiastic adoption reflected its branch secretary’s appreciation of their importance for contemporary union communities; ‘the first thing you’ve got to do is get a website, get a forum’ (Eddie). This perspective was more widely shared by the leadership in general:

[Electronic] communications have been fantastic – we’ve got a website that a lot of the other unions want to emulate...we email, we text. I think communication is what made us really successful (Lorraine).

Due to conflictual employment relations over many years and residual distrust of BA, many crew refused to give the company their email addresses. In contrast, they readily volunteered them to BASAA, a circumstance that provided the union with an advantage over management. ‘We were able to email people every day’ (Eddie). Equally important was BASSA’s access to members’ mobile numbers. Text messaging was seen as ‘really important for keeping people in the loop’ as it ensured the simultaneous dissemination of key messages (Quintin), although it had to be used sparingly.

I could text every member, but it cost £1,000 each time. But we texted them every night before strike days’ ‘Don’t go in’, simple effective messages, so the belief cascaded down. (Eddie)

A cabin crew respondent of receipt recalled the considerable effects for fellow workers and flight crew of the receipt of such simultaneous and collective messages.

I was on the crew bus, so there are say ten people on there, we all got the text messages come through at the same so ding ding ding ding ding! There might be one person who didn’t have a text message, now that doesn’t mean they went on strike or they didn’t go on strike or not. And of course the flight deck would be there and it would be very intimidating in the nicest possible way, because it meant that we just looked at each other realising we were together in this.

If some were doubtful regarding the value of the forum because discussions tended to ‘go off topic very quickly, the importance of the website, newsletters and email were acknowledged.

The website was really important during the dispute, it got the information out there. When we put something on the website, and then emailed out, 9,000 people got it. (Nick)

Every day we religiously put articles on and the Branch Secretary religiously did his blog every day and crew religiously followed it wherever they were in the world (Eddie)

6.2 The Forums

One of the principal themes of this paper is to contest a misplaced ‘techno-centrism’ that privileges internet-based communications as the autonomous driver, if not creator, of social movements and collective action (Hogan et al, 2010) and abstracts web-based technologies as *deus ex machina* from the social relationships in which they are embedded. It is important to acknowledge that in the case of the BASSA-BA dispute the adoption and use of these technological forms occurred within the ‘contested terrain’ of conflictual employment relations and were themselves subject to contestation. Such contestation is evident in the fact that at least four forumsⁱⁱ have been identified for the period prior to, or during, the dispute.

Cabin crew testified to the significance of two ‘sister’ crew forums, operating alongside each for most of the dispute, the BASSA Forum (BF) and Crew Forum (CF), which embodied different conceptions of membership and purpose. The BF, restricted to BASSA members,

emerged as an important communicative tool during the postponed conflict of 2007. Initially members had posted under pseudonyms but the dominance of a small number of ‘intransigent and aggressive’ posters led to objections and prompted the BASSA leadership to close it down, restarting it with members posting under their own names, a loss of anonymity which caused anxiety amongst many. In response, members migrated to and remained with the CF, even though the BF subsequently reverted to the use of pseudonyms. Nick who assumed responsibility for the BF recalled:

The role of the [BF] was always just to get information out there, but it had to be closed down because we had a few people shouting off and we couldn’t moderate it enough. As a result, the CF got wider and wider and the BF came to be more narrowly for members only. (Nick)

The CF had been established in 2007 as an independent forum by a BASSA during BF’s hiatus and because the BF had not been moderated, which the CF was according to strictly applied rules. Further, members sensed that the BF was insecure and that they were vulnerable to management surveillance. One of the main moderators of the CF reported on this difference and the contrasting style.

The [CF] is open to all crew, so it’s not union affiliated, although it’s very pro-union. That’s the character of it...but we do get a lot of non-union members. The CF seems to be a lot softer and more critical of the union [while] the BF was more for people who knew the terms and conditions. (Deb)

The non-member category included ex-crew and supportive guests, as ‘part of the cabin crew community’. Notwithstanding differing emphases, and unlike the FBU experience (Hogan and Greene, 2002), the relationship between the forums was harmonious, although peppered with a degree of creative tension. Indeed, the originators of the CF, although not representatives ‘took it upon ourselves to help the union’ (Brendan). The CF moderators, who worked closely with BASSA reps, were not dislocated techies but as was acknowledged by the BASSA leadership were closely ‘engaged during the dispute...at Bedfont, on the picket lines, at every meeting’ (Marion). Symptomatic of this cooperation, was the fact that CF moderators were persuaded to ensure that in order to access the CF a member had to pass through a BASSA news page. Analysis reveals crossover between BF and CF in terms of those posting, with BASSA officers pasting key BASSA notices on CF.

