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Trade Unionism, Workplace, and Politics in Post-War Britain: and Inferences for Canada

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ISSUES OF SOCIAL class are probably more important in Britain than in any other comparable society. The experience of "class" is sharpest at the workplace, where labour interests are usually represented by trade unions. Why then has trade unionism appeared to be so important in the post-war period, yet also largely ineffectual, in terms of creating fundamental changes in the economic and political position of labour? The growth of shop steward organization, with a doubling of the number of workplace representatives, was dramatic in the 1960s, and with sit-ins and workplace occupations challenging the rights of capital in the early 1970s, this high profile for trade unions continued. Trade unionism appeared to be squeezing profits and hastening capitalistic crisis; and it seemed to be organizationally capable of challenging company investment, location, and production policies. These developments suggested that the contradictory nature of trade unionism, its opposition to and yet dependence upon capitalism, might create a kind of "dual power" in the workplace which eventually could replace capital's control with workers' control. During these decades workers' occupations and workers' alternative plans emerged to challenge the property rights and purposes of capitalist production. Although this clearly was a minority experience and practice it appeared nonetheless that a new, more challenging trade unionism was in the making.[1]

[1]Albert Mills calculates that there were 102 occupations from July 1971 to March 1974. *Workers Occupations*, North East Trade Union Studies and Information Unit, 1976. Ken

Union growth has been checked in the 1980s. Although widespread shop steward organization persisted during the recession, and to judge by wage levels at least remained fairly effective, union organization was clearly less important at both the national and local levels. The defeat of the National Union of Miners in the 1984-85 miners' strike perhaps marked the end of an era of union power. Yet the late 1980s witnessed something of a resurgence of union strike activity and wage militancy which illustrated that while trade unionism might be in decline, it has not been rendered totally ineffectual either by mass unemployment or the government's changes in employment law.

These developments indicate what many observers have been arguing: that, contrary to the wishes and expectations of the Thatcher Government, trade unions will not be vanquished from Great Britain, and that they will probably succeed in organizing some of the members of the "flexible workforce" and perhaps stabilize over-all membership at around 40 per cent of the total employed workforce (compared with more than 50 per cent in the 1970s).[2] Thus, there still will be a sizable "trade union movement" and an "organized working class" in Britain. But how will this "organized working class" be linked to and explained by previous working-class experiences, organizations, and practices? Also, what are the implications of this recent history for other similar labour movements, particularly that of Canada?

The Purpose and Structure of the Article

MY EDUCATIONAL WORK with trade unionists over two decades has raised a number of key issues around the above question. One of the most important is the relationship between national developments and local workplace experience. How do we interpret and understand trade unionists' experience during those 20 years? What role has workplace organization, led by shop stewards, played in the development of trade unionism and post-war working-class politics? What role does (or should) union organization play in sustaining and developing workplace unionism? What conclusions can we draw about the aims, purposes, limits, and possibilities of union workplace organization, and how do they relate to the contradictory nature of trade unionism? More generally, and leading on from the specific analysis which forms the core of this research, what is the future role of workplace trade unionism in a democratic economy and society?

Coates argues that occupations in the 1970s involved "hundreds of thousands" and those who contributed financially to support them "millions." *Workins, Sitins and Industrial Democracy*, (Nottingham 1981), 12.

[2]E. Batstone, *Working Order* (Oxford 1984). M. Terry, "How Do We Know If Shop Stewards Are Getting Weaker," *British Journal of Industrial Relations* (1986). J. MacInnes, *Thatcherism At Work* (Oxford 1987). J. Kelly, *Trade Unions and Socialist Politics* (London 1988).

The purposes of this study are thus to address these questions, by way of reviewing the established literature, and to analyze the place traditionally assigned to workplace trade unionism within the structure of industrial relations in Britain.

