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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Social movement unionism in Spain's feminized precarious service sector: Criticism, cooperation and competition

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Abstract

'Social movement unionism' (SMU) has been suggested as a suitable strategy for union renewal in Spain, yet the literature on union renewal and SMU has two major shortcomings: (1) a lack of bottom-up studies, and (2) a lack of dialogue between industrial relations and social movement research. To redress these shortcomings, we make three contributions in this article: first, we provide evidence on the current opportunities for SMU in Spain's feminized precarious service sector; second, we apply a bottom-up intersectional approach to the study of SMU; and third, we bridge the research on industrial relations and on social movements by adopting a relational framework that looks at both union and non-union actors as key actors for union renewal. Our results show a landscape of co-existence, conflict, cooperation and competition between union and non-union actors, including established unions, radical grassroots unions and emerging forms of collective representation; however, if we are to develop SMU as a strategy for union renewal in post-Great Recession Spain, then there is still room for promoting deep coalition building between unions and novel forms of worker collectivism,

as well as developing intersectional politics to reach non-traditional membership groups.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Frequently framed in contrast to the business unionism that dominated the second half of the twentieth century, 'social movement unionism' (SMU) is understood as a radical form of unionism that seeks to broaden the role of unions in the socio-political arena (Köhler & Calleja Jiménez, 2018; Tapia & Alberti, 2018). In this vein, rather than a toolkit of tactics, SMU should be considered as part of a wider transformative vision of unions that takes into account the social composition of the 'new' working classes, the intersectional demands and organizational cultures of social movements, and the specific economic, socio-political and institutional contexts (Tapia and Alberti, 2018).

Given the crisis of traditional unionism and the consolidation of new forms of collective action and protest during the Great Recession, mainly developed by social movements and radical grassroots unions, SMU has been suggested as a suitable (although risky) strategy for union renewal in Spain (Köhler and Calleja Jiménez, 2015, 2018). This strategy, however, faces significant implementation barriers: on the one hand, deep organizational (internal democratization) and cultural (leadership and issue framing) transformations are needed in unions, and on the other hand, more coordination and stability are expected on the part of social movements (Köhler and Calleja Jiménez, 2015, 2018). Regarding networking and cooperation between unions and social movements, there are 'several promising ad hoc and mutual support coalitions but still lacking deep coalition building' (Köhler and Calleja Jiménez, 2018, p. 143).

The literature on union renewal and SMU has two major shortcomings. First, a predominance of case studies that focus on top-down union practice and typically build on interviews with union officials and, to a lesser extent, with workers (Ibsen and Tapia, 2017). And second, current debates on the relationship between unions and movements are hampered by a lack of dialogue between scholars of industrial relations and of social movements (Diani, 2018; Tapia et al., 2018): while studies on SMU have brought both fields together in the last decades, research still suffers from 'not fully satisfactory conceptualisations of what a social movement is in analytic terms, namely of the specific manner in which collective action gets promoted within movements' (Diani, 2018, pp. 43–44).

The turn to bottom-up analyses in industrial relations research seeks to redress the first shortcoming, that is the tendency of the dominant institutionalist (top-down) approach to treat the issue of workers' representation and organization in terms of unions' strategies (Rizzo and Atzeni, 2020) and overlook the alternative forms of workers' self-organization beyond the union form (Atzeni, 2016). In this sense, bottom-up research is needed not only to broaden narrow top-down ideas of union renewal, which frequently focus on moments of mobilization while neglecting the long-term context of organizing (Holgate et al., 2018), but also to broaden our understanding of labour conflict and agency beyond the workplace and the union form, which entails looking into the practices of mobilization and organization of precarious workers within their institutional and socio-political contexts (Atzeni, 2016, 2021; Nowak, 2021).

A parallel turn to intersectionality in the field of industrial relations seeks to account for interlocking forms of oppression (Holgate et al., 2006). Major unions are still committed to a 'universalistic' class-only analysis of worker exploitation that ignores the specific vulnerabilities of

precarious migrant workers (Alberti et al., 2013). Against this trend, Alberti advances the concept of 'strategic intersectionality' which promotes more effective union organizing and recruitment strategies that take into account 'the mix of subjective and structural gendered, racialised, juridical or class-based forms of oppression and exploitation' (2016b, p. 89). Integrating both bottom-up and intersectional approaches, Alberti and Però (2018) propose an actor-centred framework, more suitable for studying the independent collective initiatives of migrant (and non-migrant) precarious workers inside and outside established unions. To this proposal, Tapia and Alberti (2019) add a multi-level analysis encompassing the socio-economic and industrial relations context (macro level), union strategies and logics of action (meso level) and subjective experiences and intersectionalities (micro level). However, despite the efforts of a growing number of scholars, the field of industrial relations still remains underdeveloped as regards intersectionality (McBride et al., 2015).

To address the second shortcoming, some authors advocate for bridging industrial relations and social-movement research (Diani, 2018; Tapia et al., 2018). Doing so requires looking at both unions and movements under a common framework, in the context of broader collective action field, to better reflect the different relational patterns between actors engaged in collective action (Diani, 2018). Such an approach lets us overcome dualist frameworks that regard emerging forms of worker representation in opposition to existing labour movement institutions; and instead, to consider all collective actors in the field (established unions, self-organized precarious workers and social movements) as key actors for union renewal (Smith, 2022).

