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# **British Trade Unions since 1933**

*Prepared for the Economic History Society by*

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# Chapter 1

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## Introduction

In Britain both the fortunes and the public standing of the trade unions fluctuated markedly in the final two-thirds of the twentieth century. The trade unions gained much kudos in the 1940s for their role in helping to mobilise the British economy for war and for post-war economic recovery. Thereafter, as the British economy performed relatively poorly among industrialised nations, the trade unions received much blame for numerous economic ‘British diseases’, including a proneness to strike and low productivity.

Other than during the First and Second World Wars and their immediate aftermaths, British industrial relations, from at least the late nineteenth century to the 1970s, were based primarily on a willingness of employers and working people’s representatives to settle differences on a voluntary basis. The two world wars boosted the spread of collective bargaining and, especially, national collective bargaining. Where major industrial confrontations occurred, or seemed likely, the government (through the Board of Trade, the Ministry of Labour and its successors) could intervene, if both parties were agreeable, and offer suggested solutions to disputes. Such action was authorised under the Conciliation Act, 1896 and the Industrial Courts Act, 1919. Compared with other countries, Britain’s peacetime system of industrial relations until the 1970s was untrammelled by legal constraints, the Trade Disputes Act, 1906 having given trade unions immunity from legal actions for damages and strengthened their rights to peaceful picketing.

The British trade union movement, which had been steeped in Liberalism until the late nineteenth century and beyond, was overwhelmingly against interference with free collective bargaining. For its leaders this was a principle clearly won through past struggles

and on a par with free speech in a free society. In contrast, for at least three decades after the Second World War, they advocated planning in the economy other than in the labour market. Free market economists and many Conservatives argued for the opposite: no interference with private enterprise but restrictions on trade unionism (on the grounds of it being an impediment to free market forces).

Political arguments concerning trade unionism in Britain, as in many other countries, were coloured by the unions' role in politics. The Trades Union Congress (TUC) had set up the Labour Party (or, to be precise, its predecessor, the Labour Representation Committee) in 1900. Before the First World War over 95 per cent of Labour Party members were affiliated through the trade unions, there being then no direct individual members. The trade unions provided the bulk of the Labour Party's finances then and later, especially before the mid-1990s. For instance, in 1990 trade union affiliation fees provided two-thirds of the party's regular annual income. Not surprisingly, the role of the trade unions in industrial relations was a major issue in British politics for much of the twentieth century.

Renewed criticism of the trade unions was particularly notable from the early to mid-1950s, a period when there were growing anxieties about inflation and Britain's competitiveness as a trading nation as well as about strikes. By the 1960s both the Conservative and Labour Parties were proposing political solutions to deal with industrial relations problems which, explicitly or implicitly, centred on trade unionism. The 'trade union issue' remained prominent until the mid-1990s; by which time adverse economic conditions, reinforced by legislation and more generally by a political climate hostile to the trade unions, had considerably weakened trade unionism. Moreover, Tony Blair, the leader of the Labour Party (from 1994) and Prime Minister (from 1997), took pains to distance the Labour Party from the TUC and the trade unions (though the Labour Party remained more sympathetic to many trade union concerns than the Conservatives).

There were also other types of criticism of the trade unions. In the radical ethos of the 1960s and early 1970s their position was often ambiguous. While many trade union leaders and activists readily marched for peace in Vietnam, on behalf of Biafra in the war

in Nigeria, for civil rights in Northern Ireland, against apartheid in South Africa and the Smith regime in Rhodesia, for CND and Amnesty International as well as other causes of the time, the trade unions collectively appeared male dominated, old-fashioned, even bricks in the wall of the British establishment. The ambiguity lay in the fact that, not surprisingly, trade unions defended jobs in the arms industries, in nuclear power and in producing exports to many (but not all) unsavoury regimes. Moreover, the unions were conspicuously poor on gender and ethnic issues and in appealing to youth.

In the 1960s there were several trade union moves to appeal beyond materialism. One revealing episode concerned the arts. Here again, in an example of the ambiguity of the trade unions as radical or conservative (with a small 'c') bodies, support for radical theatre and films had been a past feature of British socialism, the British co-operative movement, mining and other working-class communities. At the 1960 TUC the General Council suffered a defeat when delegates voted in favour of a motion (number 42 on the agenda) moved by the Association of Cinematograph, Television and Allied Technicians (ACTT) and seconded by the National Union of Mineworkers:

Congress recognises the importance of the arts in the life of the community, especially now when many unions are securing a shorter working week and greater leisure time for their members. It notes that the trade union movement has participated to only a small extent in the direct promotion and encouragement of plays, films, music, literature and other forms of expression, including those of value to its beliefs and principles. Congress considers that much more could be done.

