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The past and future of trade unionism

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to offer a broad practitioner's overview of recent trade union history in the UK, and to investigate organised labour's prospects in the decades ahead.
Design/methodology/approach – The paper is based on a review of relevant literature and trade union documentation from the period 1964 to 2014.
Findings – This paper concludes that the past 50 years has been a period of change and turbulence for the movement, and suggests that this is likely to remain the case in the decades to come. Although external political and economic factors will have a significant bearing on unions' prospects, the paper argues that unions remain powerful agents of change in their own right and that a revival of organised labour is not beyond question.
Originality/value – The paper is written with unique practitioner insight from the UK's trade union centre.

Keywords Pay, Employee relations, Industrial relations, Collective bargaining, Trade unions, Trade union recognition

Paper type Viewpoint

Introduction

The past 50 years have seen profound socio-economic change in the UK – from the decline of heavy industry to the growing participation of women in the labour market – and the fortunes of the trade union movement have ebbed and flowed accordingly. Transformation of this kind remains an ever-present reality for trade unionism: globalisation, new technology and the mobility of both capital and labour are increasingly powerful influences. What, then, might the future hold for organised labour?

At the outset, it is worth reflecting on some of the seismic changes that have taken place within the trade union movement over the past 50 years. A good place to start would be by looking at the Trades Union Congress (TUC) annual conference in 1964, held in Blackpool. As trade unionists gathered that year, the Kinks were top of the charts with "You Really Got Me"; George Best was playing up front for Manchester United; and Harold Wilson, one of the keynote speakers at Congress, was just weeks away from becoming Prime Minister.

The trade union movement of 1964 was very different from that in 2014. The TUC general secretary was a white man, George Woodcock, as were all of his predecessors; today the TUC is led by its first ever woman general secretary, Frances O'Grady. The TUC president in 1964 was another white man, George Lowthian of the Amalgamated Union of Building Trade Workers; the 2014 Congress in Liverpool was presided over by Mohammad Taj, the TUC's first ever Muslim president, a bus driver from Bradford, who came to the UK from Kashmir.

The composition of the TUC's governing body, the General Council, has also undergone radical transformation. Back in 1964, just two out of 36 General Council members were women. Today, women make up nearly half its membership. Significantly, trade union density is now slightly higher amongst women than men, reflecting the steady feminisation of UK workplaces since the 1960s.

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As the labour market has changed and diversified, so trade unions have followed suit. While there is further for trade unions to go – for example just a quarter of general secretaries are currently women – today's labour movement is far more diverse than it was just two generations ago. There is now widespread awareness that trade unionism will only flourish if it is genuinely representative of the twenty-first century workforce.

In other respects, however, there has been less progress. In 1964, 8.3 million workers belonged to TUC-affiliated unions, up from 6.6 million in 1944. Total TUC membership today is 5.8 million, at a time when the labour market is much bigger and a record number of people are in work. Self-evidently, unions face an uphill task in recruiting new members, particularly in the private service sector.

A quick glance at the list of TUC affiliates in 1964 underlines the magnitude of economic and industrial change since then. Among those long since gone, or merged into other unions, are: the Association of Correctors of the Press; the Amalgamated Society of Woodworkers; the Amalgamated Weavers' Association; the Chainmakers and Strikers' Association; the National Union of Funeral and Cemetery Workers; the Rossendale Union of Boot, Shoe and Slipper Operatives; the Sailmakers' Amalgamated Union; the Screw, Nut, Bolt and Rivet Society; the Society of Shuttlemakers; the United French Polishers' Society; and the Variety Artistes' Federation.

Perhaps a better way to illustrate the dramatic extent of change is to analyse what has happened to one of Britain's greatest unions, the National Union of Mineworkers, over the period. In the mid-1960s, it represented over half a million miners and was a potent political force – as Edward Heath was to discover to his cost in 1974. But today, the union represents fewer than 2,000 members and is engaged in a struggle to keep open Britain's few remaining deep pits.