As a matter of fact, a growing body of bottom-up research has turned to precarious service workers to explore innovative forms of worker representation outside unions. Insightful studies have been conducted in different service industries so far, including courier and delivery (Atzeni, 2016; Marrone and Finotto, 2019; Però, 2020; Rizzo and Atzeni, 2020; Vandaele, 2018); non-academic university staff (Alberti, 2016a; Alberti and Però, 2018); cleaning (Però, 2020; Tapia et al., 2018); entertainment (Atzeni, 2016); hospitality (Tapia et al., 2017); creative professionals (Bellini and Lucciarini, 2019); and public transport (Rizzo and Atzeni, 2020). While our focus is on the feminized precarious service sector, we may learn some lessons from this body of literature. Exclusion from established unions and lack of access to traditional channels of representation lead some precarious workers to develop alternative grassroots organizations, also referred to 'quasi-unions' (Heckscher and Carré, 2006), 'informal unions' (Marrone and Finotto, 2019) and 'indie unions' (Però, 2020), which confront the conservatism and service-driven culture of established unions by engaging in mutual support, community mobilization, (social) media campaigning, informal bargaining, direct action and intersectional politics (Alberti, 2016a; Alberti and Però, 2018; Atzeni, 2016; Bellini and Lucciarini, 2019; Marrone and Finotto, 2019; Però, 2020; Rizzo and Atzeni, 2020; Tapia et al., 2017, 2018). While these initiatives often lack support from established unions (Bellini and Lucciarini, 2019; Però, 2020), the literature offers some instances of cooperation between unions and self-organized precarious workers, albeit with tensions between institutionalization and mobilization (see Atzeni, 2016; Marrone and Finotto, 2019; Rizzo and Atzeni, 2020). Furthermore, due to existing labour legislation, the adoption of the union form has been proven to be critical to the consolidation of workers' grassroots organizations in different institutional contexts (Rizzo and Atzeni, 2020). Eventually, rather than adhering to a logic of fusion or replacement, scholars envisage a future of co-existence and networked cooperation between union and non-union actors, including established unions and emerging forms of collective representation (Bellini and Lucciarini, 2019; Heckscher and Carré, 2006; Vandaele, 2018).

Remarkable research has also been conducted in the feminized precarious service sector, especially on domestic workers. Jiang and Korczynski (2016) find that migrant domestic workers

organized around the self-help group J4DW in London were able to transform communities of coping into micro-mobilization contexts and based their practice on participative democracy, collective leadership and stable links with Unite the Union and the NGO Kalayaan (Jiang and Korczynski, 2016). Moreover, Unite organized campaigns together with J4DW and provided support for J4DW's educational activities and monthly meetings (Jiang and Korczynski, 2016). In the Spanish context, Fulladosa (2015) enquires into the experience of migrant women in Sindihogar, an independent union of domestic and care workers in Barcelona, as a contemporary response to intersecting axes of discrimination which go unattended in mainstream unions. In the Global South, Bernardino-Costa (2014) notes that unionized domestic workers in Brazil criticized political action based only on social class and developed intersectional politics in dialogue with class-based, feminist and Black movements. Similarly, Cherubini et al. (2020) look into the way Ecuadorian and Colombian domestic workers converged with feminist, anti-racist and labour struggles, and built coalitions with left-wing parties and feminist organizations. Finally, Agarwala and Saha (2018) highlight how Indian domestic workers organized around female-dominated unions and targeted the state rather than employers, as their employment relationship is still not recognized by Indian law.

Regarding the hotel industry, Andersen (2020) offers a historical account of a pioneering example of migrant worker self-organization in Denmark, led by Filipina room attendants, along with the turn of Danish unions towards the integration of migrants as full active members. In a more contemporary account, Iannuzzi and Sacchetto show that outsourced housekeeping workers in Venice have resorted to grassroots unions to counter widespread outsourcing in the sector as 'traditional unions mainly serve the core workers of large hotels' (2022, p. 891).

In this article, we make three contributions to the literature. First, focusing on the feminized precarious service sector, we provide evidence on the current opportunities for SMU in Spain (Köhler and Calleja Jiménez, 2015, 2018), and more broadly, for mutual understanding between new and old forms of collective action (Atzeni, 2021). To do so, we explore the relationship between unionism and Las Kellys, a labour-based movement made up of and led by room attendants, a precarious, highly feminized and significantly migrant occupational group that has self-organized outside unions in recent years. Second, we apply a bottom-up intersectional approach to the study of union renewal, and more specifically, to the study of SMU. To do so, we adopt an actor-centred multi-level analysis (Alberti and Però, 2018; Tapia and Alberti, 2019) that encompasses the socio-political and industrial relations context (macro), social movement practice (meso) and precarious workers' subjective experiences (micro). We, therefore, examine the views and practices of precarious workers within their institutional and socio-political contexts (Atzeni, 2016, 2021; Nowak, 2021; Rizzo and Atzeni, 2020), covering the long-term context of organizing rather than specific moments of mobilization (Holgate et al., 2018), which allows us to better understand the factors that constrain organization and unionization (Whitfield, 2022). And third, we bridge the research on industrial relations and on social movements (Diani, 2018; Tapia et al., 2018) by adopting a relational framework that looks at both union and non-union actors as key actors for union renewal (Smith, 2022).

2 | THE SPANISH SYSTEM OF INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS: BACKGROUND SUMMARY

Latecomer industrialization and semi-peripheral development still shape industrial relations in Spain, dominated by a bipartite social dialogue between major unions and employer associations,

and contingent concertation strategies (Köhler, 2018). There are two mainstream union confederations in Spain at the state level, Comisiones Obreras (CCOO) and Unión General de Trabajadores (UGT), which have similar levels of membership and support in elections of worker representatives (Fulton, 2021). There are also other important union bodies at the state and regional levels characterized by a more radical grassroots orientation (Fulton, 2021; Köhler and Calleja Jiménez, 2018). Moreover, there are relevant professional unions in specific industrial sectors and occupations (Fulton, 2021; Köhler and Calleja Jiménez, 2018).

