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Class reimagined? Intersectionality and industrial action – the British Airways dispute of 2009-11
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Intersectionality conceptualises how multiple inequalities interact to produce distinct experiences that cannot be captured by examining gender, race or other social categories separately (Mooney, 2016; Roth and Dashper, 2016). While intersectionality, may help to capture lived experience, it is less clear how it might inform worker's collective organisation at the workplace or the mobilisation of worker *interest and consciousness*. Work and employment as a field of study has omitted to consider of the significance of intersectionality (McBride et al., 2015). Milkman observes that class has been disregarded in intersectional analysis and that 'the relationship of women workers to labor unions, is peripheral to the intersectionality literature' (2017:4). If trade unions mobilise some form of *interest*, in terms of worker's material stake in the employment relationship, few contemporary accounts consider the inter-relationship of gender, race, sexuality and class in industrial action. One exception is Pearson and Sundari's (2018) exemplary account of South Asian women's leadership at Grunwick 1976-78 and at Gate Gourmet in 2005. They explore how gender, ethnicity and class intersected 'to catalyse industrial action in each of these two workplaces' (2018:, 409).

This paper addresses Botteros's (2004) call for empirical investigation of the reasons why 'explicit class identities, class solidarities and demarcated class boundaries emerge at some times and places and not others' (2004:996). In doing so it engages with relevant debates in this journal (Savage et al., 2013; Bradley, 2014; Bottero, 2004; Reay, 2015; Jarness et al., 2019;). The 2009-11 conflict between British Airways (BA) and its cabin crew trade union, British Airways Stewards and Stewardesses Association (BASSA), offers a propitious case for empirical study. While trade union activism assumes some implicit class identity (Hyman, 2001), BA cabin crew can also be characterised by intersectional identities – crew are diverse in terms of gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity and nationality. Their reflections on participation in the dispute might reveal the ways in which they mobilised different aspects of their identities (Nash, 2008) and articulated and/or sublimated class, gender, sexuality or race/ethnicity consciousness. The organisational and ideological resources provided by BASSA may have legitimated and prioritised an inclusive or exclusive *worker* interest.

Some contextualisation is necessary regarding the role of BASSA as the representative body of British Airways' cabin crew. During the decades of de-regulation and restructuring of the civil aviation industry (Bamber et al, 2009; Doganis, 2006), BA implemented policies centred on cost reduction, flexible and reduced crewing, enhanced service excellence and work intensification (Blyton and Turnbull, 2004), but its 1995 Business Efficiency Programme signalled a step-change in its determination to dismantle the architecture and erode the substance of the joint (with BASSA) regulation of employment terms and conditions. Driven by the urgent need to strengthen its bargaining power, BASSA undertook a recruitment drive that increased membership density to 73 per cent by 2001 (CAA, 2004) and 92 per cent by 2009. At the onset of the dispute, approximately 13,000 of the 14,000 crew were BASSA members. Women comprised two-thirds of both the workforce and BASSA membership.

Questions of identity, interest, subjectivity and collectivism are interrogated through data from in-depth testimonies derived from semi-structured interviews with 60 cabin crew members who participated as BASSA members in the industrial action. Conducted post-dispute these interviews allowed respondents to deliberate on the broader significance of the conflict and the meanings of their participation. A supplementary source providing a compelling prologue to these reflections

comes from an on-line forum (Crew Forum), specifically a thread that centred on a poll on class identity.

Recognising cabin crew's collective commitment while remaining sensitive to intersectionality, a key research question concerns the assertion of class interest. Closely related to a general retreat from class politics (Meiksins Wood, 1986), a dominant theme in subsequent sociological literature has been to reduce class to one social identity amongst others with social identity and class consciousness potentially counterposed (Moore, 2011). To what extent, did crew affirm or disavow class individually or collectively prior to and then following their experiences of the dispute?

A second related research question concerns the meanings crew attached to their activity in the dispute and as strikers. Accordingly, to what extent might cabin crew's awareness of their diversity as a workforce contribute to the way they situated themselves contemporaneously and historically. Resonating with Sundari and Pearson, and underlying this paper, is an exploration of how gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity and class intersect and manifest themselves in the dynamics of the dispute. Since two-thirds of the cabin crew were women, the paper focuses particularly on the interplay of gender and class and the articulation of gender consciousness. As Milkman proposes, such interactions are reflected at the material level, through gendered labour markets and allocations of domestic labour, but also at the ideological level. Responding to both research questions requires explication of the role of BASSA and amplification of older debates concerning the distinction between trade union and class identities.