This article is divided into two main parts. The first is a brief history of the post-war years beginning with the emergence of shopfloor power (from the war to the early 1960s, spanning Labour Governments from 1945 to 1951 and that of the Conservatives from 1951). The discussion briefly introduces the economic concerns of the early 1960s (the rise of inflation and slow growth) and, from 1964, the responses of the Labour Governments of Harold Wilson to organized labour. A longer section explores the crucial period after the Donovan Report, when pluralist approaches to industrial relations were influential, and the demands of workplace trade unionism appeared so important (1968 to 1979, covering the Wilson Government of the late 1960s, the Edward Heath Conservative Government of 1970 to 1974, and the Wilson/Callaghan Labour governments of 1974 to 1979). Next comes the break with consensus politics and overt state coercion of trade union activity associated with the Thatcher governments of the 1980s. The final section highlights the position of white collar workers, women, and black workers.

The second part of the article is devoted to the debate surrounding the interpretation of this experience, and considers a number of key questions about union or class consciousness, bureaucratization, sectionalism, and some specific questions about workplace union organization. It concludes by examining the questions "Is trade unionism in Britain in inevitable decline," and "do trade unionists in Canada have anything to learn from the British experience?"

This article will argue that if British trade unions are to become either agents of change or intermediaries in a process of progressive change, then they will have to break free from depending on a predominantly "conservative" labourism. If unions can redirect their attention to the restructuring of work and society, and recreate a syndicalist vision of workers self-management, an impetus for change can emerge.

1. Post-War Trade Unionism in Britain

UNIONS ARE THE ONLY ORGANIZATIONS in Britain which truly can claim the mass membership of working people. Union organization at the local and national levels is capable of industrial action which can disrupt companies, industries, services, and even on occasion, the state. Most union members may regard themselves simply as card-carriers with no specific loyalty to their organizations, but time and again, members react as trade unionists. Unions also express collectivist values in opposition to the more individualist ideas of modern capitalist society. It is the existence of this collectivist ideology, together with these moments of action (relatively rare though they may be), which expresses the central political importance of trade unionism, and explains the continuing attention of political analysts whether on the left or the right.

Some of these issues have been part of the analysis of trade unions from the outset. For example, Marx and Engels in their early writing considered unions to be agents of change — a kind of socialist training ground for the working class. Later, they and other writers cast doubt on this potential and tended to be more dismissive of the union challenge.[3] Furthermore, despite the extensive discussion and analysis of the position of trade unions within capitalism, much of this theoretical writing has led to an overly-deterministic and static view of trade unionism and has underplayed, even ignored, workplace unionism and the import-ance of individual and collective human "intervention" in the historical process.

No one would doubt the importance of the post-war years for understanding the nature and development of the British trade union movement. This opens the possibility of new perspectives and analysis, and central to this must be an evaluation of the role of the relatively modern phenomenon of specifically work-place trade unionism.

The Emergence of Shopfloor Power

THE WARTIME PERIOD is generally considered to have been one of consensus, of British society pulling together to defeat the common enemy. For workers at home this was not always so clear-cut: some were directed away from home and found their labour exploited by war contractors. The official statistics record little unemployment, but some workers did endure periods of joblessness and social abuse for not contributing to the war effort. Others worked on contracts which were starved of proper resources, and engaged in protest over working arrangements. Some groups of workers with local bargaining power (because of the war) used it to improve terms and conditions in spite of strikes being declared illegal. At an organizational level, workers in different sites and work-places made contacts and sat on production committees (later "consultative committees"); workers' confi-dence was built, and managerial (and ministerial) decision-making were chal-lenged.[4]

The continuity between production committees, "consultative committees," and, later, post-war site bargaining, may have been overstated by early commen-

[3]For a discussion of the issues raised in this paragraph, see R. Hyman, *Marxism and the Sociology of Trade Unionism* (London 1971).