Although the social, economic and industrial environment in which unions operate has changed out of recognition, in some respects the concerns and aspirations of the labour movement remain remarkably similar. The 1964 Congress debated a number of issues that would resonate strongly with today's trade unionists: the use of private firms to clean government buildings; the procurement of railway rolling stock in the UK; shorter working time; training; wages; youth unemployment; living standards; and international trade.

For all that the names, faces and industries may have changed, the essential *raison d'etre* of trade unionism is plainly still the same: to win fairness, justice and equality for working people. Indeed many of the central debates trade unionists were having 50 years ago – about the relationship between capital and labour; state and market; employers and workers – remain at the forefront of our contemporary campaign and policy work now.

The purpose of this paper is to describe what has happened to trade unionism since the mid-1960s, to look at the contemporary challenges facing unions, and to ascertain the prospects and conditions for a labour movement renewal in the medium and long term.

Growth, decline and stability: 50 years of change for trade unionism

There can be no doubt that the past half century has seen radical economic change in Britain, and this has had major implications for organised labour. Trade unions have had to get to grips with the decline of manufacturing and the rise of the service sector; the acceleration of globalisation, international competition and technological change; a greater role for the private sector in the delivery of public services and goods; more women and migrants entering the workforce; and the gradual hollowing out of the labour market, with more jobs at the top, fewer in the middle and many more at the bottom.

Over this period, trade unions' prospects have certainly waxed and waned. These ebbs and flows serve as a useful reminder that trade unionism has not evolved in a linear fashion; in the future, this is likely to remain the case. Although labour historians have differing interpretations of the recent past, it is nonetheless possible to divide the 1964-2014 period into three distinct phases.

Phase one: growth and expansion from the mid-1960s to late 1970s

When trade unionists gathered in Blackpool for the 1964 TUC Congress, they were in confident mood. Union membership was on a long upward trajectory, strong unions and collective bargaining were a key part of the post-war Keynesian settlement, and workers' wages and living standards were rising. This was a golden age for trade unionism. Indeed by 1979, over 12 million workers were members of a TUC-affiliated union – half the workforce.

There was a political consensus that saw a growing trade union movement as economically desirable. Governments in Britain and across the west saw strong unions winning for workers as an essential bulwark against communism – a point of tension within the movement itself. After the privations of depression and war – and with the Soviet bloc presenting an ideological alternative to capitalism – policymakers on both left and right sought to address workers' demands for decent jobs, services and homes.

Significantly, unions were part of the fabric of British national life in a way that is simply unthinkable now. Employment relations stories reported by a sizeable corps of industrial correspondents regularly dominated the news agenda. Union general secretaries were major public figures. Meanwhile an opinion poll in the 1970s suggested that Jack Jones, the leader of the Transport & General Workers Union (TGWU), was seen as more powerful than the Prime Minister – a view that he himself dismissed as nonsense.

This period saw the expansion of long-established unions such as the TGWU and General and Municipal Workers Union. Crucially, however, it also witnessed the emergence and growth of new unions and new forms of unionism. White-collar trade unionism and public sector trade unionism, for example, both flourished during the late 1960s and 1970s.

Although the headline trend was one of trade union growth, other less heralded changes also took place during this time. Trade unions were at the heart of the struggle for equal pay, recently popularised by the film *Made in Dagenham*. They were also instrumental in securing the creation of new institutions such as the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS) and the Health & Safety Executive (HSE), both of which remain key features of the employment relations landscape. In addition, unions played a role in anti-racism and anti-apartheid campaigns, reflecting the growing diversity and interests of their membership.

The expansion of trade unions, their growing influence on public policy and a stronger focus on the issues facing women and ethnic minority workers (although limited by modern standards) all helped make Britain a more equal place. In the mid-1970s, the equivalent of two-thirds of gross domestic product (GDP) went to workers in the form of wages; today, barely half of our national wealth finds its way into people's pay packets.