The paper continues by critiquing the utility of intersectional theory for analysing women's involvement in industrial action, drawing on historical and contemporary studies of gender, race and class consciousness. It then provides an overview of the 2009-11 BA-BASSA dispute and details the research methods, data collection and analytical approach. Intersectionality is drawn upon as methodology. A critical review of the cabin crew's extended narratives identifies a number of salient recurring themes that lends structure to the findings, one of which is the invocation of the UK 1984-85 miners' strike. Cabin crew members' consistent references to this conflict suggest engagement with Nettleingham's (2017) proposition on the impact of narrative productions of historical generations and the role this production plays in collective political identity. However, in drawing on this 'canonical generation' BASSA activists located their identities in a very different construction of class which constitutes the distinctive contribution of this paper.

Intersectionality, class and industrial action

Intersectionality has become a methodological tool in qualitative research, since individual narratives are often constituted in terms which do not necessarily differentiate between or disentangle class, gender, age, race, ethnicity, sexuality or disability. Silence on one or more of these categories, does not obviate structural disadvantage (Bowleg, 2008). However, an anti-categorical approach to intersectionality deconstructs (modernist) analytical categories, resonating with post-modern and post-structuralist accounts of the complexity of social relations (McCall, 2005). A literature on identity and consciousness focuses on the fluidity, multiplicity and incoherence of social identity in self-presentations or 'performances' (Walker and Lynn, 2013; Cover, 2012;). In the context of the gender politics of the contemporary airline industry, Duffy et al. downplay 'collective experiences of discrimination and disadvantage' and present cabin crew as organisationally idealised gendered subjects, asserting that gendered subjectivities are mobilised 'to affirm managerially desired meaning'(2017:261).

This paper takes a critical position in relation to the cultural politics and organizational implications of post-feminism that reduces agency to subjectivity. For McCall the point is not to deny the existence of material and discursive categories, but 'to focus upon the process by which they are produced, experienced, reproduced and resisted' (2005: 1783). Class remains a difficult concept to operationalise in intersectional research. Walby et al. (2012) note that class is unlike other social relations of inequality and Mooney suggests that 'viewing class as embedded in organisational processes rather than a descriptor' (2016:715) might deliver analytical purchase. Such an approach challenges sociological conceptualisations of class defined by the location of individuals in social and cultural hierarchies abstracted from identity and consciousness (Bottero, 2004), rather than embedded in relationships of, but more significantly struggles between, labour and capital. In this perspective, class is not merely another category of intersection, but the context in which inequality is made manifest. Accordingly, Pearson and Sundari's application of intersectional analysis to the action of distinct groups of South Asian women in both the Grunwick and Gate Gourmet disputes aims to:

> understand how social axes of identities of different groups of minority women workers such as their gender, race, ethnicity, diverse class positions, migration histories and family circumstances are mobilised and reproduced in migrant labour markets and shape particular political possibilities in response to exploitation at work (2018:16).

They emphasise that workers' actions are influenced not just by intersectional identity, but also by imperial, political and industrial legacies of countries of origin. (2018:17). They challenge the 'cultural turn' in academia in which identity and culture dominate and material issues of work and economic survival are marginalised. Agency is rooted in classed, racialized and gendered contexts, not only in response to reconfigured labour processes, but also to discrimination and indignity at work, shaped by women's need to combine productive and reproductive work. For Pearson and Sundari (2018) Grunwick and Gate Gourmet represent the mobilisation of segregated workforces by gender and race, but this is not the case for BA cabin crew. Although cabin crew have been considered a gendered workforce, a distinctive characteristic of the BA strike is the mobilisation of a diverse workforce with a high proportion of women and LGBT workers, various national identities and a minority from BAME backgrounds.

Milkman's analysis of the relationship of gender to organised labour also prioritises the material and structural basis of labour market segregation, reproduced by capital but too rarely challenged by organised labour. The cultural and ideological dimensions of the gender division of labour and how these shape, or are shaped by, trade union responses are not discounted. Milkman proposes that typologies of unions formed in different historical periods have different relationships with women workers. Occupational unions are considered most receptive to female membership and to 'women's issues'. In contrast to the characteristics of occupational unions, general unions, in operating over a wide occupational and industrial jurisdiction, may reproduce labour market segmentations (Milkman, 2017), particularly in circumstances (such as Gate Gourmet) where 'core workers' have been outsourced and workforces fragmented.

Prior to the emergence of intersectional theory, historians attempted to unpick the ways in which women's involvement in the emergent labour movement 'related to their experience and consciousness of themselves as women, as members not only of an exploited class, but also of an oppressed sex' (Taylor, 1983:89). Yeo (1995) observed that historically

> women in less powerful social groups, including racial and ethnic as well as class groups, have tended to prioritise social solidarity over gender solidarity. But this has not universally been the case in the past and it remains an open question for the future.