However, in 2010, BASSA closed the BF when the BA’s solicitor attempted (unsuccessfully) to force both the BF and the CF to release the names of members posting for alleged defamation of character. This precipitate action followed the disclosure on Facebook, and subsequently the forums, of a list of the names of pilots trained to take cabin crew roles following an apparent leak of posts to management. (Ewing, 2011; Upchurch, 2013: 32-33). Both forums refused to release members’ names, but BASSA decided to close BF to avoid future litigation. Such counter-mobilisation by BA reveals the naiveté of the assertion that union internet forums represent a ‘safe space’ (Greene et al, 2003) for activists to express themselves unrestrainedly without reprisal.

Indeed, employer counter-mobilisation is evidenced in the other forums, the Cabin Crew Forum (CCF) and PPrune. The CCF was described by crew as ‘a propaganda machine’ machine, which activists did report posting on in order to challenge BA’s communications, forays that were known as going onto ‘the dark side’. PPrune was a forum for pilots, connected

to BALPA (British Airline Pilots Association) on which some virulently anti-BASSA material was posted (Upchurch, 2013: 129).

The majority of respondents, whether BASSA activists or not, believed that the BASSA forum (BF) and more so the Crew Forum (CF), were hugely important for advancing the interests of cabin crew in the dispute. Those involved in founding or moderating the CF understandably extolled its strengths. Denise saw it as ‘a powerful tool’ and Brendan thought that it had helped to get ‘the dispute going and supported the whole cabin crew community’. Others were equally convinced of its merits; Ellie believed that it ‘became the most essential part of the dispute’, Esther that it was ‘absolutely invaluable [because] it gave you strength all the time’, Wendy that it was ‘critical’, Ibrahim ‘that it was particularly important for organising’ and Olivia that the forums were ‘hugely important’. It certainly had an impressive density amongst the crew with the moderators claiming more than 5,000 active registered members during the dispute (Bendan).

For many the forum’s responsiveness to the diversity of the workforce was a key characteristic.

[You have to bear in mind that] we’re an absentee workforce of 13,500 crew, made up of a diverse workforce. The majority are female, many parents, single parents, we’ve got a large gay community. We’ve got a lot of lads as well, so we’re not like a normal workforce. And we all live here, there and everywhere. Well I think they [the company and union busters] underestimated our diversity, they relied on the fact that we’re a bunch of girls and a bunch of gays. They’ve not been able to divide and conquer (Denise)

Perhaps three main but interrelated functions of the forums can be identified; as a source of information, as a platform for debate and as an organiser. Firstly, the broad consensus was that the forums effectively challenged BA’s ‘disinformation and propaganda’.

The main thing for me with the forums is the BA propaganda. It gets squashed straight away because there is that real time communication. So basically its gets dissected and discussed only in the crew forum. And this has been the reason why they want to shut us down. (Brendan)

...we created a sub-forum called industrial relations and it’s the most used active sub forum...it made people interested and aware of what’s going on. Not everyone contributes, but it discusses rumour than becomes a fact. People use it like a blog, express their thoughts and get information. (Denise)

When you went to work they were trying to brainwash you into thinking things from a management point of view. And then you would log on to the crew forum (or the BASSA forum) and you read of things that were going on. It helped you make a decision. (Kath)

Each strike day was saw fierce contestation between the company and the union, over the effectiveness of the action, the number of planes flying and the employers’ press release. The blogs posted by the branch secretary were regarded as an influential commentary and counter-intelligence.

How he was able to sit down at the computer and write it up after spending the whole day on the picket line, I do not know. He did it as an update – day 12, day 14 – and that was really appreciated. (Ibrahim)

Secondly, was the role of the forum as a platform for discussion which, amongst other things, had the widely agreed outcomes of providing collective support and in the course of the dispute of being a hub of for debate on the immediate issues.