Unfortunately for trade unions, this period of growth, expansion and influence reached its peak in the late 1970s. By this time, the post-war consensus was unravelling as the effects of the oil crisis, stagflation and falling living standards hit home. In its place, political ideas propagated by the radical right gained traction, notably in the UK and USA.

As has been well documented, this was a time of industrial relations strife. Rampant inflation, frequent pay disputes and the failure of the social contract ultimately led to the Winter of Discontent of 1978-1979. The phrase "Crisis, what crisis?" may have been wrongly attributed by the *Sun* newspaper to Prime Minister Jim Callaghan, but nobody doubted the scale of Britain's economic and industrial woes. The election of Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government the following May signalled the beginning of a very different era.

Phase two: assault and survival from the early 1980s to the mid-1990s

As Thatcherism took hold, markets were deregulated, public enterprises were sold off and social partnership institutions were dismantled. Trade unionism came under sustained attack: within the space of just 15 years, overall membership had virtually halved and collective bargaining coverage was in steep decline. Whereas the previous period represented the high water mark of the British trade unionism, this one saw workplace organisation plumb new depths.

Part of this was caused by the effects of two prolonged recessions. As the Conservative government pressed ahead with its monetarist experiment in the early 1980s, traditional industries declined sharply, factories closed in their thousands and unemployment climbed beyond the previously unthinkable level of three million. This process of industrial change hit trade unionism hard: many of the worst affected sectors, such as shipbuilding and steelmaking, were trade union strongholds. The second recession at the end of the decade, following the stock market crash of October 1987, also saw further industrial restructuring and another upward spike in unemployment. It too had serious implications for a depleted trade union movement.

Part of the decline of organised labour during this period, however, was caused by a sustained onslaught on trade unions by the Conservative government. It was mirrored on the other side of the Atlantic by the Reagan administration's attack on the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization (PATCO).This was indicative of the degree to which the governments of Britain and the USA – unlike those in much of western Europe – were determined to ditch post-war social democracy.

In Britain, several tranches of legislation hostile to trade unions was passed by Parliament – much of which endures to this day. Secondary action, previously a central tactic during industrial disputes, was outlawed and the closed shop banned. More pernicious, perhaps, was the demonisation by senior government figures – up to and including the Prime Minister – of unions as "the enemy within". State power was used with brutal effect to crush major industrial disputes such as the miners' strike and Wapping.

Trade unionism was also being challenged culturally as well as politically and economically. The idea of collectivism itself – of solidarity among working people – was slowly eroded by aggressive individualism and (for those who could afford it) conspicuous consumption. A glance at TV schedules from the 1980s underscores this shift: from glossy imported series like *Dallas*, *Dynasty* and *Miami Vice* to game shows such as the enthusiastically materialistic *Price is Right*. Harry Enfield's "Loadsamoney" creation personified the new zeitgeist. A much needed dose of realism was provided by the critically acclaimed *Boys from the Blackstuff*, which charted the devastating impact of New Right economics on working-class communities.

Whereas in the 1960s and 1970s trade union leaders had been influential figures in national and public life, from the 1980s onwards it was increasingly business people and entrepreneurs. The education system came to reflect these changes too: where once students at university studied industrial relations as a discipline, courses in Human Resource Management (HRM) began to proliferate.

From soft cultural power through to the hard power of the state, this was a profoundly difficult period for the trade union movement in Britain. Many of the gains made by organised labour during the post-war period were reversed as anti-union policies were implemented, employers were given new freedoms and membership fell. Nonetheless, though battered and bruised, trade unionism was still alive.

Phase three: resilience and stability, the mid-1990s to the present day

When compared to the convulsions of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, the past two decades have been a period of relative stability for the trade union movement. On the positive side, the sharp decline in membership has been halted and in recent years a number of UK unions have grown impressively. On the negative side, however, the broad direction of travel has been slowly downwards and a large gap has opened up between union density in the public sector and that in the private sector.