[4]These comments are partly based on my father's records. He experienced both unemploy-ment and social abuse (on one occasion being set upon by an old lady swinging her handbag demanding to know why he was not "at the front"). He also took part in protest stoppages at Kirkby munitions depot and slept in the bed being installed for the Duke of York during one all-night "sit-in" strike on board a ship. For a discussion of wartime black experience see M. Sherwood, *Many Struggles: West Indian Workers and Service Personnel in Britain 1939-45)* (London 1985). Strikes and shop steward activity are discussed in G. Brown, *Sabotage: A Study of Industrial Conflict* (Nottingham 1977) and in R. Croucher, *Engineers at War* (London 1982).

tators,[5] but the example of workers challenging management authority was certainly a stimulus to plant-level negotiation. The ideas that life would be different after the war, and that mass unemployment and the workhouse would be gone forever, were linked to the importance of everyone contributing to win the war. For some spokespersons of industry and commerce and for some in the Conservative Party, this post-war concern about workers may have been mere rhetoric, but there was sufficient general concern to provide large-scale support for the consensus politics of Beveridge and Keynes, namely for an expanded welfare state and full employment.[6]

The British Labour Party, founded and supported by the trade unions, formed its first majority government in 1945, but the Labour Party's vision of support and protection "from the cradle to the grave" did not provide a leading role for ordinary trade unionists in the new society, for it did not seek to establish effective workers' control. When Aneurian (Nye) Bevan, a standard-bearer for the left and the Minister responsible for introducing the National Health Service, talked about problems in the mines after nationalization, he lectured the miners on the need to increase production, and about their failure to see how their status had changed, meanwhile, from worker to owner. He did not address himself to the changes required to introduce a worker-controlled structure for the industry.[7] Harold Wilson, Board of Trade president while still a young MP, challenged those trade unionists who questioned the continuation of management under the new National

[5]H.A. Clegg, *The System of Industrial Relations in Great Britain* (Oxford 1970). J. Goodman, T. Whittingham, *Shop Stewards in British Industry* (London 1969).

[6]Keynesian policies were pursued on both sides of the Atlantic. Roosevelt's New Deal required a response from the Western Allies of expansionist policies: dollars to beat the dole-queues and the appeal of Soviet collectivism. H. McMillan could not be counted amongst these Tories; he published *The Middle Way* (London 1938) — a study which illustrated his early commitment to corporatism/consensus politics.

[7]There was support amongst the Labour left for workers' control [R. Miliband, *Parliamentary Socialism* (London 1962), Ch. 9], but it failed to translate into party policy; what is striking is how the statements made in office of Nye Bevan, for example, are indistinguishable on this question from the Fabians. Bevan's *In Place of Fear* (1952) restates this position: "The advance from state ownership to full socialism is in direct proportion to the extent the workers in the nationalized sector are made aware of a changed relationship between themselves and the management. The persistence of a sense of dualism in a publicly owned industry is evidence of an immature industrial democracy. It means that emotionally the "management" is still associated with the conception of alien ownership, and the "workers" are still "hands." Until we make the cross-over to a spirit of co-operation, the latent energies of democratic participation cannot be fully released..." Not once in his chapter "The Transition to Socialism "does he discuss structures for workers' control of public industry; by his definition, socialist industry is nationalization plus accountability to Parliament. See G. Foote, *The Labour Party's Political Thought* (London 1986), 277: "[Bevan] remained trapped in the confines of corporate socialism. He was not really interested in the demands for direct management by producers."

Coal Board to name the trade unionists who were ready to manage the industry. He never viewed the creation of a democratic worker-controlled structure for industry as a priority for the Labour government.[8]

The Labour government's approach to managing the economy was corporatist, influenced by Fabian thinking. It favoured publicly-owned enterprise run by experts with union cooperation in economic management. The Labour government's voluntary wages policy collapsed in the immediate post-war years when faced with action in support of wage demands in some of the older as well as the newer industries. Agreement with the Trades Union Congress (TUC) and national union leaders did not insulate the government from workplace trade union demands. The massive vote for the Labour Party in 1950 and 1951 (more voted Labour than in 1945, although seats were lost) went hand-in-hand with demands for improved pay and conditions.

