

A new industrial relations framework – galvanising change

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After decades of neglect, industrial relations are back in the UK Government's policy thinking as part of its growth agenda. However, during the intervening years, profound changes occurred both in the world of work and in how workplaces are studied. For policy to deliver its ambition for sustainable growth, with a strong emphasis on re-industrialisation and increased inclusivity, we need to renew how we think about, and how we do, industrial relations.

The demise of industrial relations

Industrial relations is both a field of practice and a field of study, with a central focus on social relations at work and the 'study of the rules governing employment'.¹ Across the 1950s to 1970s managing industrial relations was a key concern of successive UK governments. At this time, the Oxford/Warwick school of industrial relations, with its advocacy of pluralism, heavily influenced governments of the day. By the 1980s, however, this school of thought was losing that influence. The following decades saw a to-ing and fro-ing of legislative change around trade unions with a growth in individual rights though parallel concerns around 'red tape'. However, there was also a sense of antipathy to the concept of industrial relations and, some would even argue, a strategic disengagement in some areas of the academic community.²

This shift in academic focus was mirrored and in part spurred by changes to the world of work. Industrial restructuring, new business models and declining union membership and powers all had an impact. So too did the decline in industrial action. There were parallel debates about whether the new 'employment' relations landscape reflected a philosophical shift from collectivism to individualism; and about whether the growth in individual rights had displaced collective ways of working. By the 1990s, human resource management (HRM) became a dominant intellectual and operational framing device for workplace relations with individual employment rights high on the agenda.

In 1998 the institutional route for redress of workers' grievances, the Industrial Tribunals were renamed Employment Tribunals, and a similar name change occurred in the internationally recognised Workplace Industrial Relations Survey series as it became the Workplace Employee (and subsequently Employment) Relations Survey (WERS). The survey coverage of WERS also changed. The emphasis on questions around the industrial relationship between management and the unions were reduced with a new focus on managers and individuals and HRM practices.³ WERS continued in 2004 and 2011 as a world-leading source of evidence mapping the world of work but it too ceased from 2011.

In the late 2000s there was strong academic challenge that promoted 'the purpose of industrial relations'.⁴ While the main industrial relations academic forum – the British Universities Industrial Relations Association (BUIRA) – was a stalwart promoting the cause, the outcome was of limited success not least in research investment in the field of industrial relations. Nonetheless, in its recent film retrospective on industrial relations and BUIRA, Irena Grugulis comments that a good understanding of industrial relations is fundamental to the student of HRM.⁵ The question of adequacy remains, with concerns about whether the prevailing attention on rights and individualism

is sufficient to address today's world of work. As Neil Carberry, the new CEO of the CIPD, recently commented, 'the law is not (your) labour relations strategy'.⁶

The fallout from the demise of industrial relations

The loss in policy focus inevitably resulted in casualties. Gill Dix, John Forth and Keith Sisson⁷, in charting the shift in growth in employment tribunal claims and decline in collective action, concluded that while change in patterns of manifest expressions of conflict was notable, there was limited evidence to suggest that collective conflict had been entirely swept up in the shift to individualism: conflict continued to manifest in other forms. Whilst industrial action declined and the legislative power of the unions remained reduced, strikes and threatened action were by no means extinct.

At a practical level a capacity deficit now exists in trade unions, employer organisations, the 'HR' profession and government to understand and do industrial relations at scale, or within many private sector workplaces. This problem was flagged by Eurofound in a 2020 report on capacity building for effective social dialogue.⁸ There is, for example, a tangible loss in negotiation skills. The deskilling of the key actors to the industrial relationship, including the conflict management capacity among those in the front line is met with growing concern. The period has not been devoid of examples of clever, socially agreed deals involving all parties to the industrial relationship. On the policy front, during the crisis of the Covid pandemic, the social partners pulled together with government to create the 'furlough scheme' to stabilise the UK economy. Importantly, at an institutional level, the Low Pay Commission and the Acas Council have both continued with tripartite governance structures, now joined by the Fair Work Agency.

The current economic and (geo) political instability is without doubt reflected in the social changes, insecurities and inequalities that we are witnessing and manifest in pay and productivity stagnation. What's more, whilst we may passively describe the growth in precarity and insecurity of work as an 'artefact' of changing industrial and business practices, the reality is that the nub of the change lies in a dramatic imbalance of power between worker and manager. The current climate of what might be covered by industrial relations is characterised by an erosion of mutuality and with it, the potential for mistrust has grown.