It’s a very helpful website, not just from an industrial point of view. It’s a place where crew can come and feel safe to talk about absolutely anything. There’s people have bereavements, have health problems...it’s a place where people seek advice on anything...But at the height of the dispute, it was where everybody went to see what was going on. (Kirsten)

I think people drew strength from the forum (BASSA) where they could talk openly and let off steam and rant and rave. It evolved from heated discussion into almost an underground movement during the dispute. (Nicholas)

Thirdly, in the most essential sense of organising and ensuring the solidity of the membership on strike days, the forums played a major role. In any strike, the first day is crucial for establishing the strength of union participation, for setting the tenor of the action conflict and for developing momentum and confidence. The context was BA’s counter-mobilisation and its eagerness to seize on weaknesses in the union ranks. For Denise, ‘the forum broke the fear’.

On the most important first day of the strike there was talk that everyone would be sacked. People were posting, ‘Oh my goodness, am I going to be sacked?’ Everyone was phoning each other up, but the one place that really made the difference was the forums. Everyone flocked to the forums asking how many people are there are Bedfont. When word got around, ‘There’s loads of people here’, ‘You’ll be in good company’. And then there was BA saying they were getting all these flights off, well the reality was they weren’t and those they did were empty flights. The forums completely negated what BA was saying to the press. (Denise)

For the BASSA leadership there was no conflict between the virtual and the actual. They flowed into each other, the forum assisting the mobilisations of members on strike days and, in turn, the mass rallies being broadcast through the media. A member who became active during the dispute, but was not a union rep, recalled how she organised fellow crew at local level.

I organised all of the buses from Manchester to [Bedfont] through the BASSA forum. I’d post a message asking everyone to send me a private message with a phone number and I would organise a bus. Every single strike I sent a bus down full of people. (Ellie)

An excellent example of this integration of the virtual and the actual was the mass rallies at Bedfont on strike days.

What we wanted to do was encourage more people to come and to get the message across to those who could not come for whatever reason. At Bedfont we would open up a laptop with webcams and have people live in New York watching and taking part. It was such a big thing. (Eddie)

People would go on CF and say what a great day and I think that encouraged a lot of people. People who were down route...you could be in Vancouver and wanted to know what happened. It was a good tool. (Nico)

A major challenge for BASSA was how to overcome the combined effect of crews’ geographical dispersion of ‘down route’ and their residential disaggregation. It was important to forge a demonstrable collectivism that centred on BA’s Heathrow operational hub which additionally was the locus of collective bargaining activity.

[This is where] the company knew that the forums would be extremely powerful as a means of pulling crew together and getting them out on strike. It’s a disparate workforce [so you need to know] who’s going in, who’s not going in, it’s the information you need to organise. If the forums are off line, the company is in control because all we have is company propaganda. (Brendan)

BASSA had a vibrant forum, which we logged on to nightly or daily just to catch up...You’d go away for two or three, or five days, whatever, and you’re in Singapore or Los Angeles so you’re obviously divorced from what events are happening in London. The first thing you do is log on and you’re involved again...on a personal level. Yes, the forum was humming, just zinging some nights, you couldn’t believe it. And we could hit the ground running when we returned to Heathrow. (Keith)

The forums were also important for encouraging inactive members to develop the confidence to become active and for facilitating physical contact between previously unconnected, like-minded crew members. For Maxine:

The forums made me more vocal. I just became a lot more committed. It was a laugh posting at first but I became more confident with the written word so it naturally progressed to the spoken word. It was almost bipolar because I had been quite quiet in briefings and people did say I looked like a scab. But then I became animated and they were like, ‘I didn’t realise how militant you were’. What the forum did was help you realise that there were a lot of you –it gave you confidence to act. (Maxine)

Wendy admitted that prior to the dispute she had never visited a union website. Her involvement with BASSA had been limited to reporting back on matters such as substandard accommodation, but then:

All of a sudden, I was taking an active part in a dispute. From never doing anything, I was on the forum the whole time. And I was saying to the people round me at work, “Look just tell me specifically what you need clarification on and I’ll get it answered. I got active by starting posting and going to the branch. (Wendy)

Bryan provided an example of how previously unconnected individual crew members formed a group who collectively organised in the dispute.

