

Trade Unions in contemporary Britain ReWAGE information paper

Introduction

Trade unions are once again in the limelight thanks to high inflation, growing wage demands and an upsurge of strikes. The Bank of England has called on unions to moderate their wage demands, while politicians and media commentators juggle concern about the consequences of strikes (affecting sectors including travel, healthcare, waste collection and higher education) with support for workers to defend their working conditions. It is timely therefore to review the presence and purpose of unions in Britain today. This paper offers a short summary of evidence on five aspects of unions. Its purpose is to provide information, particularly for those with little experience of unions, about what unions do, and to indicate sources of further information. It endeavours to sift evidence dispassionately, while also noting different, and sometimes irreconcilable, perspectives. The five aspects are:

- who belongs to unions today and the extent of union presence;
- whether unions are democratic organisations;
- what unions do for their members;
- unions' impact on productivity and innovation; and
- unions and strikes.

We endeavour to provide an evidence-based review but also recognise that different interpretations can be placed on the evidence. We make two overall points. Firstly, unions differ between each other, and even within one union approaches can vary. In the miners' strike of 1984-5, for example, some regions strongly supported the strike while others did not. Secondly, union effects (for example on productivity, technical change or on wages) do not exist in isolation from the contexts in which unions operate. To continue with the example of coal, the industry had strong unions and a history of bitter strikes. During the 1920s and 1930s it was also notorious for its slow modernisation.

But, though correlated, these factors were at best weakly causally related: unions often argued in favour of modernisation, and the slow mechanisation of the industry was due in large part to employers' choices, themselves shaped by a particular history of underground technology and Britain's fragmented system of mineral royalties.^{1 2} We try in what follows to identify effects that can reasonably be attributed to unions. Unions in Britain generally aim to establish structures governing pay and employment conditions that are felt to be fair and rule based. It is reasonable to attribute relevant outcomes, for example on the degree of pay equality, to unions, whereas in other areas, such as productivity, any effects may be hard to disentangle from other factors and will also vary according to the very different approaches of particular unions.

¹ Scott, P. 2004. 'Path Dependency, Fragmented Property Rights and the Slow Diffusion of High Throughput Technologies in Inter-war British Coal Mining', *Business History*, 48: 20-42.

² Paxman, J. 2021. *Black Gold*. London: William Collins.

How many union members are there, and who are they?

Membership levels and trends

UK government figures put membership of unions at 6.44 million in 2021, equivalent to a 'union density' of 23% of the employed population.^{3 4} Unionisation is an increasingly public sector phenomenon, accounting for about 4 million of the 6.44 million members. Density is thus high in education (over 50%) but low in manufacturing and construction (15% and 11% respectively) and very low in hospitality (5%).

The UK lies in the mid-range of countries.⁵ Density is similar to that in Canada (28%), above the USA (11%) but below Scandinavian countries (e.g., Denmark at 69%). In some countries, union membership may not indicate the role of unions, because collective agreements negotiated with employers are extended to non-members. Across the OECD as a whole it is estimated that there were about 80 million union members with twice as many workers being covered by collective agreements.⁶ In the UK, such extensions are very rare.

The overall trend in density has been downward for many years. The peak level for density was 50% in 1979; by 1995 it had fallen to 32% with the decline continuing albeit at a slower rate.

A related measure is the extent to which unions are recognised by employers for the purpose of bargaining over wages and conditions of employment. The authoritative series of Workplace Employment Relations Surveys, conducted six times between 1980 and 2011, shows that recognition of unions by employers fell in the private sector from 50% of workplaces in 1980 to 24% in 1998, and was then relatively stable; the trend in the public sector between these two points was from 94% to 87%.⁷

Reasons for this decline have been extensively discussed. One evident possibility is that heavily unionised sectors such as coal mining and car manufacturing have lost employment. Blanchflower and Bryson estimated that about one-third of the decline in recognition between 1980 and 2004 was due to this compositional effect.^{8 9} These authors attribute the rest to employers 'turning their back[s] on trade unions'; one part of this was the low rate of unionisation in newly established workplaces.

As to forces underlying this change of preferences, two factors may be ruled out. It is not the case that workers in general, or young workers in particular, oppose unions as a matter

³ DBEIS. 2022. 'Trade Union Membership in the UK, 1995-2021: Statistical Bulletin', May. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1077904/Trade_Union_Membership_UK_1995-2021_statistical_bulletin.pdf

⁴ This is higher than other member-based organisations such as, for example, the National Trust (5.37 million members).

⁵ Vandaele, K. 2019. *Bleak Prospects*. Brussels: European Trade Union Institute.

⁶ OECD, 2019. *Negotiating Our Way Up: Collective Bargaining in a Changing World of Work*. Paris: OECD, 13. doi.org/10.1787/1fd2da34-en.

⁷ Blanchflower, D. G. and A. Bryson. 2009. 'Trade Union Decline and the Economics of the Workplace', in W. Brown et al., eds, *The Evolution of the Modern Workplace*. Cambridge: CUP: 50.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 50.

⁹ WIRS/WERS never covered the coal industry, so that the virtual disappearance of it would make the compositional effect somewhat larger than that reported.

of principle.¹⁰ The British Social Attitudes Survey asked respondents in unionised workplaces about the power of the union. In 1989, only 4% said that unions had too much power, against 40% saying 'too little'; these proportions barely changed by 2005.¹¹ OECD data confirm that in general generational effects have been small.¹² It is the opportunity to join a union that is key rather than any shift in attitudes.

