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Labour struggles as lived citizenship. Precarious migrant workers as agents of change

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to contribute to the sociological critique of the dominant idea of citizenship. It introduces the often-overlooked question of labour conflict into the debate on “lived citizenship”. Considering citizenship as something experienced, performed and/or negotiated by social actors (and not just assigned by institutions), this article discusses precarious migrant workers’ collective practices in their spatial, relational, performative, and affective dimensions, drawing on ethnographic research conducted in London. By showing how these workers’ intersectional and participatory labour practices can improve their working and living conditions, transform their political subjectivity and sense of belonging as well as promote socio-economic justice, the article argues for including grassroots redistributive initiatives in citizenship analysis. In doing so, the article also reveals the inconsistency in ideas about migrant workers’ integration into an unequal, exploitative, and marginalizing status quo.

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Introduction

This article sets out to introduce issues of labour conflict into the sociological debate on citizenship with the intent to strengthen the critique of the dominant conceptualization of citizenship. This conceptualization creates rigid boundaries of belonging which exclude subjects such as migrant workers as “non-citizens”, restricting their rights. It also creates an illusory sense of equality among the in-group members of the state (“citizens” with full formal rights) when sharp differentiations and inequalities in accessing rights with regard to gender, race, sexuality, and class exist among them (Anderson 2019; Erel, Reynolds, and Kaptani 2017). Additionally, this conceptualization revolves around the problematic assumption of the nation-state as the natural and immutable container of society (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002). In relation to migrants, critical citizenship scholars have highlighted how the dominant idea of citizenship goes hand in hand with another one – that of integration – which problematically assumes (formal) citizens to be “integrated” while migrants (non-citizens) need integration (Favell 2019; Meissner

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2019; Schinkel 2018). Both Schinkel (2018) and Anderson (2019) have pointed out that in migration research the idea of integration is uncritically portrayed as positive and therefore rarely questioned. Similarly, in his 12 propositions to rethink the academic use of the concept of “integration”, Favell (2019) observes how integration is not always desirable, as it encourages rigidity, conformity, fixed differentiations and the perpetuation of inequalities and power structures.

In contrast to these views that dominate the “national order of things” in which we live (Malkki 1995), and in the attempt to avoid considering migrants through the prism of integration, in this article we adopt a “lived citizenship” approach to examine the contentious labour practices of migrant workers organized through grassroots independent unions in London. This approach entails considering citizenship as something experienced, performed and/or negotiated by social actors (rather than fixed and ascribed by state institutions), paying particular attention to its spatial, intersubjective, performative, and affective dimensions (Kallio, Wood, and Häkli 2020).

As this article will point out, considering contentious labour initiatives in this context is important as the lived citizenship scholarship in its examinations of new rights that migrant negotiate (which include civil, political, social, cultural, ecological and sexual rights) has overlooked those of class. Accordingly, this article sets out to explore the relationship between labour conflict and lived citizenship. This will be done by examining how the contentious labour practices of precarious migrant workers (observed ethnographically in London) can contribute to these workers’ (lived) citizenship as well as to wider social change. In doing so, the article takes up Schinkel’s (2018, 9) call to imagine society against the grain of the “immigration integration discourse”, showing that labour struggles for economic rights constitute an important overlooked site where the citizenship of low-paid migrant as well as non-migrant subjects can be articulated, and social change achieved. By doing that, the article also responds to Anderson’s (2019) plea to move beyond the “deficit narrative” that portrays migrants as inherently problematic.

The article is organized as follows. First, it reviews recent sociological literature on citizenship, paying special attention to lived citizenship; second – having highlighted how labour engagements are unexplored in this literature – it turns to labour studies and industrial relations, where the notion of conflict is considered central. Third, it introduces the heuristic device that we use to carry out our analysis of migrant workers’ labour engagements which is Kallio, Wood, and Häkli’s (2020) framework on lived citizenship. The methodology section, then, gives details on the research and the fieldwork materials collected in the last decade and on the reanalysis that has been applied to such materials for the purpose of this article. The subsequent sections explore the significance of the various aspects (spatial, intersubjective, performative, and emotional) of lived citizenship enabled by the *communities of struggle* that migrant workers developed through their involvement in independent unionism. The article will end with a discussion of the significance that contentious labour practices can have for lived citizenship and of the relevance of extending Kallio et al.’s framework to the socio-economic sphere.

Lived citizenship

In this section we draw on the literature on lived citizenship (Kallio, Wood, and Häkli 2020) as we are interested in the sociological meaning of citizenship (which encompasses more

than the formal rights and duties of the conventional notion) as well as in how citizenship is experienced and enacted in real life contexts (Erel, Reynolds, and Kaptani 2017; Kallio, Wood, and Häkli 2020; Muller 2022). Drawing on Lister (2007) and other critical and feminist scholars (Stasiulis and Bakan 1997; Yuval-Davis 1997) the focus of this approach is on the acts people carry out to negotiate rights, responsibilities, identities and belonging in their daily interactions with others (Kallio, Wood, and Häkli 2020; Lister 2003). These “activist” approaches see citizenship as defined through agency rather than status (Muller 2022). Lived citizenship can be summed up as “acts that can occur, either individually or collectively, that are intrinsically concerned with shaping the society that we want to live in” (Kallio, Wood, and Häkli 2020, 724).