Union representativeness is not based on membership but on the number of representatives elected by workers every 4 years. The law dictates that unions must obtain at least 10 per cent of representatives in elections at the state level and 15 per cent at the regional level (*'comunidad autónoma'*) to gain the status of 'most representative unions', which, among other rights and prerogatives, enables them to legitimately engage in collective bargaining, receive public funding and act as institutional representatives before the public administration (Ministerio de Empleo y Seguridad Social, 2015). Similarly, unions with at least 10 per cent representatives in a specific geographical area, industrial sector or company qualify as 'sufficiently representative' and thus are entitled to negotiate collective agreements in that specific field (Ministerio de Empleo y Seguridad Social, 2015). By this criterion, CCOO and UGT are the only 'most representative unions' at the state level as no other confederation reaches the minimum threshold; other unions also hold this status in certain regions, industrial sectors and companies (Fulton, 2021).

Collective bargaining takes place mainly at the sectoral level, producing either state-wide, region-wide (*'comunidad autónoma'*) or province-wide agreements, but may also take place at the company level as worker representatives have a statutory right to collective bargaining in the workplace (Fulton, 2021). State-level bargaining typically involves the government, unions and employers and provides the guidelines for lower-level bargaining in terms of pay, working conditions and labour market policy (Fulton, 2021). Below the state level, the landscape is complex and overlapping: there are 54 collective agreements in the Spanish hospitality industry considering both the regional and provincial levels (Bolinches, 2022). Collective agreements have general efficacy; that is they are legally binding on all employers and employees in the geographical and industrial areas that they cover (Fulton, 2021).

Law 3/2012, known as *'reforma laboral'*, gave precedence to company agreements over any other higher-level agreements in force in their industrial sector (Fulton, 2021), thus undermining unions' institutional power (Köhler and Calleja Jiménez, 2018). While there has been neither a substantial switch from industry-level to company-level agreements nor a dramatic fall in the coverage of collective bargaining (Fulton, 2021), the 2012 labour market reform has encouraged Spanish hoteliers to implement a series of adjustments, especially the outsourcing of housekeeping departments, with a harmful impact on room attendants' working conditions (Cañada, 2018b).

3 | SPANISH UNIONS AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS IN THE GREAT RECESSION: THE CASE OF LAS KELLYS

The global trend of union decline was accelerated in Spain by the economic recession starting in 2008 and the neoliberal policies of successive governments (Köhler and Calleja Jiménez, 2018) which fostered social unrest and mistrust of 'representative democracy and the institutional channels of social and political representation' (Las Heras and Ribera-Almandoz, 2017, p. 485). In this context of crisis, the major Spanish unions (UGT and CCOO) prioritized social concertation and

corporatist arrangements over more radical strategies (Las Heras and Ribera-Almandoz, 2017) contributing to a social perception of unions as mere 'managers of precariousness' (Las Heras, 2018). Their institutional role, along with other key issues, such as their inability to organize unemployed and precarious workers (Las Heras and Ribera-Almandoz, 2017), lack of internal democracy, widespread clientelism and corruption scandals, led 'Spanish society to identify them as insiders or as part of the political system in a moment of great political disaffection' (Köhler and Calleja Jiménez, 2015, p. 246).

New grassroots movements unexpectedly emerged to fight austerity and established politics, giving shape to the Spanish anti-austerity protest cycle (Portos, 2016). Taking a critical distance from traditional unionism, these social movements challenged conservative union strategies and advanced radical forms of political action based on civil disobedience, prefigurative politics and direct action (Las Heras and Ribera-Almandoz, 2017). In the same vein, some precarious workers self-organized in response to the lethargy of the unions, especially in the service sector, generally opting for confrontational tactics that resemble the action of radical grassroots unions (Moral Martín and Brunet i Icart, 2018). Nevertheless, the movements of the anti-austerity protest cycle did not dispense with traditional unionism altogether; instead, they forged formal and informal alliances with unions to deliver recurrent mass protests (Portos, 2016).

In 2014, the International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers' Associations (IUF) launched a campaign to dignify the occupation of room attendant. As part of this campaign, the researcher Ernest Cañada published the article *Las que limpian los hoteles* in the newspaper El País exposing the hardships of this job (Cañada, 2018a). The article became very popular on social media and encouraged two room attendants from Lloret de Mar to open a Facebook group conceived as an online community of coping (Alcalde-González et al., 2022a). Throughout 2015, the new-born online network of room attendants gradually turned into a locus of politicization and micro-mobilization, leading to the creation of offline work groups in Barcelona, Benidorm, Cádiz, Fuerteventura, Lanzarote, Madrid, and Mallorca and the opening of new 'region-based' Facebook groups (Alcalde-González et al., 2022a). Meanwhile, the major Spanish unions (UGT and CCOO) promoted the IUF campaign, acquiring a leading role that was not welcomed by the room attendants who had independently mobilized (Cañada, 2018a). Seeking to protect their autonomy with respect to unions, room attendants created their first formal organization, Asociación Las Kellys, in 2016 (Cañada, 2018a). Since then, several splits and rearrangements have taken place within the movement due to internal disagreements about forms of organization, leadership styles and styles of contention (Alcalde-González et al., 2022b) resulting in the current landscape of co-existent organizations: (1) Asociación Las Kellys, made up of local associations; (2) Kellys Unión, clustered in Kellys Federadas, also made up of local associations; and (3) Plataforma Estatal de Camareras de Pisos (PECAPIS), created during the COVID-19 pandemic with the aim of building bridges between local associations and strengthening their influence on policy at the state level.