A second factor is legislative change, notably restrictions on unions during the 1980s. Such change appears not to have had direct effects on unionisation but rather acted as a signal and a stimulus.¹³ Nevertheless, it may have contributed to a change of expectations among employers as to what was normal practice. Other key forces included 'tougher competition' in product markets that eroded a 'tacit settlement' between employers and unions based on collective bargaining.¹⁴

Who are the union members?

In addition to concentration in the public sector, unionism, once seen as a largely male phenomenon, has become more common among women than men. In 1989, density among men was about 10 percentage points higher than among women, a difference that had disappeared by 2000¹⁵; by 2016, the female lead was about 5 percentage points, with women comprising around 56% of union members.¹⁶ This difference is in part because relatively more women work in the public sector; gender gaps in union densities within the public and private sectors have more or less disappeared (see Figure 1). However, there are wide gender gaps in certain occupations: female union density far exceeds that of men among professionals, about 46% in 2021 compared to 23% for men; whereas among 'elementary' occupations, which are generally low-paying, the gender gap is reversed - the comparable figures are 13% and 19%.¹⁷

Greater resilience of union membership among women compared to men reflects in part unions' gender-aware practices. Many trade unions have established women's groups to encourage participation, and equality bargaining has become a recognised practice.¹⁸ Moreover, women currently lead or have recently led the Trades Union Congress and the two largest trade unions, Unite and Unison.

¹⁰ Kirton, G., G. Healy, S. Alvarez and R. Lieberwitz. 2013:34. 'Gender, Work and Unionism in Comparative Context', in G. Kirton and G. Healy, eds, *Gender and Leadership in Unions*. London: Routledge.

¹¹ Charlwood, A. and J. Forth. 2009:91. 'Employee Representation', in W. Brown et al., eds, *The Evolution of the Modern Workplace*. Cambridge: CUP.

¹² OECD, *op. cit.*, 23.

¹³ Waddington, J. 2003: 'Trade Union Organization', in P Edwards, ed., *Industrial Relations*. Oxford: Blackwell: 221-22.

¹⁴ Brown, W., A. Bryson and J. Forth. 2009. 'Competition and the Retreat from Collective Bargaining', in W. Brown et al., eds, *The Evolution of the Modern Workplace*. Cambridge: CUP: 47.

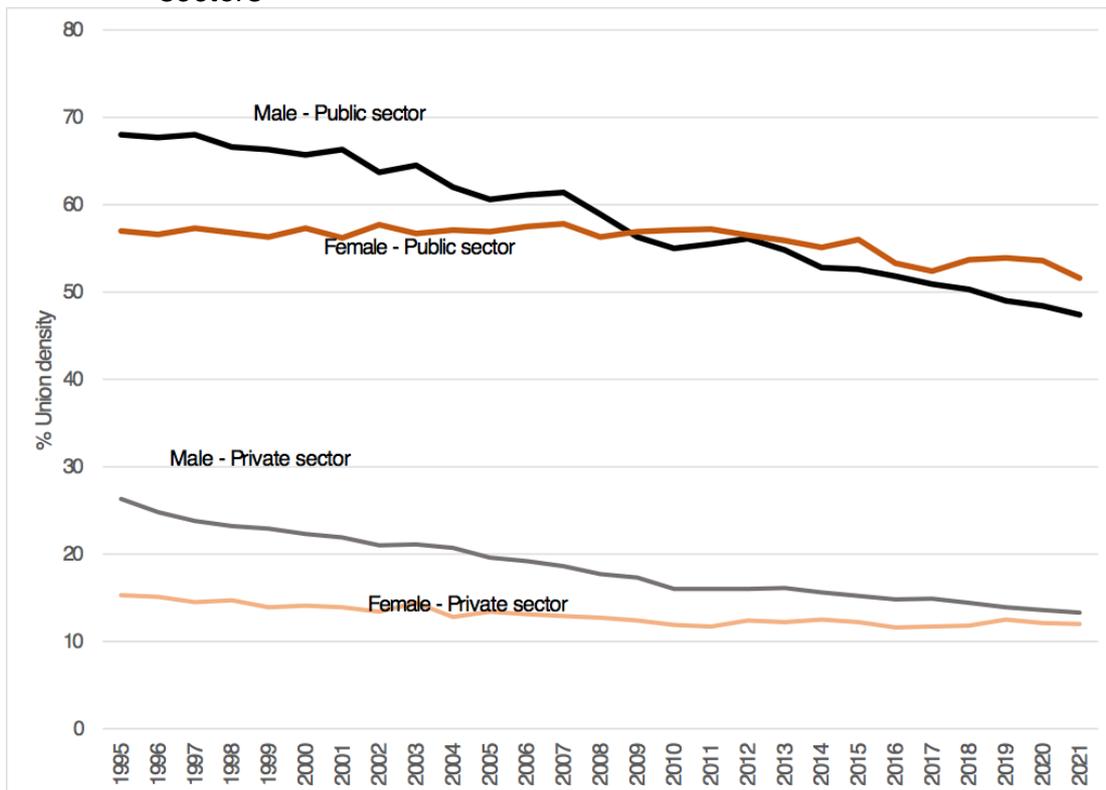
¹⁵ Dix, G. K. Sisson and J. Forth. 2009:246. 'Conflict at Work', in W. Brown et al., eds, *The Evolution of the Modern Workplace*. Cambridge: CUP.