Lived citizenship expands conceptions of who is a citizen “by shedding light on people who have traditionally been excluded from economic, political and social esteem” (Kallio, Wood, and Häkli 2020, 714) and overcomes the migrant/citizen divide (Anderson 2019). By focusing on acts that are concerned with “shaping the society we want to live in”, it brings attention to the role that people play in creating conditions for political and social change, rather than to the preservation of the status quo, as implied in integration research (Favell 2019; Schinkel 2018). The concept of lived citizenship encompasses Isin’s activist citizenship for whom to be a citizen “is to make claims to justice: to break habitus and act in a way that disrupts defined orders, practices, and statuses” (2009, 384). For Isin “acts of citizenship” are those deeds by which actors constitute themselves as those with “the right to claim rights” (2009, 371). In focusing on acts, he draws attention to rupture, rather than order, and those acts that make a difference because they break routines and habits, rather than following a script. Modes and forms of being will be transformed by these acts and “the order of things will no longer be the same as it was” (2009, 379). Additionally, these acts are important because they “prompt reflections on the substance of citizenship and on the justice of its current distribution” (McNevin 2011, 100).

The lived citizenship approach is useful to our analysis as it goes beyond methodological nationalism allowing to unsettle dominant notions of the citizen and providing space to account for those subjects – such as migrants – traditionally excluded from citizenship (Lister 2003). For authors embracing this perspective, the nation-state does not represent the privileged scale of analysis as citizenship is understood as a set of relationships which are often constructed beyond territorial boundaries (Kallio, Wood, and Häkli 2020). For Isin (2009) the sites of citizenship “are fields of contestation around which certain issues, interests, stakes as well as themes, concepts and objects assemble” (370). He urges us to start from empirical “sites” and “scales”, rather than from pre-existing categories deployed as containers with fixed and given boundaries (such as nation-states). These fluid and dynamic entities are formed through struggles whose boundaries – rather than been given – are a question of empirical determination (370). McNevin too is interested in more spatially heterogeneous accounts of citizenship by focusing not just on the “who” but also on the “where” of the political (2011, 35).

Focusing on lived citizenship also allows us to re-frame the narrative about the migrant, here recast as an agentic subject-citizen rather than as a problematic non-citizen characterized by deficits (Erel, Reynolds, and Kaptani 2017; Però 2011, 2014; Però and Solomos 2010). Isin’s figure of the “activist citizen” is, in fact, drawn from the *sans-papiers* protesters in France who, through their actions, have redefined the boundaries of the political and, in his view, contributed to the democratization of borders. Müller

(2022) too sees the migrant as the key figure of the age of globalization for they are central to expand understandings of citizenship that rest upon non-state-based connections and conceptions of belonging (while not denying the enduring importance of states as containers of citizenship). Drawing on Isin's concept of "enacting citizenship", Erel, Reynolds, and Kaptani (2017) have explored migrant women's mothering as a citizenship practice, enacted through cultural and caring work that challenges normative ideas of who legitimately belongs to the nation highlighting aspects of citizenship – such as those connected to care – that are usually overlooked; this is an aspect also explored by Zontini when studying how migrant women negotiate citizenship in Southern Europe (Zontini 2008).

To our knowledge, however, the concepts of "lived citizenship" and "activist citizenship" have not been connected to labour struggles and workers' organizations such as unions, even though lived citizenship was always concerned with how material circumstances affect people's lives as citizens (Hall, Coffey, and Williamson 1999; Lister 2003). Isin's work, for instance, focuses on what he calls "new" rights which he lists as civil, political, social, sexual, ecological, and cultural, but overlooks the "old" rights, such as economic and labour ones. A partial exception is McNevin (2011) who has focused on work in the context of irregular migrants in order to highlight attempts – such as those made by worker centres in the US – to use these migrants' status of "worker" to cut across the citizen/non-citizen divide.

We contend that the significance of economic rights for lived citizenship extends well beyond irregular migrants to encompass all low-paid migrants (as well as racialized minorities and precarious workers more generally). Indeed, the ongoing precarization and degradation of work – often conveyed through outsourcing – have been fast eroding such rights impacting negatively on migrant workers even more than on other groups (cf. Alberti and Sacchetto 2024; Però 2023; Piro 2023; Wills et al. 2010). In the emerging struggles for these "old" rights (that include the numerous recent disputes for the living wage, pension and holiday pay, as well as against abuse and victimization, unfair dismissals and outsourcing) migrant workers have been at the forefront and even inspirational to other workers' groups (Alberti and Però 2018; Cioce, Però, and Karczyski 2024; Holgate 2021; Però 2020; Piro 2023; Smith 2022; Tassinari and Maccarrone 2020). Accordingly, we reckon important to incorporate in the analysis, as well as in the critical citizenship debate more generally, the struggles for socio-economic/redistributive justice. To accomplish that we now turn to Labour Studies, for this is the scholarly field that lately has shown particular sensitivity to precarious migrant workers' struggles as well as the one that through the years has stayed concerned with the question of conflict in work relations.