Overall, Las Kellys flourished in a political conjuncture marked by the decline of the Spanish anti-austerity protest cycle (Portos, 2016) and the rise of the current feminist wave, which has inherited the collective learnings of the previous protest cycle while placing intersectionality and care work at the centre of debate (Campillo, 2019). Given this political conjuncture, it is no accident that Las Kellys has organized independently from unions (Moreno González, 2019) while drawing upon the politicization of care work in contemporary feminism (López-González and Medina-Vicent, 2020). In sum, Las Kellys has emerged from the gaps between the labour and feminist movements to take a stand against labour precarization and social devaluation of cleaners in hotels and beyond (Alcalde-González et al., 2021).

4 | METHODOLOGY

In this study, we conducted qualitative digital ethnography (Pink et al., 2015) which allowed us to research Las Kellys' practice and room attendants' subjective experiences with regard to unionism. Building upon the key principles of multiplicity and 'non-digital-centric-ness' in digital ethnography (Pink et al., 2015), we employed three data collection techniques, including semi-structured interviews, online observation and documentary analysis, which enabled us to triangulate information and thus increase the reliability and credibility of our findings (Miles et al., 2020, pp. 305–307). The research design was approved by the Ethics Committee of UOC (Universitat Oberta de Catalunya).

To build the sample of interviewees, we contacted key members from Las Kellys to introduce our research to them and we proceeded from there with a snowball strategy (Patton, 2002, pp. 237–238). In total, we conducted 40 semi-structured interviews between May and November 2020 with female room attendants involved in Las Kellys across Spain. A few interviewees were also union representatives (*'kelly sindicalista'*); however, we kept our focus on the bottom-up views and practices of self-organized precarious workers rather than top-down union practice. Room attendants with a permanent contract were temporarily furloughed and room attendants with a temporary contract were made redundant during the COVID-19 lockdown. Thus, at the beginning of our fieldwork, all interviewees were unemployed but most of them gradually came back to work as the pandemic situation improved and economic activity resumed.

Interviewee information (Sample size = 40)

Origin		**Place of work (Spanish province)**	
Argentina	1	Asturias	1
Bolivia	1	Balearic Islands	2
Colombia	2	Barcelona	9
Dominican Republic	3	Cádiz	1
Ecuador	3	Girona	1
Honduras	1	Granada	3
Peru	2	Las Palmas	7
Romania	1	Madrid	3
Spain	25	Málaga	2
Uruguay	1	Santa Cruz de Tenerife	1
Age		Seville	5
20–29	3	Tarragona	4
30–39	3	Toledo	1
40–49	15	**Employment status**	
50+	19	Permanent contract	27
Social movement organization		*– Direct hire*	*(23)*
Asociación Las Kellys	14	*– Outsourced hire*	*(4)*
Kellys Unión	26	Temporary contract	12
Prior political militancy		*– Direct hire*	*(6)*
Yes	12	*– Outsourced hire*	*(6)*
No	28	Permanent disability	1

The interview guide comprised several open questions covering these topics: involvement and trajectory in Las Kellys; composition, mission and organization in Las Kellys; repertoires of contention; mobilizing and organizing during the COVID-19 pandemic; and relationship with unions. Interviews took place via videoconferencing software, lasted 90 min on average and were transcribed verbatim. All the interviewees signed an informed consent document.

The documentary analysis addressed 44 public documents from Asociación Las Kellys, Kellys Unión, Kellys Federadas and PECAPIS. Online observation covered 1061 posts published on Las Kellys' Facebook pages and public groups during 2020, comprising 17 local organizations of Asociación Las Kellys and Kellys Unión as well as the Facebook pages of Kellys Federadas and PECAPIS.

The data were subjected to thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) with the help of ATLAS.ti 9 following three general stages. In the first stage, we transcribed the interviews; organized the information gathered in semi-structured interviews, online observation and documentary analysis; and identified relevant excerpts of content. In the second stage, we coded these pieces of data systematically. In the third stage, we grouped the previous codes into possible themes, revised them and defined the final themes of this report.

5 | RESULTS: LAS KELLYS' RELATIONSHIP WITH UNIONISM

We delve into Las Kellys' relationship with unionism, focusing on the views and practices of these self-organized precarious workers. The relationship is complex and varies over time and space, comprising (1) criticism of major unions, (2) front stage and backstage cooperation, and (3) competition.

5.1 | Criticism of major unions: From neglect to corporatism

Las Kellys advances a set of criticisms against the 'most representative unions', UGT and CCOO, which legitimately engage in collective bargaining at the state level. For analytical purposes, we divide these criticisms into two groups: criticism of how the unions treat room attendants, and criticism of their reaction to the emergence of Las Kellys as a movement.

5.1.1 | Unions – Room attendants

There is a widespread criticism of what room attendants consider to be unions' disregard of their problems, especially after the 2012 labour market reform (*'reforma laboral'*) fostered increasing workloads and the expansion of outsourcing in housekeeping departments. Disregard translates into the lack of union action against which Las Kellys is rebelling:

> We want to show all our support for our colleagues in #Benidorm for this initiative. Due to their continuous complaints, and given the inaction of the #unions and the silence of the #employers, our colleagues have requested a #CollectiveBargainingCommittee to deal with #AdditionalRuling5 (more info http://bit.ly/ActaComisiónParitaria) OUR HEALTH, OUR RIGHT!! (Kellys Unión Gran Canaria, Facebook post).

According to Las Kellys, CCOO and UGT have been unable to convey the specific needs of room attendants to the employers at the negotiating tables, largely because they had repeatedly ignored the perspective of the workers involved. Las Kellys Barcelona and Las Kellys Benidorm, the associations with the most contentious relationships with UGT and CCOO, depict these unions as double-dealing organizations beholden to interests that have little to do with the real needs of room attendants:

> When you see that #UGT and #CCOO are a big swindle, and there is nobody in charge to fight for workers' rights, you don't even get angry. You simply take matters into your own hands and accept that you have to fight alongside us (Las Kellys Barcelona, Facebook post).

