

Resource Centres – The Hidden History of a Radical Movement

Introduction

Trade-union and Community-based Resource Centres made a significant contribution to radical, working-class politics in the UK during the 1980s and 1990s. A national network supported trade unionists and working-class communities through the sustained onslaught by successive Conservative governments that led to mass unemployment and the destruction of public services.

But this form of grass-roots movement is in danger of slipping out of our collective memory. The story deserves a better fate because it represents a dynamic model of class politics that drew on the energies of both trade unions and community groups. Activities ranged from welfare rights training, support for tenants' associations and disabled groups, through to community arts, all combined with political campaigns that could draw on the Resource Centres' facilities such as meeting rooms and leaflet publication.

There were substantial differences in the size and the scale of Resource Centres, but they all offered a vital, physical space for solidarity and friendship, challenging the grim trajectory of Conservative neo-liberalism through creative forms of resistance and struggle. At their height, before funding crises led to decline and ultimate closure, they sustained a network that drew in tens of thousands of working people across the country.

This story is both a fascinating one, in itself, but also because there are many resonances for radical politics today. After a decade and a half of austerity, working class communities face similar challenges to those of the 1980s and 1990s. How the Resource Centre movement emerged and sustained itself on a national scale offers important, not to say inspirational, ideas on grass-roots activism, inclusivity and approaches to radical change.

History

A major influence on the early development of Resource Centres was the Community Development Projects, funded by the Labour government under Harold Wilson in the early 1970s, because of concerns over persistent levels of poverty and deprivation in some inner-city areas of the UK.

Twelve pilot projects were set up including areas in Coventry, Liverpool and Newcastle to engage with those local communities about what they saw as their priority issues. Community Development workers were employed to act as intermediaries between public agencies and community groups aided by research carried out by local universities. For example, the CDP in the Hillfields district of Coventry published a detailed socio-economic analysis that identified serious structural problems of poor housing and low wages, as the basis for engagement by local groups with housing authorities and other service providers.

This model of community development was adopted by the first wave of Resource Centres in the mid-to-late 1970s, emphasising the role that 'action research' could play in supporting both trade unions and community groups in areas like health and safety issues and housing, drawing on university support while also developing their own expertise and information sources.

But the early 1980s, when most Resource Centres and similar organisations like Unemployment Centres were set up, was one of deep and rapid structural change to the economy. The first Thatcher government, elected in 1979, initiated what came to be known as the Conservative's neo-liberal economic agenda, with deep cuts to public expenditure and privatisation of public services. The subsequent recession led to mass unemployment and the devastation of traditional manufacturing industries, hitting hardest the regions that already faced significant problems of poverty. By 1983-84, there were three million people unemployed, and, in the most deprived, inner-city areas, unemployment rates had risen to 50% or even higher.

The labour movement responded with growing demands for action on a scale that reflected the depth of the crisis and the need to provide direct, local support to working-class communities. Labour councils, trade

unions and community groups came together to organise the facilities and funding for new or expanded Resource Centres and Unemployment Centres. In many cases, existing council buildings or shared facilities were used, while funding came from a variety of sources including local authorities, the European Union, and charitable foundations.

Broadly, there were three areas of activity: welfare rights; political campaigning; and community arts. Welfare rights training was seen as essential to assist people through the complex systems of unemployment and social security benefits, and to ensure that they received the income and other support to which they were entitled.

Political campaigns were supported by offering a range of facilities, including meeting rooms, the production of leaflets and photocopying. Resource Centre libraries also provided information ranging from government publications and trade union reports, through to the alternative and radical press. Access to the first generation of desk-top computers for word processing was a particular attraction in support of political campaigning.

Community Arts had an extensive range of resources and materials for painting, fabric design, etc., as well as other facilities included dark rooms for photography, recording studios and video equipment. For example, the Birmingham Trade Union Resource Centre had a dedicated video production unit that provided regular coverage of trade union campaigns, while offering support to community groups such as young people who made films about their experience of unemployment in the city. Some of these larger Resource Centres could well be described as cultural hubs for working-class communities offering music, theatre, dance and films.