We came together with a group of pseudonyms through the forum. Did you ever see a 1970s TV programme called the Zoo Gang? It was a group about the French Resistance who had pseudonyms – the fox, the goose, the dog. So a group of us with these pseudonyms formed on the forum, but then we met at my house and became active in the Crew Defence Forum.

Interviewees acknowledged that given the large number of flights it was unlikely that there would be a BASSA rep on a flight. However, they were certain to find strongly pro-union cabin crew on each flight, who were forum members and who could be (almost) instantly communicative with their de-located colleagues.

...in terms of real time communication what the company can't handle is that particularly on long haul we have four or five active forum members on every flight. So we get reports of mechanical defects, problems with pilots, the behaviour of the people who went on strike. We get updates on the air conditioning, food uploads everything. So in the dispute we had a very good real time picture of what was going on, and BA had no control over that. (Kenneth)

6.3 Contested Terrain and Counter-mobilisation

The dispute was also marked by a ‘strategy of decapitation’ (Ewing, 2011:20) with around 100 activists sacked or disciplined. Central to this was the suspension of 15 activists – the Facebook 15 – for comments posted on Facebook sites about pilots taking on cabin crew duties during the strike. They were charged with bullying and, despite existing BASSA-BA procedure, dismissed under a dispute-related process subsequently deemed illegitimate by an Employment Tribunal.

We were all shocked when the Facebook 15 happened. Rumour got around that 15 people had been suspended because they'd written about the volunteer thing. That was the turning point for me. My god they really clamped down on us. I used to write bits and bobs on Facebook, and I was beginning to think perhaps we're not as safe as we thought. There were rumblings on the BASSA forum that managers were looking at it. We all started to feel a little bit more nervous about what we were writing. It still didn't stop us, but we were just a little bit more mindful'. [Lorraine].

So, while the internet provides unions with ‘spaces’ for solidarity and communication that can overcome physical dispersal, these spaces are not necessarily ‘safe’ from employers (Greene et al, 2007). Like physical spaces, the forums are arenas for contestation and counter-mobilisation. In this respect, the BA dispute is a troubling exemplar.

6.4 Uniting the Virtual and the Real

If there has been a tendency to exaggerate the liberatory power of internet-based media (Greene et al, 2003; Hogan et al, 2010), then an opposing error has been to downplay the extent of the contribution that web pages, forums, the email, text and blogs can make to organising. There is no disputing the contention that ‘face to face contact and argument, democratic debate and mass meetings are the life blood’ (Upchurch, 2013: 135) of the labour movement, but counterposing the virtual and the real may be unnecessarily schismatic. In the context of the BA dispute, forum participants and BASSA members alike understood the dynamic relationship between the internet-based and real, and did not see a Chinese wall between them.

Branch meetings *and* the forums were a haven...where people went to get comfort and reassurance and to debate and decide. And particularly people who were living miles away from the airport [Heathrow] needed somewhere to go. When you went to Bedfont, obviously that was an up, because you had a collective feeling. But then you had to go

home alone. So people would turn to the forums. Then forums then were our lifeline. (Kath)

7. ‘Traditional’ Forms of Communication and Organising

7.1 *BASSA Structures and Reps*

In answer to the questions of how BASSA was able to organise through the dispute, how they were sustained contact between members, kept them informed, provided them with the arguments, ‘framed’ the issues and directed their activity, traditional or more conventional means were important. Bryan who was centrally involved in the CF, described the four main ways of contacting the members directly, as branch meetings and printed newsletters, as well as the internet and text messages. ‘We would post out 11,000 bulletins and that would be costly at 50p a shot per member, but it was real because it reached everybody’. For the long-standing BASSA rep, Quintin, the newsletter was the single most important mechanism ‘for telling people the truth and keeping the members informed’.

Nor were the existing union structures displaced or sublimated by the virtual media, Many described the close relations between the BASSA committee and reps, and the cabin crew (Moore and Taylor, 2014) and recounted the importance of BASSA structures for organising throughout the dispute:

A lot was networking by the reps themselves, because if on long haul we’ve got 15 reps, each rep might know at least 100 people pretty well. And then if these people you know have belief in you that belief is cascaded through a lot of people. (Ibrahim)

Thus, BASSA was wholly committed to reps’ face-to-face engagement with the crew. BA’s clampdown on the BASSA had the unintended consequence of actually reinforcing that relationship. Ethan recalled:

They stopped the facility for us to take time off to do union activities other than health and safety work or disciplinaries and grievances as per the ACAS minimum guidelines. So they actively sent us around the world, literally dispersed us, but that did have a positive effect in that we met up with a lot more crew than we would normally do as reps who don’t actually fly very often. It was a double-edged sword insofar that it was harder to work with each other [rep to rep] but in that time I’ve never flew so much in all the years I’ve been a rep, so we got to spread the message down route to far more people. When you actually say discuss the issues face-to-face, it comes across far better than just reading it on a communication via a website.