¹⁶ Vandaele, K., *op. cit.*, Table 5.

¹⁷ DBEIS. 2022 (Table 1.7c). 'Trade Union Membership in the UK, 1995-2021: Statistical Bulletin', May. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1077904/Trade_Union_Membership_UK_1995-2021_statistical_bulletin.pdf

¹⁸ Dean, D., and S. Liff. 2010. 'Equality and Diversity', in T. Colling and M. Terry, eds, *Industrial Relations*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Figure 1. Trends in union membership among men and women in the public and private sectors



Source: Trade union statistics 2021, Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy.

As for age, young workers are consistently less likely than older ones to be union members: around 11% in the 20-24 age group, and 19% in the 25-29 group, compared to 30% and 33% among workers aged in their early and late 50s. While registering a decline since 1995 in union density, the trend for some older groups reveals a steeper drop: density for 25–29-year-olds fell from 28% to 19% during 1995-2021, nine percentage points, compared to drops from 41% to 28% (age 45-49) and 40% to 30% (age 50-54).¹⁹

Are trades unions democratic organisations?

Trade unions are membership associations, which are governed through formally democratic constitutions. At grassroots level, elected lay representatives represent, service and maintain union organisation in the workplace. At higher levels of union government, elected conferences are sovereign and set union policy, while elected executives are responsible for its implementation. Key decisions, such as taking strike action or accepting pay offers from employers, are made through ballots of members. In many unions, moreover, there are distinct and often well-established factions which have contrasting programmes and which compete with each other for office and influence. To be sure, there are weaknesses in union democracy: voter participation is often low, elections often are not contested, and cases of electoral malpractice occasionally come to light. It remains though that unions are characterised by their democratic form of governance to a greater degree than are many other British institutions. There is evidence, moreover, that unions strengthen

¹⁹ DBEIS. 2022 (table 1.6). 'Trade Union Membership in the UK, 1995-2021: Statistical Bulletin', May. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1077904/Trade_Union_Membership_UK_1995-2021_statistical_bulletin.pdf

democratic culture more generally: a study of voting in 28 democratic countries found that union membership raised the chance of voting in public elections by an average of six to eight per cent and also strengthened attachment to democratic norms.^{20 21}

Another way in which unions contribute to democratic culture is through formal participation in party politics. Eleven unions are affiliated to the Labour Party, while most others maintain a 'political fund' to allow them to engage in lobbying and support campaigns that target the political process.²² While it is sometimes suggested that unions should be apolitical and refrain from party politics, all mature trade union movements operating within liberal democracies are engaged in activity of this kind. Even in the USA, sometimes thought of as the home of 'business unionism', unions are political actors, providing essential support to the Democrats.

Within the Labour Party, unions provide finance and organisational support and have often exerted significant influence over policy-making, persuading the Party to adopt the minimum wage and other significant labour market reforms.²³ For much of the Party's history, the trade unions have functioned as a 'praetorian guard', bolstering the position of the Party leadership against a more radical constituency membership. The leftward shift in the leadership of several unions in the Blair years led to a weakening of this traditional union function and there was strong support within the unions for Jeremy Corbyn's leadership. More recently though, it has been suggested that the moderating function of unions within Labour has begun to revive, with major unions providing essential support to the current leadership.²⁴

Politically motivated reforms

While many features of union democracy are longstanding, the institution has continued to evolve. One line of evolution has arisen from a critique of union democracy emanating from the Conservative Party, notably since 1979 but with the origins of the critique going back at least to 1958.²⁵ The Conservative argument is that failings of union democracy have allowed domination of unions by militants who are essentially unrepresentative of the broad mass of union members.²⁶ This critique has informed a legislative programme, initiated under the Thatcher Government of the 1980s, which has required unions to make greater use of postal balloting in their internal governance arrangements. Unions are obliged to use postal ballots to elect and re-elect their principal officials, such as the General Secretary, to establish a political fund and affiliate to a political party, and to take industrial action.^{27 28} This

²⁰ Bryson, A., R. Gomez, T. Kretschner and P. Willman. 2014. 'What Accounts for the Union Membership Advantage in Voter Turnout?' *Relations Industrielles*, 69: 732-65.

²¹ Budd, J.W. and Lamare, J.R. 2021. 'Worker Voice and Political Participation in Civil Society', in K.F. Zimmermann (ed.), *Handbook of Labor, Human Resources and Population Economics*, Champ.: Springer.

²² Leopold, J.W. 2006. 'Trade Unions and the Third Round of Political Fund Review Balloting', *Industrial Relations Journal*, 37: 190-208.

²³ Coulter, S. 2014. *New Labour Policy, Industrial Relations and the Trade Unions*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.

²⁴ Massey, C. 2021. 'The Changing of the Praetorian Guard? The Size, Structure and Composition of the Labour Party's National Executive Committee and the Enduring Importance of Labour's Trade Unions', *Political Quarterly*, 92: 343-51.