This conflict between wage and salary demands and government attempts to control incomes in pursuit of increased profitability (and in turn investment and growth) became a recurring post-war theme. It illustrated both the frailty and complexity of the link between the party and unions, as well as the limitations of post-war "labourism," which sought to meet workers' demands by seeking reforms within capitalism. This often led Labour governments to seek union cooperation to limit pay claims as the preferred method of funding industrial reinvestment. An alternative view might emphasize that the Labour leadership saw its role as introducing democratic socialism through parliamentary reforms, which although a compromise with capital did have benefits for workers.[9]

Labour governments could strike deals at the national level, but over time immediate trade-union membership demands, articulated through growing shop steward activity, reasserted themselves. In many cases shopfloor workers pushed national union leaderships to give official support to the claims.[10] From the late 1940s to the early 1960s, this pressure from below did not prevent some union leaders from denouncing lay officials, or from trying to break steward control in the docks, shipbuilding, and the motor trade (as shown by the break-up of the powerful Ford Dagenham combine shop steward committee in 1960).

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, in response to economic conditions and labour shortages, shop steward organization and power grew not only in these traditional industries, but also in the engineering and newer manufacturing industries. Although trade union concerns were sectional and focused mainly on pay and conditions, the growth of labour organization nevertheless was increasingly seen

[8]W. Brown, the GEC Liverpool convenor, retells this story. Wilson was his MP after the war. B. Spencer, "Workers' Take-Over," *Political Quarterly*, 43 (1972).

[9]A. Crosland, *The Future of Socialism* (London 1956).

[10]J. Hinton, *Labour and Socialism* (London 1983).

to threaten managerial power and, later, economic recovery.[11] However, no major political initiatives were taken to restrict the growth of local trade unionism, although limits to public sector trade unionism and ballots before strikes were considered both by Labour and Conservative governments from the late 1940s to the early 1960s.

At the national level, the government's links with trade union leaders and their involvement in government policies of industrial reconstruction were considered sufficient to curb national pay demands. In the 1950s and 1960s, Conservative as well as Labour governments believed, that direct political attacks on trade union rights would upset the implicit consensus on industrial relations. For example, the 1946 Fair Wages Resolution and Wages Council legislation were complemented by the 1959 Contracts of Employment Act, and later by union involvement in the National Economic Development Council (NEDC). The latter emphasized the importance of maintaining a consensus through trade union support.

The Early 1960s and the Emergence of Inflation

DESPITE THIS CONSENSUAL VIEW, workplace trade union rights were curbed by the courts. In the 1964 *Rookes* v *Barnard* case, judges attempted to curtail the scope of industrial action undertaken by workplace trade unionists and were to repeat the attempt in a number of other cases during the late 1960s (for example, *Torquay Hotels* v *Cousins* in 1969). The judicial response signalled what was to come in the late 1960s and early 1970s in proposed and enacted legislation designed to curb trade union power and reduce the legal rights of trade unionists.[12]

The industrial policy of the 1964 Labour government envisioned trade union involvement in economic management: witness the 1964 Joint Declaration of Intent on Productivity, Wages, Output and Prices, signed by the government, the TUC, and representatives of the Federation of British Industries (later merged into the Confederation of British Industry — CBI). But this policy did not seek to promote shopfloor organization. The 1965 Trade Disputes Act dealt only narrowly with the *Rookes* v *Barnard* judgement and did not seek to extend the scope for industrial action or greater workplace union rights.

The concern of the government to modernize industry — "the white heat of the technological revolution," as Harold Wilson expressed it — together with "indicative" National Plans,[13] led to some improvements in working conditions,

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[11]One analysis of workplace strike activity concluded that only one quarter of strikes were concerned directly with pay (compared with two-thirds before the war), and the majority were about the "use" of labour-control issues. Turner, *Trend of Strikes* (Leeds 1963).