Labour studies and conflict

From an integrationist point of view, as well as from one concerned with the reproduction of the neo-liberal status quo, migrants' labour conflict appears dis-functional, if not disruptive, of the social order in which migrants are expected to fit smoothly in. Drawing on Labour Studies and Industrial Relations, in this article we take a different perspective on labour conflict whose significance we want to examine in terms of the lived citizenship of migrant workers. To do that, we first need to point out that conflict and antagonism are not aberrations but intrinsic features of the "wage-effort bargain" that defines the

employment relationship (Edwards 2003, 2018; Gold and Smith 2022; Korczynski 2024). In fact, in such a relationship – characterized by the exchange of labour power (i.e. workers' effort) for a reward (i.e. a wage) – employers attempt to contain or cut labour costs and maximize the productivity of workers, while the latter seek to contain their labour time and effort and maximize their pay and conditions (Gall and Hebden 2008; Gold and Smith 2022; Williams 2020). A key point in the management of the employment relationship is to prevent this intrinsic antagonism from escalating into industrial disputes and actions. However, this prevention often is neither possible nor desirable. Typically, this is the case when pay and conditions worsen to the point of inducing workers to organize to redress collectively their exploitative and oppressive conditions.

A contemporary example of this conflictive situation is represented by contentious industrial initiatives of migrant workers in conditions of “high precarity” (Però 2020) that populate the low-paid sectors of the economy, such as those of the outsourced custodial services (e.g. cleaners and security guards) and hospitality, as well as those typical of the gig economy (e.g. couriers, riders, drivers, etc.) (Alberti and Però 2018; Tassinari and Maccarrone 2020). Not finding adequate representation in mainstream unions, many of these migrant workers chose to self-organize in contentious grassroots independent formations for the articulation of their interests, such as the indie unions in Britain and the Cobas in Italy (Alberti and Però 2018; Cant 2019; Cini, Maccarrone, and Tassinari 2022; Cioce, Però, and Korczynski 2024; Moyer-Lee and Lopez 2017; Piro 2023; Tassinari and Maccarrone 2020; Woodcock and Cant 2022).

A recent strand of labour research (Atzeni and Cini 2024) characterized by an actor-centred approach (Alberti and Però 2018) has been especially active in examining these emerging contentious labour initiatives of low-paid precarious and migrant workers (see Alberti 2016; Però 2020; Petrini and Wettergren 2023; Tassinari and Maccarrone 2020; Weghmann 2022; Woodcock and Cant 2022). What emerges from these studies is that (labour) conflict tends to play a valuable role in the improvement of the conditions of the precarious and migrant workers involved in it. As these studies have shown, migrant workers' involvement in the contentious initiatives of independent grassroots labour organizations – such as those of indie and Cobas unions – tend to produce concrete material rewards such as the living wage, improvement in pension contributions, sick and parental leave (Acciari and Però 2017; Alberti 2016; Moyer-Lee and Lopez 2017; Però 2020), as well as in some cases the reversing of outsourcing (Però 2023).

Building on this critical work, this article now examines the significance that precarious migrant workers' involvement in this type of contentious labour initiatives has for their lived citizenship as well as for the wider society more generally. In doing so, we apply Kallio et al.'s framework on lived citizenship (2020), which was developed to facilitate a broad understanding of what it means to live as a citizen today.

Extending a lived citizenship framework to the study of labour engagements

Kallio, Wood, and Häkli's (2020) framework identifies four dimensions of lived citizenship – *spatial*, *intersubjective*, *performative* and *affective* – which we will use to frame our analysis of migrant workers' labour engagements. The first dimension is the spatial one. Through this dimension they invite problematizations of the spatiality of citizenship and the

consideration of how it can be experienced also beyond the nation-state or territorial boundaries. In this article we take the “communities of struggle” (Però 2020; see below) – which are a particular form of participatory labour organizing developed by precarious migrant workers in London to represent their interests – as our spatial unit of analysis.

The second is the intersubjective one, through which the authors invite us to focus on the realm of social relationships. Citizenship they argue “is not carved out as an isolated endeavour, but is lived, practiced and shaped interpersonally and intergenerationally” (Kallio, Wood, and Häkli 2020, 717). Drawing on this, here we focus on the intersubjective and convivial relationships that develop across racialized, gender and generational boundaries in indie unions’ communities of struggle and the ethics of care (Fisher and Tronto 1990) that characterizes them.

The third dimension of lived citizenship is the performed dimension, which invites us to focus on processes and actions articulated to claim rights and entitlements, what Isin (2008) calls “acts of citizenship” or “the practices of claim-making in and through various sites and scales” (Isin 2008, 16). Here we consider the tangible actions that precarious migrant workers take in terms of mobilizations to improve collectively their working conditions in the gig and outsourced economy and the innovations that such practices bring to labour organizing.

The fourth dimension is the affective one, which refers to the feelings associated with being a citizen (e.g. feelings of belonging and acts of care). McNevin (2011) argues that by struggling for certain rights and recognition the actors involved engage in practices that go beyond the success or failure of the immediate issue of concern and are productive of new forms of political belonging. Here we focus on the sense of belonging as well as on the non-material rewards that can be achieved through work-related collective action and participatory organizing for material justice, including the new subjectivities that this involvement produces for marginalized subjects.

Through the application of this framework to the analysis of the communities of struggle developed by the migrant workers of independent unions in the UK, our intent in the following pages is twofold. On the one hand, we want to highlight the relevance of the contentious collective dimension of lived citizenship, paying special attention to the socio-economic sphere, and on the other, we want to extend the application of Kallio, Wood, and Häkli’s (2020) framework to the study of this important yet overlooked dimension of lived citizenship connected to redress the (intersectional) inequalities of class that afflict and degrade the living conditions of vast portions of the population.