Women could act alongside men in defence of family, community, and class, often in an extension of their domestic role (Humphries, 1977) as evidenced in the Miner's Wives Support Groups during the 1984-5 strike. Interpretations of wider social mobilisations by working class women have identified forms of 'female consciousness' as based on women's experience in the household and which may contribute to class consciousness and class-based activism, particularly where adverse social conditions, such as food shortages constrain women in carrying out domestic tasks (Kaplan, 1993).

In the conditions of the contemporary UK labour market, in which a greater proportion of women than ever before are formally engaged, women's collective action is more likely to be a manifestation of the realities of waged labour. Women may take action to defend working patterns that underpin their capacity to undertake domestic responsibilities and social reproductive roles. A recent notable case was the Essex Fire Service when control staff struck action against imposed 12-hour shifts that were incompatible with their childcare arrangements and forced some to leave full-time employment and to reduce their working hours (Hudson et al., 2017).

The articulation of gender consciousness that challenges extant gender relations and identifies with 'feminism' may be as elusive as class consciousness in trade union disputes. Feminist ideas may encourage or constrain women's participation in unions as, for example, through separate or self-organisation. As Kirton (2005) stresses, gendered experiences may not be politicised or seen as issues for solidaristic action or subject to gender conscious discourses. There may be a reluctance to self-identify as feminist despite the influence of feminist beliefs and values. For Yeo (1995) working class women may utilise a number of 'contradictory languages/discourses', which promote solidarity, but also 'operate to cement hierarchy and inequality of power' such as languages of motherhood. In the Essex fire service dispute contradictions were evident in the women's promotion of 'Mother's Day' to gain publicity and support, reflecting existing gender relations, but simultaneously advocating women's full-time work. Such narratives seem to confirm that union women use some, but not all, aspects of feminist ideology to legitimise the assertion of workplace rights (Hartman-Strom, 1983).

At the same time as interrogating women's identification with class, older debates on class consciousness should be recalled. It was argued that since trade unions are class-based organisations, trade unionists will have a class identity, but this is not synonymous with politicised class consciousness. In actively defending their livelihoods and working conditions, workers do not necessarily consciously challenge the class basis of capitalist society (Anderson, 1977; Hyman, 1971). Recent literature on class has been premised on the apparent absence of class struggle and consciousness and a 'new sociology' of class has privileged cultural, affective, psycho-social, moral and other 'lived' dimensions (Reay, 2005). These readings of class focus on hierarchical differentiation informed by Bourdieu, but operationalised in the UK through Savage et al.'s 'empirical schema' underpinned by markers of cultural capital and social networks, rather than by economic relationships (Bradley, 2014:433). Rejecting the individualised hierarchy of class where identifications are implicit or 'disavowed', Bottero (2004) argues that definition of class should be reserved for the expression of explicit collectivity (Bottero, 2004), thereby implying a disarticulation between identity, interest and political discourse (Jarness et al, 2019). The testimonies of cabin crew reflect on the salience of such subjective and objective identifications with class and gender and permit theorising on their interaction in the context of industrial action.

The meanings that participants in disputes attribute to their actions may be shaped by historical legacies and memories. In this regard Nettleingham's (2017) study of the narratives of contemporary socialist political activists, found that the miner's strike of 1984-5 had a major historical and symbolic importance for them. It has been contextualised in longer-term cycles of social change and collective political identity by successive cohorts through active narrative (re)production. For Traverso (2016) such historic defeats underpin a left-wing melancholia and signify crisis in the social and political identity of the traditional left that has impacted worker and class memory. How does Nettelingham emphasis on the legacy of the miner's strike find expression in the meanings attributed by cabin crew to their actions and identities in a dispute occurring a quarter of a century later?

Context: Cabin Crew Conflict

Constraints of space prohibit a detailed account of the protracted conflict (Taylor and Moore, 2019), but salient characteristics provide essential contextualisation. Project Columbus, BA's attempt to impose a new 'mixed fleet' on inferior terms and conditions underlay the dispute, although the immediate trigger was the reduction of crew numbers on aircrafts without consultation. BASSA faced enormous obstacles, including judicial decisions that blocked strike action and even jeopardised the right to strike in the UK (Ewing, 2010), political opposition and hostile media. BA's ferocious counter-mobilisation involved victimisation of BASSA officers and activists, strikebreaking tactics and the encouragement of pilots and non-strikers to display overt hostility towards union members. Facing this offensive, they demonstrated sustained resistance, evidenced by the large majorities for strike action on huge turn-outs in four ballots[i], testifying to BASSA's organisational effectiveness.