Other reps agreed that the removal of facility time backfired on management:

It was brilliant going back to work because you were a union rep on the crew and the crew were hungry for information. So regularly you were surrounded by people wanting to know the ins and outs. (Brian)

7.2 *Mass Meetings*

In weighing the balance between the virtual and the real, Ethan reported that the bulk of rep-to-rep contact was by email or mobile, but the decisive ‘forum’ for members remained the mass

meetings, both scheduled and emergency. As part of their inclusive and self-consciously democratic ethos, BASSA was committed to extraordinary mass meetings to involve members at key stages. These outgrew medium-sized venues and were held at Sandown Park and Kempton Park racecourses. Interviewees recalled:

As the dispute became more and more likely, it grew from 500 to 1000 and then we had to find a venue for 2,000, then 4,000. By the end we had to have a venue for 6,500, a hell of a lot. It was like rock and roll shows, they were incredible. The biggest ones at Sandown had 6,000 on the top floor and then a whole other floor with video screens. Then we had to have video screens outside, because we couldn’t get everyone in. I remember walking in and thought my god, it was literally like U2, got the music and it was almost tribal. The sound system was about ten thousand a go, because it was a high-tech, video screens, so rock and roll. That was my doing really because of my theatre years. I know how important the staging of it is. If you make live theatre it captures people’s imagination [not like] if you just walked about with a cloth cap and ‘go well brothers and sisters what we’re going to do is...’ (Oliver)

7.3 *Bedfont and Strike Days*

What emerges, most forcefully from the interviewees is the enormous importance of the mass rallies BASSA organised at Bedfont on strike days. It is difficult to exaggerate their significance.

Bedfont was the bedrock of the dispute. It brought people together, it collectivised them. It symbolised the dispute. The mass meetings were like rock concerts. It was like a big room party. (Ibrahim)

The latter comment is important because demonstrates the connections between the bonding experiences of crews during flights and when they are down route, with the collectivism of union action centred on the dispute and at Heathrow. For Quintin and many others, ‘Bedfont was *the* key symbol of the dispute’ He described the ‘incredible atmosphere, like a carnival’ with music. Not only were rousing anthems played, but the play list included subversive and humorous songs that ‘took the piss’; ‘Little Willie’ by the Sweet was a particular favourite. For Nuala it was ‘culturally important to be physically involved in the presence of others’, although she added that Bedfont might have been even more effective if crew had been obliged to pick up their strike pay there. Still, Bedfont was where strikers could take ‘their children and their dogs, where there were barbecues, bouncy castles’ and music was mixed up with union and political speeches One referred to it as ‘a massive free festival’:

It was a place where you were surrounded by people who took real joy in the fact there were so many of us who felt the same way. Not joy in not having to go to work or being on strike, but just being able to speak so freely. And real pleasure in seeing people who you hadn’t seen in years who you’d flown with, you had massive respect for...Standing on a picket line with people I really admired, it was great’ (Erin)

Bedfont was more than symbolic, for it was the ‘physical place for a workforce that lacked a fixed workplace’.

Bedfont was hugely important. Bedfont was, because we don’t have a shop floor and we couldn’t be actually at the terminals, in the airport because of the security, the shop

floor if you like. It was a football club, a random place, but that was the place we had. Everybody missed it desperately when it was over, no one wanted to go back to work. They loved it because you got a sense of community...(Olivia).