Las Kellys attributes this negligent behaviour to one fundamental reason: the sexist culture within unions, which tend to devalue and marginalize feminized occupations (usually care jobs). This leads, for instance, to few or no room attendants being present at the negotiating tables, usually dominated by male department heads, thus reinforcing the invisibility of their problems.

> If I'm just a beginner, with no experience at all, and I know this exists, why aren't you (major unions), who have been doing this all your lives, fighting about it? I think it's all down to sexism. I don't know if I'm explaining it well. This is women's work… They don't see any value in it. I think they might have thought our problems weren't too serious. And they are very serious (Kelly 2, Sevilla).

In this light, sexism within unions underpins the framing of hotel housekeeping as an extension of female domestic work, and therefore, as unskilled 'women's work' suitable for uneducated working-class women, where there would be little to gain from union organizing.

5.1.2 | Unions – Las Kellys

Pioneers of Las Kellys accuse CCOO and UGT of trying to hijack the 'Kellys' label after seeing the favourable reception of the emerging movement of room attendants in the traditional media and social media. This accusation of opportunism is intertwined with a reproach of union corporatism. After a first stage in which UGT and CCOO ignored the movement, and a second stage in which they attempted to co-opt it, interviewees refer to a third stage in which both unions closed ranks, disparaged the movement and blocked any possibility of cooperation. In the worst cases, such as in Málaga and Tenerife, Las Kellys faced open hostility from certain unionists:

> I believe that between the two of them, UGT and CCOO wanted to take over this movement. They think they are the leaders of this movement and they want to own it. There was a moment when many of us were in the same situation as me, offended by the unions, because we've been through a lot with the unions, and they didn't defend us, even though they say they did. Once the movement started, they did. But before the movement, they didn't […] Here, for example, we had a very rough time with CCOO. It got very rough in Málaga. At the beginning they were there. Afterwards it turned into open warfare. Right now they are sabotaging us (Kelly 12, Málaga).

Apart from these extreme cases, there is room for nuanced criticism. Indeed, most interviewees mention good personal dealings with individual CCOO and UGT union members despite the complicated relationship with the unions themselves. As time goes by, the initial conflict between activists and unions has de-escalated and the relationship has somewhat normalized, taking different forms depending on the local circumstances of the collective agreement in force and the varying anti-establishment character of Las Kellys' associations in each territory. By contrast, Las Kellys' relationship with radical grassroots unions has been more amicable and productive from the start, as they offered the support lacking from UGT and CCOO:

> The minor [unions] have always been there for us, especially the SAT. The SAT is the one that has supported us the most. CNT too, in a lot of things. And CGT are just a few people, they aren't strong in Granada, they do what they can. But the SAT is the union that has supported us the most (Kelly 10, Granada).

There is also room for nuance here. Radical grassroots unions typically hold an antagonistic approach towards major unions, positioning themselves as true defenders of workers' rights in contrast to the 'established unionism' of CCOO and UGT. In this respect, the emergence of Las Kellys constitutes an opportunity for radical grassroots unions to reproduce this antagonistic approach in alliance with the most anti-establishment Las Kellys associations, such as Las Kellys Barcelona and Las Kellys Benidorm.

The last criticism of unions has to do with their 'bureaucratic language'. Opposing the overuse of jargon in union communications, Las Kellys takes pride in their clarity and plain speaking, easily understood by their working-class peers, hotel customers and the general public, which has contributed to the favourable reception of the movement across a broad swathe of society:

> When the media contacted me, they didn't ask for a union rep; they asked for a room attendant because talking simply and directly, with our own words, we are able to reach people. Maybe the unions explained the same things, but they used union rhetoric. They talked about 'overnighting', they talked about 'occupancy'… While we say, in my hotel I clean X number of rooms and I make 70 beds (Kelly 1, Girona).

Overall, neglect, opportunism, corporatism and bureaucratic language are significant flaws of major unions that have produced feelings of helplessness and mistrust in many room attendants and consequently led to a detachment from unionism. Nevertheless, the relationship between Las Kellys and unions is not confined to criticism but can open up to include cooperation and competition.

5.2 | Cooperation with unions: Front stage and backstage

Beyond criticism of established unionism, we find that various Las Kellys' associations maintain relationships of cooperation with both major unions (UGT and CCOO) and radical grassroots unions (CGT, CNT and SAT) which vary according to local circumstances, meaning the collective agreement in force and the varying anti-establishment character of Las Kellys' associations in each territory. Cooperation occurs in two spheres: front stage, or a cooperation

relationship with a public and formal dimension; and backstage, or an informal/internal cooperation relationship.

5.2.1 | Front-stage cooperation

Las Kellys is aware that unions, especially the 'most representative' ones (CCOO and UGT), are key for curbing labour precarization and improving working conditions. After all, these union bodies are legally entitled to engage in collective bargaining and influence changes in labour law:

> It's true that without unions you can't get anywhere… We're talking here about labour issues, not about the environment. They are the ones who negotiate the collective agreements: CCOO and UGT (Kelly 2, Sevilla).

Thus, a line of front-stage cooperation pursues the inclusion of room attendants' voice at the negotiating tables between unions and employers. This type of cooperation is facilitated by the *'kelly sindicalista'*, a mediating figure between unions and Las Kellys as she is simultaneously a union representative and an activist. Through this mediating figure, Las Kellys can 'engage in' collective bargaining, albeit only in a preliminary stage:

> The last few days, before the upcoming signature of the Catalonia Hospitality Sector Agreement, we met with the major unions to introduce our manifesto and tell them our opinions and wishes. At this negotiating table we will have representatives of our collective, who will be there on behalf of all of us. We're grateful to UGT and CCOO for having listened to us and shared with us. We hope it will be good for all of us #kellysfederadas #kellypride (Kellys Federadas, Facebook post).