Methodological approach

The data on which this article is based draws on Davide Però longstanding multi-sited ethnographic research with “indie unions” in London that began in 2015. This work entailed participant observation, conversations, semi-structured interviews, and document examination. Participant observation was conducted across several sites and events, including meetings, training sessions, workshops, demonstrations, protests, strikes, marches, round tables, parties, barbeques, and pubs, for a total of over 110 events/venues. Semi-structured interviews (59 in total) and informal conversations were carried out with both indie union migrant and non-migrant members as well as activists and leaders. Documentary analysis included texts produced by participants and their organizations as well as by

journalists and bloggers, both online and in-print. The study received favourable ethical opinion by the ethics committee of one of our departments and was the result of several years of engagement through which trust was built. Observations were overt and participation voluntary.

While previous work by Però was concerned with documenting the contribution that these migrant workers and their formations made to the renewal of workers' organizing and of the labour movement more generally, in this article the focus is on highlighting their relevance for lived citizenship, an important question that has been overlooked in labour studies and industrial relations, as well as in migration studies. Specifically, in this article we use the lived citizenship framework developed by Kallio, Wood, and Häkli (2020) to re-analyse migrant workers' experiences in indie unions gained through fieldwork. This reanalysis was carried out by both authors, working individually as well as jointly on the collected material (interview transcripts and fieldnotes, audio-visuals etc.). This entailed re-coding it according to the framework's four themes of *spatiality*, *intersubjectivity*, *performativity*, and *affect*. Illustrative examples from this analysis are then used below to appreciate migrant workers' contentious labour organizing in terms of citizenship, and consequently to argue for extending the remit of the lived citizenship scholarship to comprise the socio-economic dimension and the conflict that characterizes it.

Precarious migrant workers, indie unions and communities of struggle

Failing to find adequate representation for their degraded working conditions in mainstream unions, in 2012 several outsourced migrant workers of the London facilities sectors (such as cleaners, porters, security guards, etc.), started to set up their own migrant-led labour formations (Alberti 2016; Alberti and Però 2018; Moyer-Lee and Lopez 2017; Però 2020). The first to emerge was the Independent Workers of Great Britain (hereafter IWGB) soon to be followed in 2014 by the United Workers of the World (UWW) and the Cleaners & Allied Independent Workers Union (CAIWU). Collectively referred to by the etic term "indie unions" (Però 2020; see also Dias-Abey 2021; Smith 2022; Wegmann 2022), these labour formations are mostly constituted by and for highly precarious migrant workers (subjects positioned at the intersection of different forms of oppression, see Però 2020), from approximately 70 nationalities.¹

The arrival of indie unions on the scene was initially met with diffidence when not hostility by the mainstream unions², as well as by the expectation that they ought to have changed mainstream unions from within rather than going independent (see Hardy 2022). Despite this scarce institutional support from established labour organizations, and the lack of structural power and economic resources, the precarious migrant workers of indie unions went on to achieve a long series of wins in the outsourced facilities (e.g. cleaning) and gig economy (e.g. food delivery) sectors. These wins entailed important material rewards that included the living wage, pension contributions, fairer sick and parental leave, and even the reversal of outsourcing (see Però 2020; Shalmy 2018; Wegmann 2022). These achievements are all the more remarkable considering they were obtained in sectors characterized by outsourcing, i.e. where employers fragment the labour process to cut labour costs, relinquish their managerial responsibilities (by formally passing them down to a service contractor company) and undermine labour organizing. Then, on the back of such wins, these formations soon started

organizing also the “non-migrants” (many of whom are British-born racialized citizens) who worked precariously as couriers, private hire drivers, foster cares, sex workers, gamers and architects (see Kirk 2020; Shalmy 2018; Weghmann 2023).

This article considers one crucial feature of these precarious migrant workers’ formations and their distinctive type of participatory labour organizing in terms of its relevance for lived citizenship – “the communities of struggle” (Però 2020). A community of struggle is not a pre-existing geographical “community” but rather an informal and loose group of people united by similar experiences of exploitation and exclusion as well as of grass-roots union activism and participation. Communities of struggle have been defined as safe participatory spaces where precarious workers experiencing multiple oppressions are not only able to receive and provide support to each other, but also generate a contentious collective identity, plan and conduct industrial initiatives and in so doing obtaining material and non-material rewards (see Però 2020; Però and Downey 2024). These are formations that – using Patricia Hill Collins (2019, 185) wording – are “simultaneously political (negotiating differences of power within the group), dynamic (negotiating practices that balance individual and collective goals), and aspirational” (spaces for imagining and pursuing something better than the present). Indie unions have from the outset developed an intersectional approach to their struggles – what Lee and Tapia (2023) have termed “intersectional organizing”, recognizing the intersecting forms of exploitation (class, race, gender, nationality and sexuality) experienced by their members and developing their participatory actions based on the understanding of the relational nature of power relations. Communities of struggle are a central building block of indie unions negotiating power vis-à-vis employers (see Però 2022).