[It was] vital especially because you are on your own, if you aren't able to go and meet up with someone else, you would be sitting at home thinking 'God am I the only one on strike?'. And because a lot of the communication that came through from BA would almost intimate that and...we'd be thinking bloody hell it's just me. Without having a central location I think [the strike] would have fallen apart pretty quickly. I think people would have started to believe BA, 'Christ maybe people are turning up for work'. (Naomi)

I think people gained much strength from that because again, because we are a vacant [sic] workforce, we don't often get together. Having that Bedfont base and having hundreds of people there, and on occasions it was well over a thousand people there/ People could see that they weren't on their own. When you're lying in your bed at night, thinking the world is collapsing around you, it gives you strength. (Ethan)

If BASSA's purposes for Bedfont were to ensure inclusivity and to overcome the isolation that a dispersed membership might experience, *ipso facto*, that they also wished to strengthen the sense of collectivity and to use it a springboard for action. Bedfont was the base from which picketing was planned and crew testified to exceptionally high levels of participation:

I think most people wanted to get onto the picket line. Especially the good days, I can't tell you the amount of times we turned people away. The highlight of the picket lines [was] when we had an open top double decker bus. I used to organise that and I'm not exaggerating, I used to have over 100 people queuing to get on that' [Greg]

Another rep described how picket lines became an important outlet for members' frustrations:

If you mentioned the word strike or Bassa and BA [when you were working], you thought you would be suspended. It was an awful, awful atmosphere so it was just a total release of tensions out there. On the picket line, people could shout whatever they wanted and just felt no intimidation. It was a total release of pent up anger'

The picket lines drew comparisons with perceptions of male industrial action and stimulated memories of the 1984-5 Miners' Strike and the printworkers at Wapping. For example:

We didn't want to go down that route of the image of aggression and the fighting element with the riots and the police and all that sort of thing. I remember one of the papers titled us one of the most glamorous picket lines they'd ever seen, when you get stewardesses in Chanel sunglasses, There was the joke on one of the London phone-ins. This guy rang in and said, there's no foundation to this strike, no foundation to that picket line, and one of our girls rang up and said I do have to correct you on that, 'There's more foundation on that picket line than you would get in Debenhams and that's just the men!'. And the reporter just, fell about laughing. I remember standing there once and a steward walked past in bright pink wellies, waving his flag, and you think, what picket line is like this?' (Thomas)

Despite the creativity, flamboyance and the humour, the picket lines served the important and traditional purposes of establishing a significant presence, demonstrating strength to the company and to the employers, persuading reluctant crew to join the strike, and communicating with the public. The conditions were not always easy. One of the crew recalled organising the picket as:

...the proudest moment of my life was - apart from my children - it was bitterly cold, torrential rain and they were queuing ten deep to get on a picket bus. And some of them didn't even have coats, it was just the most amazing thing I've ever seen in my life. And everyone was laughing, they were all singing. (Tully)

The picket lines, as key to ensuring the solidity of members' action, were vital. Minimising the numbers of 'working' cabin crew was a key source of union power especially given the perishable nature of the airline product. From the perspective of the union airlines resemble and embody JIT systems that make them profoundly susceptible to disruption. (Breitenfellner, 1997; Herod, 2001).

7.4 *Strength Through Diversity*

Another theme to emerge strongly from the interviews was the important role played by European crew and, in particular, the way their particular legacies of industrial action contributed:

BA about 10-12 years ago started a big recruitment for European crew. Now they are much more politicised than their counterparts in the UK. We had to stop the Italian girls, who wanted to go and sit on a runway. I'm not joking they were all, these lovely glamorous Italian stewardesses dolled up to the nines in Dolce Gabbana and all this crap, they were at Bedfont. 'We'll go and sit on a runway, we do this in Rome!' We thought this lot are mad, they all were, the Spanish, Germans, the French – so they weren't exactly your home counties. (Eddie)

Other activists similarly felt that geography influenced political perception of the legitimacy of strike action, and that the experience of less restricting trade union laws in Europe permeated the cabin crew overall:

The Spanish, Italian, French mentality of taking action is more spontaneous than can be allowed in our country...Well you got the feeling if you said to them 'let's go and set fire to some tyres and put them on the runways' they would. They were very vociferous some of the European ones on the picket lines' (Esther).

Similarly for another UK BASSA member:

You forget we've got such a diverse workforce...you've got a lot of Europeans who know what it's like to go on strike and have that experience in their countries. The French, the Italians, the Spanish, their labour laws allow them to strike quite a lot so they know what it's like. If you're from up in the north of England then you've had some sort of knowledge of industrial action and relations through your parents or whatever, but if you're in the south east, it might not be as clear cut. (Ibrahim).