There have certainly been some success stories for trade unionism since the mid-1990s. The election of Labour in 1997 represented a more positive political climate for unions, if not a complete ideological break from the Thatcherite settlement. Tony Blair's "New Labour" administration legislated for fairness at work, introduced a minimum wage and facilitated trade unions' ambitious work on learning and skills.

More fundamentally, many unions adopted a more systematic approach to organising and recruitment. Under the auspices of the TUC's New Unionism project that began in the late 1990s, and with considerable input from affiliates themselves, unions began to reach out to new members and new groups of workers. Time, energy and resources were increasingly devoted to organising. To some extent, the lessons of the original new unions of the 1880s were applied, albeit in a very different social and industrial context. Significantly, the post-1997 period saw unions winning new recognition agreements, helped by a new right to recognition – something that had barely seemed possible just a decade before.

However, the past two decades have also thrown up some serious challenges. To the disappointment of many in the movement, New Labour never really embraced trade unions, collective bargaining or social partnership. In a memorable turn of phrase, former TUC General Secretary John Monks suggested some New Labour figures saw unions as "embarrassing elderly relatives". Despite being in power for 13 years, Labour left much of the Conservative's negative industrial relations architecture intact.

The election of a Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition in 2010 threw up further political difficulties for trade unions. Austerity, privatisation and a large-scale cull of public sector jobs have led to a number of high-profile disputes, including the biggest mass stoppage since the 1970s and the first National Health Service (NHS) strike in 30 years. Just as alarming for trade unionists has been the coalition's approach to employment and labour law, seeking to further denude rights that already rank as among the weakest of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries.

Economically, trade unionism has had to get to grips with profound volatility since the mid-1990s. The period started with a steady recovery from the recession that began in the late 1980s, encompassed the hubris of the long boom and then took in the worst financial crash since 1929 and the deepest recession since the 1930s. Although growth has returned, workers' living standards until recently faced their tightest squeeze in 150 years. At the end of 2014, prices had risen faster than wages for 50 out of the preceding 52 months – an unprecedented situation in modern economic history. As the vast majority of ordinary workers have struggled, the spoils of growth have increasingly flowed to a tiny minority at the top.

The new millennium has also seen the growing casualisation of the UK labour market – already one of the most flexible in Europe – making it more difficult for trade unions to organise workers. Agency work, freelancing, contracting, temporary jobs and self-employment, some of it bogus, are now much more common. In recent years, the widespread use of zero-hours contracts has attracted considerable scrutiny. Rising insecurity at work has become a reality right across the economy: building workers, care home staff, contract cleaners, college lecturers and airline pilots are just some of those affected.

Economic turmoil, austerity and rising insecurity at work have inevitably undermined trade unionism. Membership of TUC-affiliated unions in 2014 was 5.8 million, down from 6.9 million in 1995. However, viewed against the precipitous decline of the previous period, this represents resilience if not resurgence. Yet there can be no room for complacency: this is the lowest TUC membership figure since the early 1940s, and comes at a time when the workforce is bigger than ever.

While trade unions have been notably successful over the past decade in influencing public policy debate in the UK on issues such as industrial strategy, pensions and falling living standards, a weaker trade union movement and falling collective bargaining coverage has nonetheless filtered through to rising inequality and stagnant wages for the majority of workers. These themes were crystallised in the TUC's "Britain needs a pay rise" campaign during 2014, which attracted significant media, political and public interest. The broader challenge for the trade union movement is to translate this campaigning success into organising success, reaching out to a new generation of members.

Viewed against the backdrop of the past 50 years, trade unionism now stands at a historically important crossroads. What, if anything, does the post-1964 period tell us about what the future might hold for organised labour? Are there any lessons from the past 50 years that unions could apply in the context of today's rapidly evolving economy and labour market? Most fundamentally, what are the prospects for a renewal of trade union organisation in the coming decades?