Using Kallio, Wood, and Häkli’s (2020) framework outlined above as a heuristic device, we now explore the significance of the various aspects (spatial, intersubjective, performative, and emotional) of lived citizenship enabled by and expressed through these communities of struggle. This exploration will show unaccounted possibilities of belonging, conviviality and embeddedness that are developed through contentious collective claiming of justice that entail challenging the unequal social order, rather than seeking “integration” into it. In so doing, this article offers a new narrative around the figure of the migrant who is seen here as an actor of social change whose impact is relevant not only for their own conditions but also for those of other (non-migrant) marginalized citizens.

Labour organizing and the spatial aspect of citizenship

One key feature of the spatial dimension of the communities of struggle developed by the workers of London’s indie unions is that these contentious communities are not being based so much in a physical locality or place, such as a neighbourhood where communities are usually “found” in sociology (Neal et al. 2019) or a workplace, the spatial unit of relevance to industrial relations and labour scholars (Lazar 2023). Of course, the workplaces that the campaigns target are important, but in such workplaces workers are usually far from constituting the majority of the workforce due to the structural organization of production and the consequent separation of workers in discrete sub-categories (e.g. standard/precarious; in-house/outsourced; employees/bogus self-employed, etc.) and therefore not in the position to develop a vast struggling community fully grounded in that space/workplace (of the type theorized by McAlevey 2016). For example, the

outsourced cleaners at the University of London are few when compared to the other workers of the same organization (e.g. academic and administrative staff who are in-house workers, perform a different job at different times and for a different employer and belong to different trade unions) to be able to ground the bulk of a contentious community in such workplace. Similarly, these outsourced workers – who are largely precarious and migrant (see Pannini 2023; Però 2020; Weghmann 2022) – are not densely populating any particular neighbourhood in terms of enjoying real physical proximity to each other but tend to live sparsely distributed on the territory of London. This is the case even in those boroughs which are considered to have a higher concentration of one ethno-cultural group – say Colombians or Latin Americans in Lambeth. In such boroughs too we are always talking about small numbers of residents in relation to the total population of these areas.

To be sure, all this should not induce an analytical dismissal of the relevance of place/locality for precarious migrant workers³, but only an adjustment – albeit significant – in our awareness of the changing nature of its role in hosting communities. For example, Cant (2019) has provided evidence of how food delivery platform couriers of the IWGB conduct part of their face-to-face labour organizing on benches in the streets and in pubs. Similarly, Kearsey (2023) reports how the private hire cab drivers of IWGB use some of their time spent waiting for customers at airports parking areas to share work experiences and carrying out collective contentious organizing.

As far as migrant cleaners of indie unions are concerned, a great deal of the building of the community of struggles occurs through the many encounters (meetings, events, initiatives) that take place in a variety of locations. These range from the premises of each union (premises which themselves have been moving due to rent unaffordability) as well as in the many recreational and operative events held respectively in parks and rented venues. Last but not least, this contentious community-building happens during the disputes: in the streets (and nearby cafes, restaurants, parks) where the mobilizations and protest take place and in follow-on gathering (e.g. in pubs and private houses). For example, during protests, we have observed the communal preparation of banners and other materials (e.g. assemblage of tents), the fine-tuning of the protest activities previously planned for the day, the improvised meetings in immediate response to emerging issues (e.g. management's threats), the holding of free breakfast events at the change of shifts to strengthen the rapport and solidarity between the workers (cleaners) of one shift with those of the next (and the other protest supporters present). Importantly, the communities of struggle are not exclusive to the workers directly involved in a dispute but are open and feature other workers and members of a union. Moreover, these informal, dynamic and inclusive collectives are not strictly coincident and instrumental to one single dispute but tend to extend for longer, forming the “associational power” (Schmalz, Ludwig, and Webster 2018) basis for further initiatives.

Labour organizing and the intersubjective aspect of citizenship

If the spatial dimension of indie unions' communities of struggle seems to have a rather “flexible” and instrumental connection to places, the intersubjective one, on the contrary, is very much at the heart of such communities and the contentious collective efforts of their members. The communities of struggle of London's migrant workers are ethnically

very heterogeneous groupings. They are multi-ethnic formations with migrants from many different nationalities, with a strong presence of Latin American workers who originally co-founded them. This considerable linguistic and ethno-cultural heterogeneity could, at first sight, suggest thin and superficial intersubjective connections between participants. This is not the case as communication among participants is, in fact, facilitated by translations into other languages which are ordinary at meetings, events, training, in documents, and on social media and by the informal and supportive nature of their events (see also Però 2020). These formations, while oriented towards collective economic rights-claiming, are at the same time characterized by relationships of mutual care and support (Fisher and Tronto 1990). They are sites where horizontal comradeship, solidarity, trust and friendship are spun and materialized and where members can share their experiences and mitigate their sense of marginalization.

One illustrative example in this respect comes from fieldwork done at CAIWU, where one of the authors participated in a fund-raising lunch done to alleviate the material conditions of a fellow cleaner who had been diagnosed with a serious illness: thus, simultaneously supporting the cleaner and offering a space for conviviality. Anybody coming into the union's premises on that day would be offered the possibility of a Latin American meal in the kitchen of the union in exchange of an offer. It is for this type of reason that participants of communities of struggle, in illustrating the high degree of trust and proximity with other participants, recurrently describe the intersubjective relations in these formations through the family metaphor. Typical statements emerging in interviews include "he is like a brother to me" and "UVW is my family" (see also the section on the affective dimension below).