One activist described herself as half French and half Greek and recalled how this experience was brought to bear on the UK dispute:

I just don't understand...like sometimes the people who are rude – ‘get to work!’. These people are they stupid? But that's what I say, is that they get brainwashed by the media. ‘Oh, strike is bad, strike is bad’. In France never a bad word about a strike, - a strike is something people [do] because it's your last resort. You don't do it for fun, you don't do it because you've got nothing else to do in your time. (Beatrice)

Another French activist brought a similar experience but argued for the global organisation of the crew.

As the first ballot was running and they said they would remove staff travel privileges, being French that alone infuriated me. So OK now we have a camp that's now hell bent on...intimidating their staff against exercising what I believe is a human right. And they know that many of their staff rely heavily on staff travel because they can't afford to live round here, it's too expensive. And they live in Spain or Scotland and that was to me an indirect lockout anyway...I was always on the internet. I contacted my MP, I did all sorts of things. I argued with the pilots! I did put my point across. But my immediate involvement was the fact that my partner was a day one striker and his shift was starting at 6 in the morning and being Scottish, a strike probably had a far greater impact on him psychologically than it did on me. Because being French I don't see political confrontation as a problem really. I think it's part and parcel of democracy...Because we're very insular I believe that we should have a bloody trans-European cabin crew union, forget about just the UK. We should be in cahoots with Air France, Iberia, etc, and whatever issues we have with our respective managements, organise strike days coordinated (Nuala).

European staff were profoundly affected by the withdrawal of staff travel and made a particular sacrifice when attending BASSA meetings and picket lines, although this did mean that at Bedfont ‘We had the best buffet, we had a mountain of food that crew would bring in or they'd bake stuff or they'd bring over cheese from France’ (Nicky). In one incident Spanish crew who could not afford to travel demonstrated at a Spanish airport through the Spanish union affiliated to Unite representing staff at Iberian Airlines. Such action reflected wider solidarity from unions and cabin crew from airlines worldwide, including visiting picket lines, and with crew from other airlines allowing European BA strikers to use their staff travel to get to pickets.

Rather than BA's Europeanisation of the crew contributing further to fragmentation, counterintuitively it served as a source of strength through introducing more militant conceptions of what constituted effective strike action. The diversity of the backgrounds of the crew imparted a distinctive flavour to collective action.

8. Discussion and Conclusion

The paper commenced with an empirical question that raised theoretical implications. Under conditions of considerable adversity, both objective and subjective (powerful employer counter-mobilisation and apparent workforce fragmentation), how was it possible for the cabin crew to sustain such demonstrable collectivism throughout a bitter dispute that lasted almost two years and involved 22 days of strike action? An important piece of the puzzle has already put in place. Moore and Taylor (2014) identified the roots of an enduring collectivism as lying

within the labour process, the erosion of crews’ loyalty to and the embeddedness of BASSA in the work lives of a highly unionised cabin crew community, that conferred on the union a powerful legitimacy.

This paper has focused specifically on the immediate tasks of organising during the dispute and particularly on strike days. Three spatial problematics confronted BASSA and its cabin crew membership; that the crew is scattered across domiciles in the UK and Europe; that crews come together as disaggregated individuals who form only ephemeral collectivities for the duration of the flights before dispersing on return to Heathrow; that, related to this transience and fragmented labour process, that the workforce is globally dispersed at any given moment in time.

Although these spatial challenges appear to exacerbate the difficulties of organising, one cannot mechanically infer weakness from the fact of geographical dislocation. BASSA effectively utilised internet-based communication to communicate with members and assist in forging a collectivism from a globally scattered workforce occupying (albeit temporarily) multiple time-zones. The success of this endeavour lies as much in the legacy of BASSA’s legitimacy with members (Moore and Taylor, 2014) as it did with the medium of internet-based techniques. Nevertheless, the imaginative application of internet-based communication by the BASSA leadership, and in CF tech-savvy, committed supporters, played a hugely significant part in transcending distance and the diaspora of members. Mindful of the danger of ascribing to this technology an autonomous power that exaggerates its social impact in the manner of Castells (1996), the verdict of crew activists is nonetheless compelling in its admiration for internet-based communication. For Tully it was ‘amazing [that] across the world we planned a dispute by Blackberry and i-Phone’.