A profound informal collectivism was ingrained in quotidian work solidarities and the distinctive cabin crew labour process and the intensity of interactive work routines in confined physical spaces generated 'an indefinable chemistry' (Taylor and Moore, 2015: 90). This fusing of work and social lives created a strong sense of occupational community, distinctive in that crew shared neither residential proximity, nor continuous working relationships. Crew constantly defined themselves as a 'family' or a 'community' and of inhabiting a 'global village', and even referred to a distinctive language – galley FM – that indicated a shared system of values. Essentially, union organisation was underpinned by a shared occupational experience *at the workplace*, albeit that the workplace was transient and the workforce composed of multiple, sequential and impermanent relationships.

Formal collective organisation was manifested in the joint regulation of work, the working environment and employment terms and conditions. Comprehensive union-negotiated agreements specified every aspect of crews' working lives, with BASSA reps monitoring management adherence to the detail of, for example, working hours and crewing levels. Reps may have been disproportionately male, but several women held leading positions Arguably, BASSA exemplifies Milkman's (2017) observation that occupational unions are most receptive to female membership, vertically organising all BA crew regardless of 'grade' and apropos the purposes of this paper, gender, ethnicity, nationality and sexual orientation. BASSA possesses relative autonomy from its general union parent, Unite, and its democratic, accountable structures have made it highly responsive to the demands of its diverse membership.

Accordingly, BASSA's embeddedness in the totality of crew's working lives provided a foundation for the ideological framework in which members understood BA's actions. This powerful collectivism was nourished through the dispute by constant communication, including the skilful use of social media,

theatrical mass meetings, the carnivalesque rallies at Bedfont Football Club on strike days and by inventive counter-cultural activity designed to build confidence and solidarity (Taylor and Moore, 2019: 98-114).

Research Methods

The primary data derives from a broader study of the dynamics of industrial conflict between British Airways and the cabin crew union, BASSA, between 2009 and 2011 (Taylor and Moore, 2019). Firstly, and substantially, the article draws on sixty semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with cabin crew, all of whom were BASSA members and were active before and during the conflict. Access was facilitated by BASSA and here researcher positionality is conceded. Interviews took place between September 2011 and November 2012 in union offices, in quiet spaces in hotels and restaurants and in crew members' homes. Interviews were based on informed consent and typically lasted around 90 minutes, but many over two hours. The gender, ethnic and age profiles of respondents were representative of the population of BASSA reps. A majority of interviewees worked long-haul on the WorldWide fleet and a minority on the short-haul Eurofleet. All but one, who worked from Gatwick, were based at Heathrow. Of those interviewed, twenty-nine were employed in senior roles, either as Cabin Service Directors (19) or as Pursers (10) while twenty-one were employed as main crew.

An interview schedule was constructed around distinct themes including: personal profile, employment biography, career history at BA, work routines and labour process, changes in work organisation, work relationships, perceptions of management including employment relations, union membership and involvement in and experiences of the dispute from Project Columbus onwards, with a specific concentration on strike days. The time distance between the dispute's conclusion and the interviews permitted crew to deliberate on the broader significance of the conflict and the meanings of their participation.

The research was informed by the utility of intersectionality as methodology with its potential to capture the ways in which research participants might privilege one identity over another, or switch between different social identities which can become intertwined in the construction of their self-narratives (Buitelaar, 2006). Most of the distinctive intersectional methodologies identified (Nash, 2008) have engaged with the question of how far a categorical approach to inequality aids or hinders intersectional *analysis*. An 'anti-categorical' approach (McCall (2005) means that the researcher does not aim to operationalise one particular social category in the course of *data collection*. Rather, respondents articulate their own identities, which was the method adopted in this study. However in terms of analysis, as Ludvig (2006) suggested in her discussion of intersectionality in empirical investigation, it is difficult to avoid using categories altogether, nor as Walby et al (2012) contend is it practical or even desirable Within the scope of this study the researchers sought throughout to elicit reflections on the nature of individuals' activity and the relationships between their and colleagues' trade union and individual identities. Towards the end of interviews direct questions were asked about women's involvement, political and social values, including feminism, socialism and voting intention, and about personal trajectories and transformations. Inductive evaluation of themes emerged from the narratives, with the schedule of questions facilitating an analytic strategy based on a matrix of responses under respective headings and sub-headings (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

While Duffy et al. conceive of organisationally idealised gendered subjects as realised through 'corporate aesthetics' and adhere essentially to 'a phenomenological understanding of gender as a performative ontology' they are reluctant to abandon entirely a more structural understanding of gender as an organisationally imposed (2017:264).This study may seek a reconciliation of

phenomenology and historical materialism in so far as it restores a dialectical impulse to class as a relationship. However, the analysis of cabin crew experiences, meanings and identities in the BA dispute is rooted generally in the asymmetrical nature of the employment relationship and concretely in the adversarial relations in which the respondents located themselves.