This inclusivity and care go hand in hand with a concern for the respect of difference (ethnic, but also gender and sexuality) which in these formations is paramount. Importantly, this strong and pervasive concern for the recognition of difference in all activities tends to be "unremarkable". Communities of struggle, in fact, are characterized by conviviality, namely a mode of co-existence (Back and Sinha 2016, 552) typified by "indifference to difference" (Amin 2013, 3), "a social pattern [in which] racial differences become ordinary, banal and unremarkable" (Back and Sinha 2016, 552). In other words, the communities of struggle of London migrant workers are characterized by that conviviality that facilitates multi-ethnic interaction and communication (Gilroy 2004; Valluvan 2016). They are formations whose initiatives (contentious or recreational alike) tend to be carried out in manners that are characterized by multiculturalism, a condition where identity differences cease to be an object of normative supervision (Valluvan 2016, 219).

An example of this conviviality is that which Però observed during a summer party of UVW that took place in one of London's parks on a sunny Saturday afternoon of July. This was one of the numerous events where the members with their friends and families come together to have fun, strengthen their ties and celebrate their contentious "community". In such event – like in many other of UVW events – people from very different backgrounds and age groups come together to joyously celebrate their campaigns and organization. On this occasion, for example, there was a group of "gender fluid" youths running a drumming workshop and a group of elderly Ecuadorian workers performing folkloric dances in traditional costumes. It was a moment where the participants were making home in the midst of a hostile environment characterized by multiple exclusions (racism, heteronormativity and so forth) through their convivial community of (labour)

struggle, and where the acceptance of differences need not being remarked because constitutive of the group/community. Importantly, it was a situation that “exceeded” in at least two respects the definition of conviviality provided by Neal et al. (2019, 69) as the “elective coming together of often ethnically diverse others, over time, in places, to do leisure things”. First, in events like those just described, the elements of differentiations were not only ethnic but also included generation, gender, and sexuality. Second, the purpose was not only to do leisure and self-celebratory activities but to contribute to build and maintain the capacity of collectively (associational power) pursuing the improvement of working conditions and achieve greater socio-economic justice.

Indeed, indie unions’ communities of struggle often are also pedagogic sites where those migrant workers who do not come from a metropolitan convivial background can – in good faith – make mistakes while “learning” and practicing multicultural in an understanding environment. An example of this concerns Tobias, a Latin American cleaner in his 50s who, during an organizing meeting used patriarchal overtones towards a female comrade in making his case over a particular course of action he wanted to undertake that she and others were disagreeing with. At that point participants firmly interrupted him saying that his phrasing was not acceptable and shortly after, realizing his genuine puzzlement, in a smaller group patiently explained to him why his way of arguing things had been unacceptable.

Labour organizing and the performative aspects of citizenship

A defining characteristic of the communities of struggle of indie unions that has central relevance to migrant workers’ practices of citizenship is that of campaigning and mobilizing to improve participants’ labour rights through direct action and social media communications that resonate in the public arena (see below and Però and Downey 2024). In response to participants’ needs for workplace rights and justice, communities of struggle host discussions of workers’ collective grievances, assess the collective will to undertake first-person industrial action against employers, plan and carry out the action which is normally articulated on several fronts at once. Typically, employers are first notified of workers’ demands (e.g. the living wage, pensions, sick and parental leaves, the reversing of outsourcing – see Acciari and Però 2017; Alberti 2016; Moyer-Lee and Lopez 2017). As these demands tend to be dismissed, they are followed by a campaign starting on the internet and through social media in which employers and their malpractices are exposed. Very importantly, these online campaigns are never stunts, but a companion as well as a reflection of an actual organizing and mobilizing in progress. They are part of a broader initiative entailing actual face-to-face peaceful direct actions (strikes, protests, sit-ins with a variety of actors). Given that normally the mobilizing workers are not many in relation to the total number of employees of a workplace and therefore are unable to shut down “production” altogether, disruption is sought through a variety of alternative means. In addition to strikes, protests are staged by the communities of struggles (which are normally very visible, loud, colourful and creative) which sometimes involve the customers and users of the organization hiring the exploitative contractor. For example, in 2017 the outsourced cleaners of the LSE developed a series of events and protests featuring not only the cleaners themselves, other members of their union (in this case the UVW), their “allied” groups and individuals,

but also numerous students at that university. The face-to-face protests of indie unions are normally very eye-catching, well attended and positively covered by the mainstream media (Però and Downey 2024) which are notoriously “unfriendly” towards social and labour protest (see in McLeod’s “protest paradigm” 2007).

During these protests, often coinciding with strikes, migrant workers engage in a number of activities (often for the first time), such as making a stand against their supervisors and managers, speaking to the public, and giving interviews to journalists and bloggers. Supported by organizers and fellow workers who have previously completed a cycle of protest at their own workplace, it is migrant workers who occupy central stage in the various phases of the campaigns and protests (from decision-making to articulation of protests). Many of these are women and people with very limited command of English who are new to engaging in such activities.

The goal of the protests is to generate enough *negotiating power* to induce managerial change through the combination of associational power (expressed through contentious collective practices of the communities of struggle), coalitional power (acquired through the involvement of allied organizations and individuals) and discursive power (generated by the media coverage that creates embarrassment for the employer organization hiring the exploitative subcontractors) (see Però 2022; 2023).