A further step entails taking an active part in unions so as to gain first-hand access to work councils and to health and safety committees where room attendants, acting as worker representatives, would be able to monitor employer practices and negotiate better working conditions for housekeeping departments.

The other line of front-stage cooperation has to do with demonstrations of all kinds, such as marching in the streets, sit-ins in hotel entrances, press releases, campaigns and round tables, especially with radical grassroots unions:

> We had a round table with CNT two years ago. We often get calls from CGT because they have a tiny little radio station. They call us a lot. SAT, for example, has always come to all of our sit-ins and all of our demonstrations. In the end we found each other because they are born fighters too. They're always in the street. In campaigns, press releases, in everything we've needed, the truth is they have always been there, always respecting the association (Kelly 10, Granada).

As seen above, the anti-establishment and confrontational approach of radical grassroots unions (CGT, CNT and SAT) resonates better with a significant proportion of activists in Las Kellys, especially regarding forms of organization and styles of contention.

5.2.2 | Backstage cooperation

In this sphere, we distinguish three core areas of cooperation: legal coverage, advice and infrastructure. First, in order to protect their jobs against possible contingencies which may arise during labour disputes, room attendants involved in Las Kellys are advised to join a union: the management boards of the various Las Kellys' associations usually advise their members to join a union, albeit it is not required and no particular union is recommended. A lack of protection has made some room attendants martyrs to the cause, and this is what joining a union is intended to avoid:

> I want to fight but not to be a martyr. My family comes first and I'm not going to let… Whoever is in the front line must have at least a little protection […] Here they cut your head off as soon as you start talking. You won't be going back to that hotel. If you go, they cut you off in the hotel itself. I mean, there is both horizontal and vertical harassment, because they don't want people who fight for their rights, especially not a room attendant (Kelly 2, Sevilla).

Second, advice from a union representative is a valuable resource for Las Kellys. Such advice can be provided formally as part of the service relationship between the union and its members, and informally through the mediating figure of *'kelly sindicalista'* or through personal acquaintances within unions. This kind of information is precious for guiding the actions of Las Kellys, as the movement mostly consists of room attendants with no expertise in labour law or collective action:

> I have a friend who works in UGT and I get the information I need through her. She helps me quite a bit, when something new comes up she sends it straight to me on WhatsApp […] Now with Covid there are a lot of changes. She sends me information and I share it with Las Kellys (Kelly 9, Balearic Islands).

And third, some unions lend spaces to Las Kellys for holding meetings. Since they are legally registered, Las Kellys' associations have the right to a public space for holding their meetings. However, these public spaces tend to be in high demand and must be booked in advance, so that sometimes room attendants end up meeting in cafés. To avoid this, the union SAT has loaned a private room to Kellys Unión Sevilla where the association can hold meetings and provide training such as English lessons for room attendants.

What unions does Las Kellys cooperate with? What unions do room attendants join? There is no guideline. Quite the opposite: leaving aside affiliations and personal preferences, the management boards of Las Kellys' associations are eminently pragmatic and tend to cooperate with whatever union 'works best' in each company, province or *'comunidad autónoma'*:

> The rule I pass on to all the women is: if you have to join a union, join the union that works well in your town. OK? Because here UGT may work very well, but in the next town over, the UGT guy is a bad union rep, and the one who does a really good job is in CNT. So I always say: 'Who's doing a good job there?' The women tell me: 'Well, here the CCOO people are very trustworthy.' 'So join them, join them, but remember, you must always be in front, you must be in front' (Kelly 1, Girona).

Overall, there are neither master guidelines nor party lines for cooperating with unions. Cooperation varies in quantity and quality depending on local circumstances which are shaped by the collective agreement in force and the varying anti-establishment character of Las Kellys' associations in each territory. Regarding major unions, however, cooperation seems to be based on instrumental reasoning: major unions are seen as actors with strong bargaining power, protective institutions in the workplace or repositories of knowledge for collective action. By contrast, cooperation with radical grassroots unions seems not to be so clearly based on an instrumental bond but on a cultural bond as they are often depicted as 'comrades in the fight'.

5.3 | Movement–union competition: Las Kellys versus unions?

> We will never be a union. That's not our intention. Our intention is to put pressure on the unions to do their jobs properly – nothing more, nothing less. Or to fight alongside them if they want to fight. As I told you before, if the unions want us by their side fighting for women workers' rights, we'll be there supporting all of them without checking the acronym. But if they want to take away our rights, sign labour market reforms that do so, putting us in worse working conditions, and sign agreements with companies or internal agreements which bust all labour rights, then of course they'll have to face us and we will fight them (Asociación Las Kellys, 2017).

These words were spoken by Myriam Barros, former leader of Las Kellys, at the official presentation of Asociación Las Kellys, in October 2016, drawing a neat boundary between the movement and the unions. Las Kellys came into being as an autonomous movement with a clear goal: to spur and watch over the action of major unions regarding room attendants. While remaining faithful to the original goal, Las Kellys' associations have evolved over time to cover areas of need that unions do not properly meet:

a. *Emotional support*. Las Kellys' associations function as communities of coping where peer room attendants come together and find the emotional support that is generally lacking within unions:

> The unions have not provided the help they ought to. So room attendants feel they are in a safe space when they talk to us and they know that we can at least point them to the path they need to take (Kelly 4, Tenerife).

b. *Legal action*. Several Las Kellys associations assist room attendants who decide to denounce a situation of labour exploitation to the Labour Inspectorate. In the same manner, they offer free legal advice and low-cost legal defence without requiring a membership fee in exchange. This comes as a relief to room attendants who are in more precarious situations, and contrasts significantly with the unions, which provide legal advice and defence services in exchange for a membership fee. To offer these services, Las Kellys relies on an informal network of labour lawyers who sympathize with the cause:

> We have our own way of doing things so they can be free of charge for the room attendants. We have a lot of people who lend us a hand for free [. . .] We are gradually getting more experience because we are in contact with a lot of lawyers who work for free and give us advice (Kelly 7, Toledo).

c. *Awareness raising and lobbying*. Movement leaders underscore that Las Kellys' associations recurrently appear in traditional media and campaign on social media in order to raise awareness among hotel customers and the general public. Likewise, when possible, Las Kellys directly engages with regional/state governments and political parties to convey the voice of room attendants to lawmakers:

> Now, we as an association work with the ministries and with the politicians. That has nothing to do with the unions (Kelly 2, Sevilla).