Intersectionality and Class – The Findings

Class Disavowal?

The diversity of cabin crew in terms of gender, sexuality, race and ethnicity raises questions about the identities expressed during the protracted conflict and whether these were articulated, sublimated or transformed through struggle. An on-line poll and discussion took place on the class character of cabin crew before the commencement of the crews' industrial action, but following the disclosure of the detail of Project Columbus. The poll yielded 108 responses, with 58 per cent agreeing that cabin crew were working class and 27 per cent believing that they were middle class. Only two per cent rejected class as a category, reflecting the statement 'it's a classless society' and an additional 13 per cent agreed that class 'depends on your own beliefs/values'. Resonating with Savage et al. (2013), the debate focussed largely on whether class is defined by occupation or background or consumption/lifestyle as, for example, where someone might shop.

In a post-strike interview, Richard acquiesced with the widely-held stereotype of cabin crew as middle class seeing their actions as motivated by a sense of justice rather than adherence to class identity. He questioned the association of crews' voting intention with their identities, motivations and actions (Jarness et al. 2019):

> I think the cabin crew if anything tend to be middle class, middle England-y sort of people with a sense of fairness about us and I think it was this sense of unfairness from our employer that really struck a chord with a lot of people that you would not normally associate with any militant actions. Oh yes, a lot of our members will be staunch Conservative and they might be married to pilots and bankers and this, that and the other. But it was the complete sense of unfairness and unjustification that led people to taking the action that they did.

In contrast, Elizabeth encapsulated the tension between sociological and political definitions of class, suggesting that, for her, class was based on the shared experience and essential collectivism of the cabin crew:

> You have got that underlying, common denominator, you are all cabin crew, you've all experienced the job. I work for a living therefore I am working class. People fall into this idea that they have become middle class but they haven't. You can be working class, but they try and put it negatively. And that's what impacts, so yes I am working class through and through even though my job title [gives the impression] it might not be.

In the Forum postings, while there were both direct assertions of, and disassociations from, class, it was nevertheless a salient identity. The discussion was infused with interrogation of 'middle class' as an appropriate descriptor for cabin crew. During the dispute one media commentator reiterated the caricature of cabin crew as 'the unthreatening faces of Middle Britain – sensible, orderly, down to earth people, as far removed from stroppy left-wing militancy as you could imagine'.[ii] This stereotype might even be internalised by cabin crew for, as Carrie remarked, they were 'just a bunch of girls or a bunch of gays'

Gendered relationships – reproductive and productive roles

Like work, industrial action reflects a gendered intersection of reproductive and productive roles (Sundari and Pearson, 2017). Not one respondent regretted taking strike action, but the 'utterly all-consuming' nature of the dispute took its toll in terms of physical and mental health and put enormous pressure on personal relationships and domestic roles and responsibilities Savi's quote is notable for her compelling insistence that she is not a different person at work and home and that commitment to the strike transcended dualities between women's productive and domestic/reproductive roles. She highlighted the damage the dispute inflicted on her relationship:

> My husband was completely against it, just did not want me to be part of this at all. I said, 'No, you can't tell me what to do, this is me and my dispute', but he said 'We're gonna get affected by it, we've got a mortgage, we've got children, but yeah, fair enough, we'll see what happens'. It did affect my relationship and still does even now. I said 'How can I go to work and not get involved with something which is so central to my life? How can I just disengage myself from something like this?' I couldn't. I'm not one person here and one person there, it's the same person. Oh, it put a huge strain on my marriage, it really did.

Kat recalled similar tensions even when cabin crew were supported by their partners - same-sex or otherwise:

> 'It became almost obsessional for everybody. There were an awful lot of divorces because these sort of things were happening, where [partners would be saying] 'Can you get off it and make a cup of tea now, can you get off it and sort the kids out? From the minute you woke up in the morning to going to bed at night, it was obsessional. [My husband] was very, very supportive, but it did put a strain on us. It's a busy household and Mum was needed but Mum was involved in a bitter dispute with her employer that took over everything unfortunately.