The future of trade unionism

As the saying goes, making predictions can be difficult – especially about the future. Given the political, economic and industrial turbulence of the past 50 years, seeking to establish where the trade union movement will be in the middle of the 2060s is at best educated guesswork, at worst idle speculation. However, there are some important historical lessons that it would be unwise for today's trade unionists to ignore.

Perhaps most importantly of all, while the economic climate remains difficult for organised labour, trade unions remain powerful agents in shaping their own destiny. There has plainly never been more need for strong, effective trade unionism than now. The systemic problems now facing workers – stagnant wages and endemic low pay; unfair rewards and spiralling inequality; insecurity at work and a huge imbalance in the employment relationship – demand powerful unions. With global capital increasingly footloose, the need for collective organisation among workers is surely self-evident.

Interestingly, a number of leading figures within the International Monetary Fund (IMF) – historically an institution that has promoted labour market flexibility and economic deregulation – have urged governments to take steps to increase the bargaining power of ordinary workers, especially those on low and middle incomes. At the beginning of 2014, meanwhile, the director general of the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) urged member firms to pay their workers more if they could – indicative of growing concern within business itself of how diminishing living standards could hit demand for its goods and services.

All of this explains why the TUC is actively campaigning to win the political argument for a new policy architecture to promote collective bargaining, fair industrial relations and stronger labour rights. Among the policy changes unions would like to see are: worker representation on company remuneration committees, to restore a sense of balance to the pay setting process; union representation on company boards, as is common throughout much of Europe; and modern wage councils bringing together government, employers and unions to set higher pay in the sectors that can afford it.

In the years ahead, the legislative and policy context will be crucial, just as it has been in the past – broadly positive in the 1960s and 1970s; disastrous in the 1980s; better post-1997; largely negative since 2010. It is important to remember that unions are not merely passive actors in the public policy arena; they can shape outcomes too. From equal pay legislation to the minimum wage, many progressive policy developments have stemmed from union campaigning.

Ultimately, what matters most is what unions do themselves. Based on the experiences of the half century after 1964, three key lessons should shape how trade unionism progresses towards the middle of the twenty-first century.

Lesson one: organising is crucial

It is no coincidence that the rapid growth of trade unionism in the 15 years after 1964 correlated with organising initiatives across both public and private sectors. Then, unions put huge efforts into recruitment – and just as importantly, building a culture of organising within workplaces.

That approach continues to reap rewards now – and will likely do so in the future. Much has been written about falling union density in the private sector – and with good reason. However, in recent years unions such as GMB, Unite and USDAW (the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers) have all shown it is possible to build membership even in traditionally hostile sectors such as security and retail. Meanwhile, a number of unions in the public sector have maintained density and membership despite public spending cuts and significant job losses.

Since the turn of the millennium, trade unionism has prospered in both public and private sectors where unions have focused explicitly on organising and winning for members. To take one example, the RMT (National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers) has grown its membership by around a third over the past 15 years from 57,000 to nearly 80,000. Although this model may be more suited to the transport sector than others, where workers are well organised and can wield relatively high levels of industrial power, it underlines the efficacy of organising. The big task facing the trade union movement as a whole is to ensure individual success stories such as this become the norm rather than the exception.

Lesson two: unions can only grow if they reach out to new groups of workers

Throughout modern economic history, rapid industrial and labour market change has created new groups of workers – from airline staff to computer programmers to call centre operatives – alongside new forms of working. Trade unions have invariably prospered when they have been tuned into these realities.

Back in the 1880s, the new unions reached out to previously unorganised workers such as dockers, seafarers, gas workers and labourers, helping trade unionism move beyond its craft base to forge new strongholds among unskilled and semi-skilled workers. In the mid-1940s and 1950s, the TGWU's Jack Jones successfully recruited tens of thousands of workers in the Midlands car industry, which grew strongly after the war. In the 1970s, civil service and white-collar trade unionism flourished.