²⁵ See Davies, P. and Freedland, M., 1993. *Labour Legislation and Public Policy*. Oxford: Clarendon.

²⁶ See Undy, R. and Martin, R.M. 1984. *Ballots and Trade Union Democracy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

²⁷ Adams, Z., Barnard, C., Deakin, S., and Fraser Butlin, S. 2021. *Deakin and Morris' Labour Law*. Seventh Edition. London: Bloomsbury.

²⁸ Undy, R., Fosh, P., Morris, H., Smith, P. and Martin, R. (1996). *Managing the Unions: The Impact of Labour Legislation on Trade Unions' Behaviour*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

programme of reform has continued, with further legislation on strike balloting included in the Trade Union Act 2016.²⁹

This externally-driven reform has led to changes in union democracy: unions have complied with the law though doing so has proved expensive and occasionally challenging, particularly with regard to the complex legislation on strike ballots. What is notable about balloting reform, however, is that it has generally not produced the effects anticipated by those who framed it. Thus, the direct election of national leaders has not favoured more moderate candidates nor prevented the leftward swing in the leadership of several major unions since the early 2000s.^{30 31}

The requirement to ballot on political funds has also not led to the anticipated 'de-politicisation' of union activity. Instead, the law prompted unions that previously had not had funds to establish them to secure protection for their routine campaigning and lobbying activities, and while some unions have elected to disaffiliate from the Labour Party this has been because of the perceived moderation of the latter, with funding redirected to left-wing parties and political causes.^{32 33} Finally, while the era of strike balloting has been characterised by a low incidence of industrial action, evidence suggests that the law itself has played only a minor, causal role. Unions have adapted to the law, using ballots as a means of pressuring employers for concessions, and have become adept at securing levels of turnout and support that enable them to initiate industrial action while also often arguing that the requirement to have postal ballots is cumbersome and costly (see below).

Enhancing equality and diversity

A second key development has been a strengthening of arrangements for women and members of minorities to participate in union governance. From the 1980s onwards there has been an extensive reform of union democracy that has encompassed the creation of:

- 1) specialist conferences and committees for women, black and other minority groups amongst union members;
- 2) reserved seats at union conference, on delegations, and executives for representatives of these groups;
- 3) specialist roles such as women's officer or equality representative with responsibility for women or minority members;
- 4) support for internal activist networks drawn from women or minority members, such as black workers' sections; and
- 5) training and development programmes to support women and minority activists, with the aim of facilitating their election or appointment to senior union positions.³⁴

²⁹ Bogg, A. 2016. 'Beyond Neo-Liberalism: The Trade Union Act 2016 and the Authoritarian State', *Industrial Law Journal*, 45: 299-336.

³⁰ Charlwood, A. 2004. 'The New Generation of Trade Union Leaders and the Prospects for Union Revitalization', *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 42: 379-97.

³¹ Undy, R., Fosh, P., Morris, H., Smith, P. and Martin, R. (1996). *Managing the Unions: The Impact of Labour Legislation on Trade Unions' Behaviour*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

³² Leopold, J.W. 2006. 'Trade Unions and the Third Round of Political Fund Review Balloting', *Industrial Relations Journal*, 37: 190-208.

³³ Undy, R., Fosh, P., Morris, H., Smith, P. and Martin, R. (1996). *Managing the Unions: The Impact of Labour Legislation on Trade Unions' Behaviour*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

³⁴ Kirton, G. 2015. 'Progress towards Gender Democracy in UK Unions 1987-2012', *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 53: 484-507.

This attempt to embed diversity in union democracy continues. The latest TUC audit of equality structures in trade unions notes recent growth of networks amongst black and minority ethnic activist in unions, stimulated in many cases by the Black Lives Matter movement.³⁵

The drive to represent diversity in union government has arisen from a critique of union democracy as dominated by men and majority representatives, which in turn has skewed union activity towards the advance of male and majority interests. The obverse of this bias has been the neglect or de-prioritising of the interests of women and minorities in union policy-making and collective bargaining. This critique continues to be made. It has been argued, for example, that the machinery of women's and minority representation in many unions remains detached from the conduct of collective bargaining, much of which remains focused on a traditional agenda.³⁶ Nevertheless, the impulse to reform union democracy to accommodate greater diversity has been in many respects successful. Change is most apparent with regard to women's representation, where the strengthening of internal women's voice within unions has been associated with stronger external representation of women's interests in the political realm and in collective bargaining. The reform of union democracy is of a piece with changes in union policy to prioritise equal pay, work-life integration, *pro rata* pay and benefits for part-time workers, and issues such as sexual harassment, reproductive rights, domestic violence, and the menopause.^{37 38 39}

Overall, therefore, the institution of trade union democracy has followed two lines of development in recent decades, one affording greater scope for the expression of women's and minority interests and the other requiring greater use of individual postal balloting. Both programmes of reform have been advocated as a means of changing the way unions behave, shifting their policy and representative priorities towards women and minority groups within the membership in one case and seeking to moderate union leadership and behaviour in the other. The line of development focused on representing diversity has succeeded in promoting anticipated changes in union behaviour, perhaps because it emerged from within unions themselves, promoted by successive generations of women and minority activists.⁴⁰ The other line of development, focused on balloting, has changed the way in which union democracy operates but has seemingly been less successful in securing behavioural change. Unions have displayed obduracy in the face of external reform, emanating from those they regard as hostile.