Where both parents were BASSA members childcare and participation in strike activity could be shared, although the pressures on family relationships were exacerbated by hostile media commentary that attacked female strikers in terms of their role as mothers for taking industrial action to defend themselves as workers. Sana recounted her experience of participating in picket lines and at rallies held at the strike's operational headquarters at Bedfont Football ground near Heathrow Airport:

> The *Daily Mail* put my youngest daughter on their website and I wasn't happy…she was in Bedfont and she was walking along with me and she looked as glum as anything. And they put a picture on there saying about mothers dragging their children too young to understand the picket line and said this little girl looks glum or doesn't look very happy. And a comment was "Can we go home please Mummy?'. I was so cross because it was like questioning my ability to be a mother. Like 'are these people really suitable to be parents if they think it's ok to bring a child to a picket line?"'.

Cabin crew thus challenged the imposition of gendered roles. Shift working on both short and long haul flights meant that cabin crew habitually constructed complex childcare routines that attempted to manage their work–life balance, particularly in circumstances where both parents were cabin crew. Tensions between strike action and domestic responsibilities were thus not just experienced by women. A leading BASSA rep, Tom disclosed that he had been fully committed for the entirety of the dispute, so that 'during that period I was an absent father [because] I was giving everything to the union'.Consistent with Pearson and Sundari's conceptual schema (2018), cabin crew agency is rooted in, but not necessarily defined by classed, racialized and gendered contexts. Yet, in distancing

themselves from a perception of class militancy defined by the 1984-5 Miners' Strike, cabin crew asserted their identities in terms of gender, sexuality and, to a lesser extent, race and ethnicity.

Location and Canon – the Miner's Strike

Picket lines at Heathrow and mass rallies at Bedfont were marked by humour, glamour, ebullience and a carnival atmosphere. As the quote below demonstrates, strikers Pickets might mobilise subjectivity in terms of both sexuality and gender (Duffy et al. 2017) but collectively rejected comparisons between themselves and the miners in respect, firstly, of social identities and, secondly, perceptions of 'militancy'. Their narratives suggest that they used the miners as a cipher for working class men, implicitly white and heterosexual. For Rhys:

> Bearing in mind we are people people and live off our emotions so we're not the miners, ours are not hard core macho environments. Our demographic, our girls and gay guys mostly, [are] not probably the most militant of people. … We used it [the Miner's Strike] as an analogy as in probably the last dispute that probably would come anywhere near to this was the Miners' Strike and you could draw comparisons as in trying to break them, it was purely about breaking [the union]. So we did, but then we didn't want to go down that route of the image of the aggression and the image of the fighting element with the riots and the police and all that sort of thing. One of the papers titled it as one of the most glamorous picket lines they'd ever seen…[on] one of the London phone-ins this guy rang in and said, 'There's no foundation to this, there's no foundation to that picket line. And one of our girls rang up and said 'I do have to correct you on that. There is 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 this steward walked past in bright pink wellies, waving his flag, and you think, 'what picket line is like this?

This distancing from a historical stereotype of trade unionists reflects, in part, the decline in heavy industry and manufacturing and the growth in service activity in the UK economy that has seen record levels of female labour market participation. Simultaneously it involved a repudiation of a conception of militancy:

> There were quotes about, 'We're getting back to the 70s and all cloth caps and whippets. All out, brothers and down the working man's club'. And we were not like that anymore, the human race has evolved and these are gentle people…we're not militant, no, we are not militant. We're not militant, we're not radical, we're pragmatic and we're people that want fairness and recognition for what we do. And that is not being a militant. (Stephen)

Kat, similarly emphasised what might be defined as gendered performance on the picket line, as a means of differentiation:

> We weren't the miners, we were not the typical stereotype. On the picket lines, you would see all these glamorous girls and people would comment: 'Oh you don't look the usual militant lot…people have stereotypes, so [when] they think of strikers in this country they go back to the miners' strike, and think of you as that.

Several affirmed this reluctance to define cabin crew and their actions as militant perceiving militancy as highly gendered and somehow inappropriate in terms of sexuality and age. Laurent reflected:

> I wouldn't say militant, I think it was my colleague who said that if you've got the majority as either middle aged women or guys who are homosexual then it's the most opposite of militant you would ever find. I don't want to use the word but I think it's quite laughable. Ok, if they were all like me, short haircut and big bloke, you could understand. But the people we represent, it couldn't be further from the truth. They were very solid.

Others critiqued the use of the term militancy on the grounds that it betokened an ill-conceived rush into taking strike action regardless of the consequences, which was quite contrary to the approach BASSA had adopted. Recalling a discussion prior to the first strike vote, Julianne expressed her opposition to a manager's use of this epithet. While re-iterating the trope disassociating the crew's action from that of the miners', she concluded by suggesting that the descriptor might nevertheless be used approvingly.