Our concluding argument is consistent with the criticism by Fuchs (2012: 386) of those who regard social media as an autonomous creator of rebellions and resistance as ‘fetishism of things...a deterministic, instrumental ideology that substitutes thinking about society with a focus on technology’ (cited in Upchurch, 2013: 119). Clearly, the claims made for ‘distributed discourse’ (Greene et al, 2003; Hogan et al, 2010) are naïve in the believing that the internet-based technologies have the ability to shift the power balance with capital at transcend the structural contradictions of trade unionism. Any illusion that worker or union forums and blogs can constitute ‘a safe social space’ was rudely shattered by the vicious countermobilisation of BA and the wholesale dismissal of union activists. Nor, if we apply a more nuanced analysis are these sites the locus for unrestrained expression, The CF was and is moderated and its postings organised into threads overcoming disorganised conversation. It is not possible to gauge the extent of censorship. While anonymity on CF may disinhibit, there are also limits and the fact that membership is based upon pre-existing social identities, underpinned by a collective identity, prevents the ‘virtual carnage’ that characterise unhinged virtual environments, although as West argues (2010) even in these participants exercise a degree of self-censorship, self-regulation and ‘deference’ influenced by off-line political and ideological values.

Apropos the debate on the validity of the ‘distributed discourse’ concept, it is interesting is that while the BF and the CF were acclaimed by the interviewees, they were frequently referred to as a ‘tool’, or ‘instrument’ or as a ‘means’ of communicating and organising. Crew certainly did not regard the forums as a ‘nirvana...to rescue collective organisation’ as, Upchurch (2013: 135) contends is position of the enthusiasts for internet-based communication. It is important, therefore, not to conflate the Foucauldian embrace of ‘distributed’ discourse’, that abstractly

promises not just to overcome the structural and democratic aporia of trade unionism but to transcend class power, with the celebration of the forums by these BASSA activists as they concretely utilised their potential and understood their limitations in the concrete conditions of a major episode of employer-union conflict. All the cabin crew interviewed understood that what was decisive for their side was the level of participation in the strikes, the solidity of crew support for BASSA throughout the dispute and between strike days, the size of the majorities in the ballot votes, the extent to which action impacted financially and materially on the company and shareholders, the battle for public opinion and the success of the ideological struggle with Walsh and BA. Of course, crew did not always articulate their understanding in these terms, although some did. For them, it followed, that the virtual and real were not opposite modes of organising but intimately related, to the extent that they also provided fulsome accounts of the importance of ‘traditional’ forms of organising. Rejection of the fetishisation of internet-based communication should not lead to its opposite; the organising baby should not be thrown out with the e-bathwater.

Notwithstanding the global reach the flight network, BA’s operations, including collective bargaining, remained highly centralised at the Heathrow headquarters and terminal airport. So one contradiction or tension is that while the cabin crew is a workforce that demonstrates spatial mobility, their terms and conditions were determined at national scale. The importance of BA’s hub location (magnified by the establishment of Terminal 5), the highly centralised legacy of collective bargaining and the transience of the crew’s labour process have combined to shape employment relations. The distinctive characteristic, if not contradiction, of nationally determined pay and conditions at ‘local’ level for a mobile workforce working for a ‘global’ TNC, that is spatially fixed in important ways, profoundly influenced BASSA’s organising efforts in the 2009-2011 dispute.

BASSA’s initiatives had a serious spatial element focused at the global and the local, as Herod advocates (2001). Internet-based media was never seen as a substitute for the reps structure, for internal democratic structure or for the ‘real’ ‘actual’ embeddedness of BASSA in the cabin crew community. However, the web pages, email, text messaging and, particularly, the forums became a central component of an organising strategy that successfully contributed to overcoming the distance, dispersion and disaggregation of the crew. The epicentre of the dispute was Heathrow. (Bedfont is less than a mile away from Terminal 4). It was at this local scale that the union concentrated its forces for maximum impact - symbolic and real - on its global antagonist. In the final analysis, it was the resilience of the cabin crew occupational community and BASSA’s organisational core that transcended the obstacles of geographical distance.

Biographies

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ⁱ In part, this configuration is a product of BA’s legacy as the UK national flag carrier airline.

ⁱⁱ A fifth forum ‘Trolley Dolley’ established during the period that the BF was closed was shortlived.