So the conclusion for contemporary trade unions is stark: there is an overwhelming need to reach out to millions of unorganised workers in the private sector service economy, where density has fallen to barely more than 10 per cent. To add to the scale of this challenge, unions must also target the growing number of workers on the fringes of the labour market: agency workers, people on zero hours contracts and freelancers. Critically, trade unions have to do more to engage with young workers under the age of 25, little more than 8 per cent of whom belong to a union. The TUC is currently exploring the concept of "gateway" membership of a trade union for young workers, a new entry point for those working in unorganised workplaces.

It will certainly be interesting to see what happens with the ongoing campaign in the USA to organise fast food workers – and to see what UK unions can learn from organising strategies on the other side of the Atlantic and indeed around the world. Trade union organisation and collective bargaining coverage undoubtedly makes a difference to low-paid workers even in so-called "McJobs": a worker in Denmark on the national minimum wage takes just 15 minutes to earn enough to buy a Big Mac; in the UK it takes 27 minutes; but in the USA, the equivalent figure is 35 minutes.

Trade unions need to be imaginative in the way they engage with unorganised workers: building campaign alliances to fight for a living wage; linking up with other lobbying groups such as fair trade or green NGOs; and using social media and new technology effectively. Unions must also shout louder about success stories such as their outstanding work on learning and skills, which is currently helping almost 250,000 workers a year access training and development opportunities.

Merely hoping that workers will themselves seek out unions clearly would not suffice; unions need to actively engage with today's workers in all of their diversity, making it easier for them to join and become active. As with young workers, unions need to explore the potential of new types of membership and pathways into membership, especially in those parts of the private sector service economy where trade unionism struggles to have a presence.

Lesson three: unions cannot afford to repeat the mistakes of the past

Just as the trade union movement needs to be alert to the threats facing it, it must also be tuned in to the opportunities too. Looking back at the previous half century, this is perhaps an area where trade unions have sometimes fallen short.

The TUC is currently undertaking major work programmes on the related themes of industrial democracy, corporate governance reform and what the UK could learn from German-style co-determination. But the labour movement's collective failure in the past to fully grasp the possibilities presented by this agenda has arguably left it playing catch up.

From the late 1960s onwards, trade unions' collective failure to take advantage of In Place of Strife, the Bullock Report and the Social Contract – even allowing for the industrial complexities of the time – arguably paved the way for Margaret Thatcher to impose her version of trade union reform in the 1980s. In a world that is changing fast, trade unionism cannot afford to make the same kind of mistakes again.

The key lesson is clear: the trade union movement has always been at its best when it looks forward not back. None of this means rejecting core trade union values such as solidarity and collectivism, but it does mean thinking seriously about how to apply these principles in a modern setting. The labour movement cannot – must not – be constrained within what the former TUC General Secretary Walter Citrine described as the "traditional walls of trade union policy". We must be bold enough to develop new ways of working to embed trade unionism into the fabric of Britain's workplaces, and to ensure the union voice is heard in key national debates. On housing, public services, industrial policy, pensions and skills, unions and their members have a key role to play in mapping out a vision of a better, fairer, more successful Britain.

Conclusion

The trade union movement faces some major challenges, notably rebuilding its collective strength in the private sector. But while there is clearly a need for hard-headed realism, there are also grounds for optimism too. With imagination, hard work and a favourable wind, a trade union renewal is not inconceivable.

None of the 997 delegates gathering at the TUC Congress in Blackpool in 1964 could have anticipated how the next 50 years would have turned out. Rapid membership growth, the industrial convulsions of the 1970s, the regression of the Thatcher and Major eras, New Labour's third way, the financial crash of 2008 and its aftermath – the past five decades have been nothing if not interesting.

Nobody can predict what the period from 2014 to 2064 will hold. However, there is nothing inevitable about further trade union decline. Throughout its history, the fortunes of organised labour have fluctuated dramatically. This is likely to remain the case: in 50 years' time, I hope that academics and labour historians will be examining the conditions that led to the rebirth of the trade union movement. It is sure to be an interesting journey – and today's trade unions are determined to establish a clear, and upward, direction of travel.

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