It is also important to highlight the “innovative” character of these contentious practices of citizenship, as they constitute a break from the cautious customary ways of conducting industrial relations that has characterized mainstream British unionism after Thatcherism.⁴ For example, no formal union recognition is usually sought prior to mobilization as the recognition process is deemed too long, bureaucratic and uncertain if not dysfunctional (as it would kill off the momentum; see Però 2020). Rather, management’s recognition is pursued and usually obtained *de facto* through bold initiatives and protests.

All this shows how precarious migrant workers can be active subjects and indeed lead the way in collective contentious labour organizing of the precariat which conventional unions have so far been unwilling and/or unable to adequately represent both in Britain and in the rest of Europe (see Cini, Maccarrone, and Tassinari 2022; Cioce, Però, and Korczyński 2024; Tassinari and Maccarrone 2020). This effectiveness is beginning to be recognized in the British labour movement (Holgate 2021), with a number of mainstream unions branches starting to adopt similar tactics (Smith 2022).

Labour organizing and the affective aspects of citizenship

In the previous three sub-sections we have looked at the spatial, intersubjective and performative dimensions of citizenship characterizing the involvement of migrant workers in communities of struggle. As a whole, the above account offered an idea of how these formations are generally pivotal in migrants’ obtaining material rewards (see Però 2020; 2023). In this section, we consider a further dimension – the affective one – that Kallio, Wood, and Häkli (2020) associate to the feelings connected to being a citizen and which in our case tends to be linked to the non-material aspects of the involvement in communities of struggle for workplace entitlements. In this respect, here we consider the transformations that the involvement in these contentious communities seems to entail in terms of workers’ overall emotional state and outlook; social embeddedness

and sense of belonging; as well as acquisition of skills, abilities and personal growth (not least in terms of political subjectivity).

A recurrent theme in the interviews with migrant workers of indie unions was the improvement in their wellbeing and outlook. To illustrate this point, we use the case of Maria, a Latin American cleaner in her 40s, as it reflects the kind of transformations experienced by many other participants of the communities of struggle of indie unions.

Maria highlighted how her involvement with UVW has been coinciding not only with an improvement in her working conditions (payment of arrears, termination of abuses and mobbing) but also with her progressive coming out of depression and medication. This condition had started various months earlier because of the abuse and harassment that she had received from her supervisors while working for a cleaning company hired by a high street chain in central London. This included being made to clean toilets using powerful chemicals all day for prolonged periods of time after she had told her British supervisor to stop addressing her with derogatory terms like “donkey”, which made her feel very low: *I felt humiliated, I was crying all the time and I got ill*. Following the recommendation of a friend, she turned to UVW where she received both emotional and practical legal support and where she met others in similar oppressive conditions. In the union she felt that she was not on her own and started to *feel well ... to feel that this is my space, that this is my place*. Through her involvement in the union she (re-)gained hope about the possibility of achieving positive change, a feeling that she has since tried to pass on to others – especially the new members – whose difficulties have rendered them dispirited. This transformation is reflected in her effort to challenge the attitude she sees as diffused among Latin American migrant workers to respond to abuse and exploitation at work by quitting their job, only to re-encounter them in their new workplaces.

Many of us are suffering from abuse and lack of respect at work but because of poor English etc. we try to end them by changing job only to find the same abuse again and again in the next ones ... because abuse is in every workplace in every company.

In explaining her experience with UVW, Maria compared it with that in an organization campaigning for citizen and migrant's rights.

My union is more like my people, there is more friendship and trust there, it's a different feeling, it's like being in your own home ... where I can let go ... and feel relieved, it's like being with some of my own family members. I feel like I can do everything with them: share, open up, laugh, get upset, anything.

Importantly, during the interview Maria also pointed out how in the union she not only received solidarity, improved her condition at work and become more embedded, but also started to reciprocate providing support to others.

Giving people information, making them feel that they are not on their own – like I initially was ... for lack of information, support, translations ... – trying to address all these needs that I know are many as we are many that experience abuses from companies. ... I'm happy with myself to know that I have not been one of those who see abuse and suffering and turns the other way

Becoming an active provider of solidarity – and not only a recipient – was described by her as something that contributed to make her happier and more satisfied with herself, with positive repercussions for her children and family.

As a result of her involvement in the communities of struggle of her union Maria now considers herself stronger as well as more confident and able (which is also how others who have known her for some time would see her). She explains how – through her involvement in a variety of union’s initiatives – she has overcome her fear of confronting supervisors, as well as of speaking in public and now routinely speaks in both English and Spanish at meetings and events, small and large.

Discussion and conclusions

Contemporary sociological critique of citizenship challenges dominant conceptualizations for being exclusionary, with static boundaries demarcating those inside (with rights) from those outside (without rights). Importantly, it also exposes the internal differentiation that exist within citizenship in relation to intersectional inequalities of gender, race, sexuality, and disability, and to a lesser extend of class. In addition, this critique points out: the relevance of looking beyond formal rights and focusing instead on how citizenship is experienced and enacted in everyday life; the importance of not taking the nation-state as the natural unit of analysis and replacing it instead with empirical “sites” where relationships assemble with fluid boundaries; and the need of considering the variety of practices that can be seen as acts of citizenship, including cultural and caring work. Contentious labour practices – this article contends – have been the “great absentee” in this sociological critique of dominant understandings of citizenship. This is the subject that this article has sought to illuminate by examining the case of the communities of struggle formed by the precarious migrant workers of London’s indie unions, focusing on the four key dimensions of spatiality, intersubjectivity, performativity and affectivity (Kallio, Wood, and Häkli 2020).