One of the real strengths of Resource Centres was to bring together trade union and community groups, leading to new forms of support and cross-fertilisation of ideas for future activities. This might be described as a 'softer' form of political radicalism compared to the more visible and national campaigns that were carried on through the main structures of the labour movement such as the TUC.

In comparison, Resource Centres focused on local, political activities, involving new forms of union and community group alliances. An example would be a tenants associations concerned about industrial pollution from local factories and the health and safety issues for workers exposed to hazardous chemicals in those factories. Their campaigns would gain strength from mutual support for improved pollution controls and health and safety legislation. A similar example might be a group involved in campaigns against deportation working with an anti-fascist organisation. The role of the Resource Centres was to support local trade unionists and community groups who had agency and control over campaigning.

But there was always a tension between those ambitions to focus on radical politics against the daily realities of securing funding for projects and workers, while maintaining older buildings. The sheer grind of funding bids to cover existing work, let alone new activities, combined with running costs and maintenance, was time-consuming and frustrating as it diverted from these core priorities.

Alongside the under-funding crisis was the impact of technological changes around the growth of home computing and the internet. Groups that previously met at Resource Centres or used their facilities, could organise and advertise meetings or gain access to published material online.

Over the years, Resource Centres attempted to survive through a focus on activities that had mainstream funding but even this proved unsustainable and the vast majority were closed down by the early 2010s. During this period of decline some functions were transferred to other organisations already involved in areas such as benefits advice. Groups that had been established at Resource Centres found new venues while workers moved into areas like community development or further education and research.

Assessing the legacy of Resource Centres is difficult because it must go beyond this normal cycle of change and adaptation. The real legacy is one of solidarity and friendship and the cross-fertilisation of political and cultural experiences that had longer-term impacts as they rippled out into the wider, local communities. The

resonances are clear today when austerity has led to the closure of so many public spaces like libraries, community centres and youth clubs and where the sense of political alienation and powerlessness pervades too many working-class communities.

Historical Memory

What is a collective historical memory and how do we retain the sense of working-class radicalism in a capitalist society that attempts to neutralise it and, ultimately, to close it down?

The Merseyside Trade Union, Community and Unemployed Resource Centre was opened in 1983 and commissioned a mural painted by Mick Jones (son of Jack Jones, the former General Secretary of the Transport and General Workers Union and a volunteer in the International Brigade during the Spanish Civil War). It depicted key historical events and figures in the city's working-class history, with the building's rotunda as the centre piece. By any standards, this was a bold and confident, public work of radical art.

But after the closure of the Resource Centre in 2004, the building went into decline and part of the mural suffered serious water damage. Eventually, the site was sold for redevelopment including offices and shops with part of the original building retained as an annex to a new hotel. What remains of the mural is located on one of its staircases.

There could be no starker symbol of this insidious process of historical marginalisation. Capitalism intends to sanitise and strip working-class radicalism of its real, political significance. All that remains is a partial, 'safe' history. For example, commemorations of the miners' strike focus on the bonds of community solidarity (in itself important) but they rarely engage with the overarching political agenda of class war.

The Conservative government was intent on destroying the NUM by building up stocks of coal to keep the power stations operating, while, literally, starving the miners back to work. The political struggle was one between the forces of capital determined to impose neo-liberalism and crush organised labour, against trade unions fighting to retain jobs and public services.

The Resource Centre movement can be, similarly, marginalised as a disparate, loosely connected set of activities and campaigns. Or it can be placed in a radical, political context, focused on solidarity and creativity between trade unions and community groups, with a shared vision of a democracy in which working people have agency and control.

This brief summary hardly scratches the surface. There are extensive archives, both written and oral that are still to be fully accessed and that can be used as a platform, providing insights into this rich tapestry of working-class radicalism. Given all the ongoing challenges that Resource Centres faced, they made a remarkable contribution to working-class politics and one that should be remembered and celebrated.

Steven Schofield (Friends of Bradford Resource Centre) August 2025

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