Towards a renewal of industrial relations

Such an environment is not conducive to harmonious workplace relations or policy aspirations for economic growth. Government policy has sought to address some systemic changes with the 2025 Employment Rights Act. While the Act could have gone further in some areas, it does offer demonstration of an ambition to address precarious work, unfair employment practices and a reversal of some constraints on trade union activity. The proposed Fair Pay Agreement for adult social care offers a significant milestone reflecting the need for change.

Speaking in the Commons, as Minister for Employment Rights, Kate Dearden⁹ raised the need *'to build a modern industrial relations framework, fashioned on the principle of social partnership - that consent and consensus must replace disputes and conflict'*. Responding to the King's Speech, the Chair of Acas, Baroness Maggie Jones, also called for a *'strong industrial relations framework'*, particularly in relation to any reformed public services.¹⁰ Industrial Relations was also explicitly included in the Department for Business and Trade's Areas of Research Interests.¹¹ Both as a term to describe workplace relations and a mechanism for managing those relations, it seems that industrial relations is back on the policy agenda amongst those who seek to inform policy and shape workplace best practice.

However, with so much change to work and reduced academic evidence and analyses, coupled with a diminished capacity amongst the key actors, there is a need to develop new ideas and mobilise

fresh debates to inform the social partners in this area. In particular, we need to know what good industrial relations look like in the UK of the twenty-first century, what creates the conditions for these good industrial relations and how good industrial relations can be levered to deliver better pay, productivity, good jobs and growth. As a starter, we propose three suggestions.

First, given the changes since the old industrial relations, there is a need to shift the focus from one purely around collectivism (and collective conflict) to embrace the structures of individual rights. The latter is now embedded as a key feature of workplace relations in the UK. A new industrial relations framework therefore needs to embrace both the collective and the individual, and the important interactions of collective and individual interests. Collective bargaining may stay centre stage, but so will emerging challenges about working practices, not least the impact and governance of AI. The shift will need to be felt in the policy agenda and in the 'culture' of workplace relations.

Second, we may need to revisit the content, strengths and weaknesses of what works well. Back in 2004, the Warwick Agreement, forged by the Labour Party and unions, was arguably the most manifest attempt at a social partnership model in England. The current mood music is calling for a shift from adversarial to consensual approaches. We might also review other models of social partnership within the UK, most obviously in Scotland and Wales, and other European countries including Ireland and Denmark.

Third, we cannot follow a traditional ideal-type model of research informing policy, then the latter informing practice, not least due to the urgency for social change. We propose a re-invigorated collaborative approach in which academics, government and social partners come together to lay a fresh foundation for a new pluralism. The focus must be on analysis, information sharing and consensus building.

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- 1 Clegg, H. A. (1979) *The Changing System of Industrial Relations in Great Britain*, Blackwell.
 - 2 Darlington, R. Ed (2009) *What's the Point of Industrial Relations: In Defence of Critical Social Science*, (2009), BUIRA.
 - 3 Cully, M. (1998) *A Survey in Transition: The Design of the 1998 Workplace Employee Relations Survey*, in WERS98 User Guide, UK Data Archive Study 6712.
 - 4 For example, Moore, S., McKay, S., Hyman, R., Clarke, L., Donnelly, E., and Kelly, J. (2011) 'What's the Point of Industrial Relations?' *International Journal of Comparative Labour Law and Industrial Relations* 27(3): 239-253; see also Darlington, R. (2009) op. cit.
 - 5 <https://www.buira.net/2026/10/15/thirsty-scholars-writing-history-a-collective-account-of-buiras-development-and-purpose>.
 - 6 <https://www.cipd.org/en/about/blogs/cipd-chief-executive-neil-carberry-shares-key-points-evershed-labour-relations-conference>, October 2026.
 - 7 Dix, G., Forth, J. and Sisson, K. (2009) 'Conflict at work: the changing pattern of disputes' in *The Evolution of the Modern Workplace*, eds. Brown, W., Bryson, A., Forth, J., and Whitfield, K.
 - 8 Eurofound (2020). *Capacity building for effective social dialogue in the European Union*, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg.
 - 9 In July 2026, Kate Dearden was appointed as Minister of State at the Department for Business, Innovation, Science and Trade. She will serve as Minister of State for the Future of Work.
 - 10 [Employment Rights Bill - Hansard - UK Parliament](#); and [Loyal Debate on the King's Speech](#) respectively.
 - 11 [DBT areas of research interest: list of detailed questions - GOV.UK](#). In July 2026, the DBT was merged and the Department for Business, Science, Innovation and Trade was established.
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