What do unions do for their members?

Unions bring a wide range of positive benefits for their members. Beyond providing a collective platform for voice and negotiating better pay, unions win a better deal at work for their members by combating inequalities, establishing fair procedures and improving job quality. Nevertheless, union influence on other aspects such as job satisfaction and work intensification are hard to decipher.

³⁵ TUC 2022 [TUC Equality Audit 2022](#) | TUC

³⁶ Kirton, G. 2021. 'Union Framing of Gender Equality and the Elusive Potential of Equality Bargaining in a Difficult Climate', *Journal of Industrial Relations*, 63: 591-613.

³⁷ Colling, T. and Dickens, L. 2001. 'Gender Equality and Trade Unions: a New Basis for Mobilization?', in M. Noon and E. Ogbonna, eds, *Equality, Diversity and Disadvantage in Employment*, Basingstoke: Palgrave.

³⁸ Heery, E. 2006. 'Equality Bargaining: Where, Who, Why?', *Gender, Work and Organization*, 13: 522-42.

³⁹ Milner, S. 2022. 'Bargaining for Work-Family Benefits in the UK', *Journal of Industrial Relations*, 64: 124-46.

⁴⁰ Heery, E. and Conley, H. 2007. 'Frame Extension in a Mature Social Movement: British Trade Unions and Part-time Work, 1976-2002', *Journal of Industrial Relations*, 49: 5-29.

Voice and influence - Declining membership has been associated with weakening influence, in the workplace and also more generally.

Weakening union influence in the workplace is most sharply illustrated in the WIRS/WERS series. Analysts identified two forms of employee 'voice': through trade unions, or through non-union mechanisms such as regular workforce meetings and team briefings.⁴¹ Between 1984 and 2004, the extent of union-only mechanisms fell from 24% of workplaces to 5%. Non-union-only workplaces grew from 16% of the total to 46%. Taking account of the many workplaces using both mechanisms, the percentage of workplaces with any union voice fell from 66% to 38%. In the private sector in 2004 this last proportion was 23% compared to 86% in the public sector.

Wider influence has also declined. During the 1960s and 1970s, unions were extensively involved in various forms of incomes policy, notably the 'social contracts' of the Labour Government of 1974-79. Involvement in such practices has all but disappeared, though unions retain formal positions on bodies such as ACAS and the Low Pay Commission. Some areas of influence remain. During the covid pandemic, the TUC was closely and constructively involved in the operation of the furlough scheme, and some commentators argue that unionisation reduced the risk of redundancy for workers and that some workers in precarious jobs were beginning to join unions (*Guardian*, 1/7/21). The TUC continues to campaign on a wide range of issues such as insecure work.⁴² The devolved administrations in Cardiff and Edinburgh are also committed to a formal policy of social partnership with trade unions (see below).

Wages - The role of unions in raising the wages of members as compared to non-members has been the focus of research for many years. The general conclusion is that this wage premium has declined along with the reduction in unions' influence. Bryson and Forth put it at 5% on average, though argue that it is twice as high for women as for men.⁴³ Analysis of WIRS/WERS found that *membership* was associated with a small premium but that union recognition, significant in the early years of the survey, no longer had an effect. The premium was particularly large for workers in small workplaces, though reasons for this result were not given.^{44 45 46 47}

Pay inequality - Unions often negotiate around a rate for a job and thus tend to narrow the dispersion of pay, certainly as opposed to individually-based merit pay. Evidence indeed shows that unions tend to reduce differences between men and women, between white and

⁴¹ Willman, P., R. Gomez and A. Bryson. 2009:100. 'Voice at the Workplace', in W. Brown et al., eds, *The Evolution of the Modern Workplace*. Cambridge: CUP.

⁴² Trades Union Congress, 2022. 'Insecure Work', July. www.tuc.org.uk.

⁴³ Bryson, A. and J. Forth. 2017. 'The Added Value of Trade Unions'. London: TUC. <https://www.niesr.ac.uk/publications/added-value-trade-unions-review-tuc-existing-research?type=report>.

⁴⁴ Blanchflower and Bryson, *op. cit.*, 63.

⁴⁵ Based on our own research on small *firms* (not workplaces) as per the next two notes we hazard an explanation Small firms tend to have highly individualised and idiosyncratic processes of pay setting, as against greater bureaucracy in large ones; union presence is likely to have a disproportionate effect in introducing rules-based systems that permit explicit bargaining over pay..

⁴⁶ Gilman, M., P. Edwards, M. Ram and J. Arrowsmith. 2002. 'Pay Determination in Small Firms in the UK', *Industrial Relations Journal*, 33: 52-72.

⁴⁷ Tsai, C-J., S. Sen Gupta and P. Edwards, 2007. 'When and Why is Small Beautiful?' *Human Relations*, 60: 1779-1801.

black workers, and between those with and without disabilities.⁴⁸ OECD data indicate that the dispersion of wages is low where collective bargaining is at sectoral level, and highest in the absence of collective bargaining.⁴⁹

Reducing pay inequality can have important effects. The process tends to increase workers' trust in management, and the presence of collective bargaining tends to strengthen further this relationship.⁵⁰

Fairness and discipline - Formal procedures for grievances and discipline are now very widespread. Unionised workplaces are, however, still more likely than non-union ones to have relatively developed procedures that follow ACAS guidance.⁵¹ This was an area on which workplace union representatives were most commonly involved: 77% reported spending time on this compared for example to 37% spending time on performance appraisals.