(Trade Union Congress, *Report 1960*, 435)

The impetus for this motion came from the playwright Arnold Wesker. After its success Centre 42 (1961–70) evolved from Wesker's discussions with other intellectuals including Shelagh Delaney, Clive Exton, Bernard Kops and Doris Lessing. At the 1961 TUC an ACTT delegate said of Centre 42 that it was

a voluntary alliance of artists in the field of music, drama, cinema, art and literature. Its aim is to narrow the gap between the artists and the public and to stimulate cultural and artistic activities in the closest association with the trade unions. It hopes to create a permanent centre in London,

but equally it intends to duplicate its work in the provincial centres. It is already working in the closest association with a number of trades councils in the organisation of local festivals of art and labour.

(Trade Union Congress, *Report 1961*, 453)

In 1961 a four-day festival of the arts was organised by Wellingborough Trades Council at a cost of £500. In 1962 festival weeks were backed by trades councils in Birmingham, Bristol, Hayes, Leicester, Nottingham and Wellingborough, at a cost of some £50,000 (Wesker, 1970).

The enthusiasm for Centre 42 came from the trades councils, with a few trade union leaders being active supporters. The General Council of the TUC collectively resisted such moves, arguing that there were other sources of support for the arts (notably the state, local government and voluntary bodies), that the trade unions already backed the Workers' Education Association and that (rightly) it would prove to be very costly. A closer look at the views of some of the TUC supporters of motion 42 reveals that some were motivated to hold back the tide of the rock and roll and 'Yankee films' by offering arts and culture to young people. W. Whitehead of the South Wales miners declared:

We are not satisfied in South Wales . . . that culture and art mean rock 'n' roll, the sorcerer's window, *Yogi Bear*, and *Rawhide*, with bluinite detergent. I think . . . our heritage is William Morris, Shakespeare, Shaw and, in the field of music, Vaughn Williams and today Benjamin Britten.

A delegate from the Transport Salaried Staff's Association denounced the flood of 'glossy backed publications with lurid covers . . . of sex and violence' and more generally the 'overwhelming glut of distorted degradation' (Trade Union Congress, *Report 1960*, 438). Clearly, for some, culture was something of a rearguard action against American commercialism.

Centre 42 itself was criticised by more radical cultural groups later in the 1960s for taking culture to the workers in an elitist manner. There was less criticism of much of later union sponsorship of political plays in the 1970s and after. For example, the Transport and General Workers' Union sponsored *The Non-Stop Connolly Show* in Dublin, London and elsewhere in 1975. The Amalgamated Union of Engineering Workers and its white-collar associate, Technical and Supervisory Section (TASS) were linked to *Happy Robots*, a



play concerning automation at work which was put on in 1973 by Red Ladder (Itzin, 1980).

The early enthusiasm for Centre 42 was centred on trades councils, which by the later decades of the twentieth century were the recognised local subsidiaries of the TUC. The local trade union activists who were delegates to these bodies often put in long hours promoting trade unionism, providing trade union inputs into a range of local matters from allotments committees to community relations councils and supporting various demonstrations. While the tabloid press made much of 'wicked NUPE (National Union of Public Employees) shop stewards' during the 'winter of discontent, 1979', at the local level there was often much respect for them, especially for overworked nurses who campaigned for better funding of the National Health Service and backed the several TUC sponsored People's Marches for Jobs.

In the 1980s, as in the 1930s, trade union activism often proved self-sacrificing. In economic recessions employers often made shop stewards and part-time union officials redundant. In good times trade union activities involved less family and leisure time and little if any economic reward. Yet men and women took on various tasks in a belief that they were bettering their own and their colleagues' lot.

The view from the shop floor and from the office has been much less written about than the view from the TUC or the national headquarters of major unions. In surveying major issues in the literature on British trade unionism this book is mostly a national-level account.

In this short study of British trade unions in the period 1933–2000 the focus is on some major post-Second World War themes, with a chapter as a prologue on 1933–45. The make-up of trade union membership changed very markedly between the Second World War and the turn of the century, with the unions representing less industrial male workers but more women and male white-collar workers, and generally being stronger in the public than the private sector of the economy. The trade unions had to make greater efforts to provide attractive services to their members in the harsher economic and political climate after 1979. Moreover, they needed to demonstrate their members' support, and in particular for political funds and for strike action, under the legislation of 1980–1993. In

other chapters government intervention in the form of prices and incomes policies and trade union law are examined and also the controversies concerning strikes and the economic effects of trade unions.

At the start of the twenty-first century the trade unions had experienced a substantial drop in membership and had become accustomed to less influence in Whitehall and Westminster than they had enjoyed in 1946–79. Nevertheless, the trade unions remained a major force in Britain, still very substantial in size relative to, say, France and other countries. In 1933–2000, as in previous centuries, the trade unions had to adapt to changing conditions, with a different composition of their membership, and offering a differing mix of services to their members.