Taken together these insights offer a grounded account of the lived citizenship that the involvement in participatory labour organizing can facilitate. In particular, these insights point to a sense of belonging that develops centred much more strongly and concretely on communities of (contentious) practice (i.e. the communities of struggle) than on the abstract and normatively ascribed imagined community of the host nation-state. They offer a sense of the transformation that can occur in precarious migrant workers’ outlook on their present and future, one that – as we have seen – tends to move from despair towards satisfaction and hope. Additionally, our insights offer indications of how previously isolated and excluded migrant workers can develop a stronger and meaningful social embeddedness and grounding. They also show how it is possible to organize effectively for rights across racial, gender and generational boundaries and develop spaces for conviviality. Moreover, they outline the current significance of labour contentious practices as important acts of citizenship that – far from being an archaic phenomenon as they have often been dismissed – are increasingly acquiring relevance among the vast and growing population of precarious workers, both migrant and non-migrant. Finally, they indicate the possibility for precarious migrant workers of acquiring new skills and abilities that help them start new journeys of personal growth. Overall, these insights suggest how by participating in these contentious communities, precarious migrant workers gain material and non-material rewards, with the latter including important transformations of their political subjectivities.

Drawing on their marginalized position at the convergence of different systems of power (Collins 2019), these migrant workers and their unions were able to develop new ways of enacting citizenship and in so doing re-imagine what is possible (Anzaldúa 1987; hooks 1989). Linking together social, political and economic injustices, their labour engagements have gained broader societal relevance, from inspiring changes in the tactics of the British labour movement (see Holgate 2021; Smith 2022) to being at the forefront of broader campaigns against outsourcing (Però and Downey 2024) and resistance in the gig economy (Cant 2019; Shenker 2019; Woodcock and Cant 2022). They illustrate how the labour initiatives of migrant and migrantized citizens are contributing to changing employment and living conditions, in ways that are beneficial not only to their participants but also to other precarious workers as well as to the industrial democratization of the wider society. In their struggles to re-centre who is a worker (i.e. by including the rights of precarious and outsourced workers – usually under-represented by mainstream unions which privilege “standard” workers; see Alberti 2016; Alberti and Però 2018; Ness 2014; Piro 2023), they fight the degrading and exploitative mechanisms and practices that produce alienated relations (Burkitt 2019; Petrini and Wettergren 2023) for an increasing number of workers, and not just migrant and racialized ones. This element has finally started to be recognized as a contribution to industrial democracy by the mainstream labour organizations (see Holgate 2021 and Smith 2022) after their initial dismissive, if not hostile, attitude to indie unions (Alberti and Però 2018; Moyer-Lee and Lopez 2017).

Thus, in struggles against outsourcing, it is not only the workers directly involved in an action who benefit from it, but a wider range of workers in society. This is because these struggles often involve not only structural changes to exploitative productive arrangements (Acciari and Però 2017; Però 2020 and 2023), but also emblematic cultural transformations in the political outlook of other workers and their organizations who – witnessing highly disadvantaged precarious migrant workers achieving this change – feel encouraged to reconsider their “accommodating” approach to industrial relations adopted in recent decades (see Holgate 2021; Smith 2022; Wegmann 2023).

Theoretically, the above empirical findings show the importance of incorporating the struggles for redistributive justice into citizenship debates, as material circumstances strongly affect people’s lives as citizens. These struggles, while operating at the micro scale of the community and of specific employment sectors are also impactful on a more macro level, as they facilitate migrants’ recognition and challenge normative understandings of who belongs to the nation and can be seen as a worker. By drawing attention on the achievements of those considered as the most un-integrated migrants, that is to say low-paid (often female) migrant workers in precarious contracts, these struggles dent the current division between “us” and “them” and help forge new solidarities across differences.

By showing how through participatory labour organizing precarious migrant workers can improve their working and living conditions, transform their lived citizenship and political subjectivity as well as contribute to socio-economic justice in the wider society, this article has highlighted the importance that conflict (and in particular intersectional labour conflict) can have in enhancing belonging. In so doing, it also exposes the inconsistencies of ideas about the desirability of migrants’ integration into a status quo which is characteristically unequal and exploitative.

Notes

1. Drawing on their Annual Returns submitted to the Certification Office of the British government, on the 31-12-2023, the three indie unions together had 11,977 registered members (IWGB 6,626, UVW 3,521, and CAIWU 1,830).
2. With the partial exception of the University College Union and isolated branches of Unison (such as SOAS).
3. This is evident in the implications that the formation of a community of struggle can have for the curtailing of managerial control in a workplace. As pointed out by Sandra and Pablo from CAIWU, it is more difficult for middle-managers and supervisors (especially if new) to implement exploitative company policies where communities of struggle are in place for the disruptions and conflict these would generate in opposition. Because of these difficulties some of these managerial figures have been reported to have had to resign.
4. Although in most recent years a series of strikes involving 'standard' workers such as rail workers and junior doctors have been undertaken.

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