A long-established tendency for unions to constrain the use of discipline still operates. Dix et al. compared the three types of voice regime identified above.⁵² Disciplinary sanctions across all workplaces ran at a rate of 5.9 sanctions per 100 employees. The figure was only 2.5 where union voice existed alone, 4.2 where union and non-union voice existed together, and 7.8 with only non-union voice.

Job satisfaction - For over 40 years, a negative association between union membership and job satisfaction has been observed, at least in the UK and the USA, with any effect seemingly absent in several other countries.⁵³ The usual explanation is that union behaviour encourages a sense of discontent by drawing attention to potential workplace problems. An alternative view says that the nature of work conditions causes dissatisfaction and a tendency to join unions; additionally, it may be that people who are predisposed to be discontented sort themselves into unions.

Recent studies question the relationship. Blanchflower et al. show that the negative relationship between unionisation and satisfaction has switched to become positive; for example, the fear of job loss is now similar between union and non-union workers.⁵⁴ In a study of public sector workers, examined the effect of an exogenous shock (a change in pension arrangements) on dissatisfaction.⁵⁵ If union behaviour was important, unionised workers would show a greater rise in dissatisfaction than non-union ones. But tests of this and related possibilities did not support this view. The authors conclude that union

⁴⁸ Metcalf, D., K. Hansen and A. Charlwood. 2001. 'Unions and the Sword of Justice', *National Institute Economic Review*, 176: 61-75. eprints.lse.ac.uk/20195/1.

⁴⁹ OECD, *op. cit.*, 106.

⁵⁰ Schulz, F., D. Valizade and A. Charlwood. 2022. 'The Effect of Intra-workplace Pay Inequality on Employee Trust in Managers', *Human Relations*, 75: 705-33.

⁵¹ Bryson, A. and J. Forth. 2017:27. 'The Added Value of Trade Unions'. London: TUC. <https://www.niesr.ac.uk/publications/added-value-trade-unions-review-tuc-existing-research?type=report>.

⁵² Dix, G. K. Sisson and J. Forth, 'Conflict at Work', in W. Brown et al., eds, *The Evolution of the Modern Workplace*. Cambridge: CUP, 2009: 196.

⁵³ Laroche, P. 2016. 'A Meta-analysis of the Union-job-satisfaction Relationship', *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 54: 709-41.

⁵⁴ Blanchflower, D. G., A. Bryson and C. Green. 2022 'Trade Unions and the Well-being of Workers', *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 60: 255-77.

⁵⁵ Bessa, I., A. Charlwood and D. Valizade. 2021. 'Do Unions Cause Job Dissatisfaction?' *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 59: 251-78.

membership 'does not have a causal impact on job satisfaction' (p. 275) and argue that it is working conditions that are key.

Work intensification - The general evidence is that unions tended in the past to constrain intensification but that this association may have reversed after 2012.⁵⁶ A more recent study, using the Skills and Employment Surveys, finds little or no direct effect on union recognition on work intensification.⁵⁷

Overall job quality - Wider studies of job quality suggest clear union effects. A study of union members in the finance sector used nine indicators of job quality and found that quality, as self-reported by workers, was higher where there was an on-site union representative than otherwise, and also that collective voice of union presence seemed to be a key mechanism.⁵⁸ Simms studied unions in two sectors, industrial cleaning and nursing, and found that they were able to construct bargaining agendas addressing job quality.⁵⁹

Reviewing this literature, Simms notes many studies showing that job quality in the UK is low by international standards, with a general argument being that this fact reflects the exclusion of unions from national spheres of influence and also a consequent lack of support for institutions of workplace representation such as works councils.⁶⁰ Nonetheless, argues that unions are not, or need not be, passive and that they can construct strategies to mobilise around such issues as job quality.

Are unions associated with lower productivity?

We underline 'associated with' as opposed to 'cause'. For at least 100 years, 'restrictive practices', usually attributed to trade unions, have been cited as factors in low productivity, though the evidence has often been tenuous.⁶¹ A review of quantitative studies concludes that results have low statistical power with a high heterogeneity of estimates, in other words, decisive conclusions are invalid.⁶² The review, moreover, considers the association between union presence and various outcomes; it says very little about possible mechanisms.

As Bryson and Forth conclude, any statistical associations have weakened over time to become small. Moreover, any union effects seem to be shaped by other factors.⁶³ For example, a study of 'high involvement' management practices, often seen in the Human Resource Management literature as a new way to generate productivity through workplace improvements, had positive effects only under unionization.⁶⁴ Other studies cited by Bryson

⁵⁶ Bryson and Forth, *o. cit.*, 24.

⁵⁷ Green, F., A. Felstead, D. Gallie and G. Henseke. 2022. 'Working Still Harder', *Industrial and Labor Relations Review*, 75: 458-87.

⁵⁸ Hoque, K., J. Earls, N. Conway and N. Bacon. 2017. 'Union Representation, Collective Voice and Job Quality', *Economic and Industrial Democracy*, 38: 27-50.