> What was quite interesting for me was speaking to a manager before we balloted. I said, 'You've got to realise that none of us want to go on strike'. He then said, 'We are going to sack the first 500 militants' and I said 'How dare you call us militants, but I will be on that [picket] line'. So that made me absolutely furious. I think that BA tried very much to try and make it look like we were the miners. Bill Francis (BA's Head of Inflight Customer Experience) said it [our dispute] reminded him of the miners' strike. Well how could it? We were laughing and joking with the police, they put on music on for us to dance to. So we were not like that. I don't know what militancy is, I think it is standing up for what you believe is right'.

Crew rejected a homogenised class identity and characterisations of 'militancy' as associated with the miner's strike; rather they asserted an inclusive, unified trade union collectivity forged from divergent social identities.

The coalescence of identity as interest

Kat, celebrated the role of women in the dispute but, equally emphasised that gender, sexuality and race coalesced into an overriding trade union identity:

> I think we did a fantastic job for women in Britain. I think we showed them that you can go out and have beliefs. I think we changed a lot of people's views. You didn't see gay, white, black, anything, you just saw a trade union member or a non-trade union member - a belief in a sense of injustice.

In this sense, the experience of conflict can strengthen group consciousness, shared values and identity with the union (Karsh, 1958). Felipe, an openly gay rep, stressedthe impossibility of predicting an individual cabin crew member's involvement in the strike from their identity:

> What you've got to remember is that our community is made up of so many different people from so many different backgrounds. If you look at the cabin crew population, we're all made up of foreigners and different cultures, different colours, but mainly you will find there is a middle class white woman. I think the strikers and non-strikers came from all over the mixture, so you had gay men who did strike, gay men who didn't; you had middle class women who did strike and middle class women who didn't strike. You had black people who did strike and black people who didn't, because it's such a huge community.

The disassociation with the miners and militancy recurred, but Felipe also highlighted the contribution of European crew, who brought different histories, understandings of workers' rights and political orientations. Others suggested that an inclusive conception of trade union identity was underpinned by the experiences gained by women and more particularly by gay crew in struggles for civil and political rights. Asad commented:

> Well, I think it is lot less of a stereotypical workforce, because you have got a lot of people who are openly gay and a lot of women. But then, sometimes those type of people will surprise you in being more attuned to their rights. So if you're gay and you've just gone through the whole of the 80s where you had no rights, you are now thinking well, no, I'm not going to go through that again. So it does make you stronger.

While identities arising from gender and sexuality were asserted, crew wanted to be seen as trade unionists, rather than as 'mothers' or 'women' on strike. Keira when asked if she described herself as a feminist, replied:

> Oh yeah, definitely, definitely. I don't know if there's that many feminists who fly. We're mainly made up of women and a lot of very strong women actually, amazingly strong women. I know it was mentioned quite a lot in the press that we were – well in fact the union tried to bring out that generally we're mothers – funny enough that used to anger me. I didn't want to be thought of as just a mother, I didn't want it to be just because we're poor women that sort of thing, I didn't want it to be a gender-related strike really. To me, it didn't seem to be even though of course it was mainly women.

While the central role of women was seen as a key strength and definitions of motherhood were rejected, the testimonies show limited explicit identification with feminism. Women crew saw themselves foremost as trade unionists, reinforcing studies that suggest women may draw on feminist ideas in the abstract without self-defining as feminists (Skeggs, 1997).

The interviews are full of observations and reflections on the question of identity which critique the dominant caricature of cabin crew in terms of class, sexuality and gender. Stephen , in concurring with the inclusive conception of cabin crew collectivity, offered an ironic take on diversity and identity, but also asserted class as a basis of the dispute:

> I don't like to be stereotyped but people do that anyway. So the stereotypical cabin crew member would be middle class, gay and the woman would be married to a pilot. There won't be some hairy-arsed bloke from North East London like me, but we have people like me. We are a myriad of different people. So we are multifaceted as far as class is concerned, but that is ignored because of stereotyping and identity.

The beliefs of a sizable majority reflect a trade union consciousness since their motivations are expressed in terms of their occupational community and their union, BASSA. Respondents placed greatest store by what they considered to be their most important achievement, that they had kept their union alive. A minority did see the dispute in wider political terms, as part of a more general class struggle with political implications associated with that worldview and the ideas of crew did change through their struggle. The legacy of the dispute included widespread disillusionment with the legal and political system, and with the Labour Party and Labour Government in particular. On a more