An eloquent example of lobbying is the dialogue with the Spanish Ombudsman that led to a subsequent meeting with Yolanda Díaz, Minister of Labour and Social Economy, and Irene Montero, Minister of Equality, during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. In this meeting, apart from addressing long-standing issues that affect room attendants, Las Kellys tried to redress the extremely precarious situation of fellow workers who were made redundant during the COVID-19 lockdown. On the awareness-raising side, we can mention the ethical booking website that Las Kellys Barcelona wants to set up in 2022. Unlike *Booking* and *Tripadvisor*, this booking website will only work with hotels and holiday rentals that are compliant with minimum working conditions.

d. *Training*. Movement leaders also highlight that Las Kellys associations provide (and ought to strengthen) training activities for room attendants. Furthermore, some leaders envisage a post-fight future in which the social movement is no longer necessary and Las Kellys becomes a professional association focused on skill development, much like those of cooks, waiters and head housekeepers:

> If we ever manage to get this more or less stabilised, we could become an association where we could be a professional organisation, like the cooks, heads of housekeeping, and waiters have, where we can teach how to clean a room, or have a letter of introduction from the association for when you go to work at a hotel (Kelly 12, Málaga).

While these areas of intervention roughly conform to the original boundary between the movement and the unions, and thus do not explicitly intrude into the area of union action, recent times have seen the blurring of boundaries. Las Kellys Barcelona and Las Kellys Benidorm, the most anti-establishment associations in Las Kellys, have decided to enter the terrain of union action, creating new occupational unions of room attendants that will eventually rival other unions for worker representation in their respective territories and, therefore, for access to work councils and to health and safety committees where they will be able to monitor employer practices and negotiate better working conditions for housekeeping departments.

Overall, Las Kellys began as an autonomous movement whose mission was to spur and watch over the action of CCOO and UGT regarding room attendants. Over time, Las Kellys' associations have evolved to cover areas of need that unions do not successfully meet. Recent times have seen the blurring of original boundaries between the movement and the unions, to the point where the most anti-establishment associations in Las Kellys have taken a step further to set up independent occupational unions of room attendants that will eventually compete with other unions in the hotel industry.

6 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Our results show that Las Kellys' relationship with unionism is complex and varies over time and space, comprising (1) criticism of major unions, (2) front-stage and backstage cooperation, and (3) competition. Flaws of major unions (neglect, opportunism, corporatism and bureaucratic language) notably resulted in mistrust and detachment from unionism among room attendants. Las Kellys was born as an autonomous movement with the basic mission of spurring and watching over the action of major unions (CCOO and UGT) regarding room attendants. Nonetheless, Las Kellys' associations have evolved over time to cover areas of need that unions do not adequately meet, such as emotional support, legal action, awareness raising, lobbying and training. Meanwhile, Las Kellys has been cooperating with both major unions and radical grassroots unions in a variety of spheres, both front stage (collective bargaining, worker representation, demonstrations) and backstage (legal coverage, advice, infrastructure). Cooperation with unions follows neither master guidelines nor party lines; instead, cooperation arrangements vary depending on local circumstances which are shaped by the collective agreement in force and the varying anti-establishment character of Las Kellys' associations in each territory. Thus, these findings echo Heery et al. (2012) in the sense that (1) non-union actors play a significant role in industrial relations and may prioritize engagement with employers and government over unions, and (2) there is no dominant relationship but a complex pattern of interaction with unions which may shift depending on the issue and local circumstances.

With reference to the Spanish context, our findings agree with Moral Martín and Brunet i Icart (2018) on the critical approach of self-organized precarious service workers to established unions and their use of confrontational tactics resembling the action of radical grassroots unions. Nevertheless, Las Kellys, like other movements during the anti-austerity protest cycle (Portos, 2016), has not dispensed with traditional unionism altogether but has forged formal and informal relations of cooperation with major unions and radical grassroots unions that seem to follow different patterns: while cooperation with the former is based on an instrumental bond (bargaining, protection, knowledge), cooperation with the latter shows a strong cultural bond as their anti-establishment and confrontational approach resonates better with a significant proportion of activists in Las Kellys. What is more, far from dispensing with unionism, Las Kellys Barcelona and Las Kellys Benidorm, the most anti-establishment associations in Las Kellys, have decided to enter the terrain of union action, creating new occupational unions of room attendants that will eventually rival other unions in representing hotel workers in their respective territories.

The co-existence of multiple levels of collective bargaining in Spain results in a complex landscape with 54 collective agreements in force or up for renewal in the hospitality industry, which in turn shape local circumstances in terms of pay and working conditions. Besides, the law permits the participation of multiple unions in the same bargaining unit, as long as those unions obtain a minimum percentage of representatives in elections. In other words: since there is no monopoly of representation in Spain, unions compete for worker representation and, therefore, for access

to collective bargaining at the above-mentioned levels. Hence, adding to Rizzo and Atzeni (2020), we contend that existing labour legislation and the specificities of the institutional context constrain the relational patterns between union and workers' grassroots organizations. In the case of Las Kellys, the most anti-establishment faction is opting to compete with the major unions by adopting the union form on one hand, and cooperating with radical grassroots unions on the other hand. Meanwhile, the other Las Kellys associations are opting for cooperation with both types of unions, facilitated in many cases by the mediating figure of the '*kelly sindicalista*' (half union representative, half activist).