⁵⁹ Simms, M. 2017. 'Unions and Job Quality in the UK', *Work and Occupations*, 44: 47-67.

⁶⁰ Simms, M. 2022. 'Trade Unions and Job Quality', in C. Warhurst et al., eds, *The Oxford Handbook of Job Quality*. Oxford: OUP.

⁶¹ Nichols, T. 1986. *The British Worker Question*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

⁶² Doucouliagos, H., R. B. Freeman, P. Laroche and T. D., Stanley. 2018. 'How Credible is Trade Union Research?', *Industrial and Labor Relations Review*, 71: 287-305.

⁶³ Bryson and Forth, *op cit.*, 34-5.

⁶⁴ Bryson, A., J. Forth and S. Kirby. 2005. 'High-involvement Management Practices, Trade union Representation and Workplace Performance in Britain', *Scottish Journal of Political Economy*, 52: 451-91.

and Forth suggest that negative associations between unions and productivity may exist only where collective bargaining structures are fragmented.

More qualitative research considers whether unions can contribute positively to innovation. The practice of partnership is based on the idea that they can. The Involvement and Participation Association says that it developed a partnership model in 1992, with elements including a joint commitment to success, recognition of the legitimacy of the other party, and commitment to job security. A well-known example is the deal between Tesco and USDAW, which was initiated in 1998 and was renewed in July 2022 with a widening of systems of employee consultation and increased facilities for trade union representatives.

Other early examples included water utilities, and partnership deals operating in several parts of the public sector, such as Royal Wolverhampton NHS Trust and Falkirk Council. As noted above, partnership is endorsed by the Scottish and Welsh governments; one study within the NHS found that the practice could help to modernise industrial relations and improve service delivery, though the effects depended on a supportive strategic approach and was far from automatic.⁶⁵

A considerable body of research finds that partnership can offer genuine mutual gains.⁶⁶ A good example is a longitudinal study of an engineering company, which found that the deal increased the firm's capacity for change.⁶⁷ A study of an aluminium smelter found close union involvement in the introduction of team working, which in turn contributed to reduced absenteeism and increased labour productivity (Wright and Edwards, 1998).⁶⁸ ⁶⁹ Other studies report benefits for workers including improved skills and job quality and for unions, such as strengthened organisation and also influence on management.⁷⁰ Critics argue that there is a 'dark side' involving work intensification and stress and that partnership can be a veil to undermine independent union voice.⁷¹

There is, in short, no clear evidence that unions generally tend to reduce innovation and productivity. That they can do so in certain circumstances reflects unions' interaction with many other factors rather than being an inherent characteristic of unions.

What is the role of unions in strikes?

Strikes tend to hit the headlines but they are rare and their causes are complex. The Office for National Statistics reports trends since 1891, being careful to call the measure 'industrial disputes' rather than 'strikes', for disputes involve parties in disagreement, not unilateral

⁶⁵ Bacon, N., and P. Samuel. 2017. 'Social Partnership and Political Devolution in the NHS', *Work, Employment and Society*, 31: 123-41.

⁶⁶ Johnstone, S. 2015. 'The Case for Workplace Partnership', in S. Johnstone and P. Ackers, eds, *Finding a Voice at Work?* Oxford: OUP.

⁶⁷ Butler-Pogorzelszyk, P. and O. Tregaskis. 2018. 'Distributed Leadership and Employee Cynicism', *Human Resource Management Journal*, 28: 540-52.

⁶⁸ Wright, M. and P. Edwards. 1998. 'Does Teamworking Work, and If so, Why?' *Economic and Industrial Democracy*, 19: 59-90.

⁶⁹ This smelter, at Lynemouth, was owned at the time by the MNC Alcan. Its new owners, Rio Tinto, subsequently closed it in 2012. A correlation with strong union presence might be observed, but the closure has been attributed to energy costs and the strategic choices of Rio Tinto, and not union behaviour: Merlin-Jones, D. 2012. 'The Closure of the Lynemouth Aluminium Smelter. London: Civitas. https://www.civitas.org.uk/reports_articles/the-closure-of-the-lynemouth-aluminium-smelter-an-analysis/

⁷⁰ Heery, E. 2016. *Framing Work*. Oxford: OUP: 115-16.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 120.

action. Disputes have become increasingly rare since the 1970s. The peak number of separate incidents recorded was 3946 in 1970; by 2018 this number had fallen to a mere 81. A common measure of the impact of disputes is 'working days lost', that is, the number of workers involved together with the length of disputes. In 2019, this number was 234,000, which compares with more than 20 million in each of three years in the past (1972, 1979, and 1984). The 2019 figure equates to about 10 days per 1000 people employed. By comparison, the HSE puts days lost due to work-related ill-health and injuries at 36.8 million days a year. Data were not collected during the Covid pandemic, but recent data show a total of just over 3 million days lost between June 2022 and February 2023.⁷²

Strikes are, as noted above, increasingly regulated by the law. During the 1980s, laws were passed requiring secret postal balloting before industrial action could take place. Six separate laws also narrowed the definition of a lawful trade dispute. The most recent law, the Trade Union Act 2016, increased the period of notice to the employer from 7 to 14 days, and strengthened balloting requirements to demand a 50% turnout, with a further restriction of a 40% 'yes' vote in 'important public services'.⁷³ At the time of writing (April 2023) the Government was sponsoring a bill requiring the maintenance of minimum service levels in certain public services, with failure to meet these levels leaving unions open to be sued for damages and members losing protection against dismissal.