personal level respondents believed the strike had 'defined them'. They expressed pride in standing up for what was right and displayed an unshakable belief in the power of collectivism.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study of the BA-BASSA dispute restores work as the key site of class formation. The juxtaposition of the Crew Forum discussion on class and the experience of the cabin crew during the dispute suggests a dissonance between sociologically based definitions of class as individual hierarchical differentiation and class as a relationship that is integral tothe organisation of capitalism with conflict and agency both implicit and explicit. In relocating class in relationships of conflict between capital and labour rooted in the workplace, the abstraction and limitations of sociological differentiations are exposed. At a time when strike action was at an all-time low (Kelly, 2015), the BA dispute represents one of the most bitter labour conflicts of the 21st century. It affirmed the collective organisation of labour and strong trade union consciousness, but class identity was not fixed and was often underpinned by abstract conceptions of justice and fairness rather than politicised assertions of class and gender. Cabin crew defied perceived stereotypes of themselves in terms of gender, motherhood, sexuality and class. Yet, they simultaneously rejected a version of class and class militancy based on a perceived historical legacy of class as white, heterosexual and male. Nettleingham identifies the retrospective appropriation of experience so that 'the (re)production of a canonical generation' informs the narrative construction of political identity' (2017:853). However, for his sample of ocialists this reconstruction referred to 'a time of more authentic activism and opportunity for change' and arguably represents an idealised model for action. In contrast, the crew's invocation of the miners' strike challenged a canonical trajectory. Rather than the miners' strike being 'a narrative tool forging necessary myths in an unpromising time', demarcation allowed a reimagining of class and a move away from the association of a strike with historical defeat.

Evocation of the miners' strike confirms its historic and symbolic importance, yet also demonsrates very different gender dynamics. Nettleingham (2017) proposes that the miners' strike transcended gender, race and sexuality in terms of community and solidarity and women were integral in sustaining the strike through their social and reproductive labour, chiming with Humphries' (1977) notion of the extension of domestic roles in defence of family, community, and class. The BA-BASSA strike is closer to Grunwick and Gate Gourmet in that women's mobilisation was firmly rooted in labour market activity, generating tensions between their participation in industrial action and domestic responsibilities although, again, the fact that cabin crew were less segregated in terms of gender meant that their action was not such a challenge to 'patriarchal norms' (Sundari and Pearson, 2018:124-5).

If 'militancy' is associated with the violent confrontation with police that characterised picketing in the miners' strike, then cabin crew were right that their dispute was qualitatively different. The strikes took place in changed political and legal contexts. Following the miners' strike mass picketing and secondary action were made illegal and for BASSA withdrawal of labour entailed increased sanctions. BASSA encountered different obstacles – legal challenges to the right to strike and wholesale victimisation of members. In the periods *between* strike days hostilities between BA and BASSA, and between pro-strike crew and anti-strike crew, pilots and management did not cease. When work resumed strikers experienced considerable stress, subjecting themselves to managerial discipline frequently in the face of provocation and compelled to contain their emotions while working 'normally'. These interludes, then, were not temporary truces but a continuation of the conflict.

The meaning of militancy evoked by cabin crew did not reflect their conception of class as 'multi-faceted' in terms of social identity, that is gender, sexuality, race and nationality. Their testimonies reveal that social identities coalesced as collective worker 'interest'. In general, identity and interest were defined as 'trade unionism', expressed as a trade union rather than class consciousness. As with the Grunwick and Gate Gourmet disputes the cabin crew strike was rooted in proposed changes to the . Following Milkman , BASSA as an occupational union, was possibly better placed than a general union to build on the informal collectivity that underpinned work and regulated the labour process. The National Union of Mineworkers was also a union defined in terms of a strong occupational identity and community. As the NUM, BASSA provided the organisational and ideological resources to legitimate *worker* interest, but in this case the union prioritised an *inclusive* worker interest over and above sectional identities. The union did not, then, reduce worker interest to social identities that could be essentialised and marginalised as suggested by Sundari and Pearson for Grunwick and Gate Gourmet (2018).

While intersectionality permits exploration of industrial action in terms of the interaction of multiple categories of inequality and the distinct experiences they produce, crew testimonies show the importance of the material and structural basis of labour market segregation and wider ideological and social influences. As Pearson et al. maintain, the time, place and context in which identities are formed are important (2010). Cabin crew narratives restore class as a social category to intersectionality, but a version of class that is constituted and, more importantly, coalesces other social identities through the collective mobilisation that trade unions can provide – a reimagined and reconfigured class identity.

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[i] 92 per cent on 92 per cent (Nov. 2009), 80 per cent on 80 per cent (Jan. 2010), 79 per cent on 75 per cent (Jan. 2011) and 83 per cent on 72 per cent (Mar. 2011).

[ii] Phillips, M. 'What's turned the kindly BA cabin crew who cured my fear of flying into suicidal strikers', Daily Mail 19 May 2010 http://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-1279501/BA-strikes-Whats-turned-kindly-cabin-crew-suicidal-strikers.html Accessed 19 March 2014.