Overall, we see a landscape of co-existence, conflict, cooperation and competition between union and non-union actors (Bellini and Lucciarini, 2019; Heckscher and Carré, 2006; Vandaele, 2018), including established unions, radical grassroots unions and emerging forms of collective representation, in which precarious service workers and their leaders engage in 'a spectrum or dynamic interplay of formality and informality of union voice' (Alberti, 2016a, p. 98). However, if we are to develop SMU as a strategy for union renewal in post-Great Recession Spain, particularly in the feminized precarious service sector, then there is still room for promoting deep coalition building between unions and novel forms of worker collectivism (Köhler and Calleja Jiménez, 2018), as well as developing intersectional politics to reach non-traditional membership groups.

Las Kellys is now an entrenched movement with a presence in the main Spanish tourist areas. Las Kellys has also gained cohesion and coordination in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, when PECAPIS was created to build bridges between local associations and enhance influence on policy at the state level. While the maturity of the movement along with sustained relations of cooperation with unions opens a promising avenue for deep coalition building (Köhler and Calleja Jiménez, 2018), the shared interests of major unions and employer associations around bipartite social dialogue continue to hinder this possibility (Köhler, 2018).

On another note, unions should invest more in the endeavour of 'linking economic with social injustice and going beyond class-based and bread-and-butter issues' (Tapia et al., 2018, p. 199), especially when dealing with precarious, highly feminized and significantly migrant occupations, such as domestic work (Agarwala and Saha, 2018; Bernardino-Costa, 2014; Cherubini et al., 2020; Fulladosa, 2015; Jiang and Korczynski, 2016), domiciliary/residential care (Whitfield, 2022) and hotel housekeeping (Andersen, 2020; Cañada, 2018b; Iannuzzi and Sacchetto, 2022), where interlocking axes of discrimination related to class, gender and migration are more blatant. Our results show that gender-related grievances play a central role in Las Kellys' criticism of major unions: the sexist culture within unions tends to devalue and marginalize feminized occupations (usually care jobs), thus inhibiting union involvement and reinforcing the problems of these workers. Here, Las Kellys extends the 'politicisation of caring' (Briskin, 2012) to hotel housekeeping, and more broadly, to all female cleaners. As we note in a previous article (Alcalde-González et al., 2022b), class-related and gender-related grievances are more salient than migration-related grievances across the Las Kellys movement; that is why inequality based on nationality and migration status does not play such a relevant part in Las Kellys' criticism of major unions. This contrasts with other studies in which migration issues do play a more prevailing role (Alberti, 2016a; Alberti and Però, 2018; Però, 2020), and it may be explained by two reasons: (1) migrants are a 'significant minority' in this occupational group, and (2) are less keen to join social movements. The fact that nationality and migration status issues weigh heavier in the Las Kellys' associations where migrant room attendants hold positions of leadership, such as Las Kellys Barcelona (Alcalde-González et al., 2022b), seems to underpin both hypotheses. However, they need confirmation by future studies as we lack information on the proportion of migrants in this occupational group and the propensity of migrants to join social movements.

If SMU is a strategy that seeks to broaden the role of unions in the socio-political arena, then researchers and practitioners should look into the systems of relations in which unions are embedded to identify and explain the different relational patterns between the actors involved in a given collective action field (Diani, 2018). This implies not only bridging industrial relations and social movement research (Diani, 2018; Tapia et al., 2018), but also thinking of all collective actors as key actors for union renewal (Smith, 2022), namely traditional unions, self-organized precarious workers – 'quasi-unions' (Heckscher and Carré, 2006), 'informal unions' (Marrone and Finotto, 2019), 'indie unions' (Però, 2020) – and social movements. To do so, it would be fruitful (1) to balance dominant institutionalist (top-down) analyses with bottom-up research with a focus on alternative forms of workers' self-organization within their institutional and socio-political contexts (Atzeni, 2016, 2021; Nowak, 2021; Rizzo and Atzeni, 2020), and the long-term context of organizing rather than specific moments of mobilization, such as strikes and campaigns (Holgate et al., 2018); (2) to account for the social composition of the 'new' working classes, as well as the intersectional demands and organizational cultures of novel forms of worker representation and the so-called 'new' social movements (Holgate et al., 2006; McBride et al., 2015; Tapia and Alberti, 2018), especially when dealing with the feminized precarious service sector where class, gender and migration issues more obviously interlock; and (3) to look at emerging forms of worker collectivism not only as communities of coping (Jiang and Korczynski, 2016), but also as communities of practice able to produce knowledge and influence change in the wider labour movement (Smith, 2022).

Future research should track the evolution of the new occupational unions of room attendants in Barcelona (registered in 2018) and Benidorm (in the making at the time of writing this article) focusing on the consequences of competition with major unions for worker representation in the hotel industry. It would be also worthwhile to look at the changing (instrumental and/or cultural) bonds between unions and non-union actors in relation to other feminized precarious occupational groups, such as domestic workers and domiciliary care providers, to better understand the on-the-ground opportunities for SMU in Spain, and more broadly, to open new channels for mutual understanding between new and old forms of collective action (Atzeni, 2022).

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ETHIC STATEMENT

The research design was approved by the Ethics Committee of UOC (Universitat Oberta de Catalunya) and the informed consent of all participating subjects was obtained.

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