Extensive research on the effects of the law suggests several conclusions.⁷⁴ Firstly, the overall fall in strikes reflected the decline of industries with a high strike record, notably coal but also motor vehicles and the docks, and also economic recession and a generally more assertive style of management. Secondly, when disputes did emerge to a level where a strike might be called, unions could variously: use a ballot to signal to workers that there was little support for a strike; or use it to show support. A ballot could signal to an employer the seriousness of workers' intentions and lead to further bargaining, and not necessarily sustain a strike. Lyddon argues that the 2016 Act encouraged unions to mobilise their members so that they won more, and not fewer, votes⁷⁵. Thirdly, in general unions have learned to live with the law. They are often reluctant to strike, with a strike being a last resort.

It is also worth stressing that several strikes emerge from specific discontent among workers, with unions sometimes having to catch up rather than leading the action. Examples include several disputes at airports, such as a baggage handlers' dispute at Heathrow (BBC News 4/4/2022; *Daily Telegraph* 19/7/2022) and in airlines.⁷⁶ There is also evidence that strikes can lead to unionisation rather than being merely a result of union behaviour.⁷⁷ As the strikes of 2022 illustrate, taking industrial action is often fuelled by a sense of unfairness, whether in relation to pay or other aspects of employment. Workers do not engage in them lightly. The first UK strike at McDonald's in 2017 has been seen as a reaction against 'flexible discipline', that is arbitrary cuts in hours as an informal managerial sanction against workers.⁷⁸

⁷² Office for National Statistics. 2023. 'The Impact of Strikes in the UK, June 2022 - February 2023'. www.ons.gov.uk, people in work.

⁷³ Lyddon, D. 2021. 'Strike Ballots under the 2016 Trade Union Act', *Industrial Relations Journal*, 52: 479-501.

⁷⁴ Elgar, J. and R. Simpson. 2017. 'The Impact of the Law on Industrial Disputes Revisited', *Industrial Law Journal*, 46: 6-22.

⁷⁵ Lyddon, *op. cit.*

⁷⁶ Taylor, P. and S. Moore. 2019. *Cabin Crew Conflict*. London: Pluto.

⁷⁷ Hodder., A., M. Williams, J. Kelly and N. McCarthy. 2017. 'Does Strike Action Stimulate Trade Union Membership Growth?' *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 55: 165-86.

⁷⁸ Wood, A. J. 2020. 'Beyond Mobilization @ McDonald's', *Capital and Class*, 44: 493-502.

Whether or not specific instances of industrial action require legal regulation is a political judgment. But such regulation needs to be considered in relation to the underlying causes of strikes, not immediate symptoms.

Conclusions

Trade unions in Britain are undoubtedly weaker than they were in the past, in both the economic and political spheres. Their ability to affect pay and working conditions has declined as a result. But there is evidence that they can still influence the structure of pay and other workplace matters such as discipline. In some organisations, partnership arrangements with management continue to function. There is also evidence of underlying worker discontent, be it over the intensity of work, work-life balance or pay and reward, which could promote unionisation.

Some observers see benefits. The management consultancy PWC argued that unions can build on what it termed employee activism, in sectors such as the gig economy, while also advising unionised firms to strengthen links with unions, for example in areas such as health and safety.⁷⁹ The OECD addressed a central role of unions, collective bargaining, and concluded that bargaining and worker voice are ‘important and flexible instruments’ that should be used to address challenges in the world of work.⁸⁰ Yet the challenge of overturning more than 40 years of decline is evident.

Increasing levels of employment and reducing inequality are common political goals. Unions can in principle contribute to the achievement of both. A review across several countries concludes that ‘strong, incorporated unions and co-ordinated bargaining are associated with optimal combinations of high employment and lower inequality’.⁸¹ Whether or not the conditions are in place in the UK to secure such a combination remains an open, and contested, question.

About the authors

This ReWAGE information paper was authored for ReWAGE by Paul Edwards and Edmund Heery (Emeritus Professors of Employment Relations at Birmingham Business School and Cardiff Business School respectively) together with Damian Grimshaw (Professor of Employment Studies, King’s Business School, University of London). Comments were provided by Gill Dix (formerly Head of Workplace Policy at ACAS).

This paper represents the views of the authors based on the available research. It is not intended to represent the views of all ReWAGE members.

About ReWAGE

ReWAGE is an independent expert advisory group modelled on SAGE that is co-chaired by the Universities of Warwick and Leeds. It analyses the latest work and employment research

⁷⁹ PWC. n.d. ‘Trade Unions in the Post-pandemic Workplace’. [pwc.co.uk/services/human-resource-services/human-resource-management](https://www.pwc.co.uk/services/human-resource-services/human-resource-management).

⁸⁰ OECD, *op. cit.*, 13.

⁸¹ Crouch, C. 2017:58-9. ‘Membership Density and Trade Union Power’, *Transfer*, 23: 47-61.

to advise the government on addressing the challenges facing the UK's productivity and prosperity, such as Covid-19, the cost-of-living crisis and labour shortages.

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