[12]These cases marked out the areas of law which could be changed by statute — for instance, secondary action. See also Inns of Court Conservative Society, *A Giant's Strength* (London 1958).

[13]The National Plan laid down guidelines on objectives to be achieved through industry committees of NEDC, but it had no mechanism to achieve this planning (that is, actual government intervention in companies' activities). Hence, "indicative," not actual.

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but not in radical change in Britain's economy, or in labour's socioeconomic position. The government, restricted by the international role of sterling, found it impossible to break out of the cycle of "stop-go" policies, and increasingly blamed the wage demands of shopfloor trade unionists for its own failures.[14] "Wildcat" strikes, "restrictive practices," and "unearned" wage demands all were alleged to contribute to the "problem" of industrial relations.

The dominant view that inflation was caused by "cost push" led to demands for a wages policy and to the "scapegoating" of trade unions. In the 1966 Seamen's Strike, for example, Wilson denounced those involved "as a tightly-knit group of politically motivated men," rather than seeing them as a group of workers with legitimate grievances. Wage restraint became a major plank of Labour government policy; productivity agreements were championed as a way of funding industry while simultaneously recognizing the power of shopfloor organization to maintain real incomes above any nationally agreed-upon pay levels.

1968 to 1979: Donovan and the period of pluralism

THE LABOUR GOVERNMENT considered legal sanctions as a means of restricting strikes and other "disruptive" action. The Government had no quarrel with national trade union leaders, but felt compelled to curb the growth of shopfloor power and considered that such action might strengthen national union leaders' control over their more-militant members.

The Donovan Commission, set up in 1965, reported in 1968 but did not recommend legal sanctions against "unofficial" action. However, the government was so wedded to its original position that the minister responsible, Barbara Castle, produced a White Paper, "In Place of Strife," calling for ballots before strike action. This split both the Labour Party and the Parliamentary Labour Party, and was

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[14]The Labour government believed it could achieve growth by using Keynesian demand-management policies. The intent was to run a budget deficit to boost domestic demand and stimulate confidence in industry; supply is slower to respond, and in practice the increased demand would first push up prices and attract imports. This could be tolerated for a while, but just as the results in terms of investment and increased production were beginning to show, an unfavourable balance of payments would cause a run on the pound, interest rates would be pushed up to defend sterling, and the domestic-investment side would stall. The structural problems facing Western countries thus were accentuated in the UK because of the international role of sterling. The resulting price increases were followed by wage demands, and the end result was an inflated but not an expanded economy. Labour governments would have liked to "prevent" the international speculators and wished industry had invested sooner (Wilson complained of both the "Gnomes of Zurich" and the "strike of capital"), but in practice could act only to keep wages down. For one discussion of how to move in the direction of democratic socialist planning, see S. Holland, ed., *Beyond Capitalist Planning* (Oxford 1978). For an interesting representation of workers' consciousness during this period, see the character Arthur Seaton in Allan Sillitoe's novel *Saturday Night, Sunday Morning*.

withdrawn at the insistence of the Trades Union Congress in exchange for a TUC statement of intent to monitor trade union activity.

Why did the Donovan Commission not support the politicians' view that further constraints needed to be placed on unions? Those involved in the Commission's work had a much clearer picture than the Government of what was happening in industry. Academic research had begun to monitor workplace industrial relations; indeed "industrial relations" was beginning to be accepted as an academic discipline. The growth of shopfloor organization and bargaining had been documented in the automobile industry and elsewhere, and the Esso Fawley productivity agreements (1960-1968) were being analyzed.[15] The quality of the new research was demonstrated in the Commission's research papers. Many of them rejected a "unitarist" framework for understanding industrial relations (managers and workers working for the same ends) which was explicitly accepted or implied in many Labour and Conservative politicians' speeches. It was replaced by a "pluralist" view of workplace relations, which accepted the different goals of the parties to industrial relations and therefore recognized a legitimate role for trade union shopfloor organization.[16]

The Donovan Commission merely may have been expressing what was happening in industry, services, and offices, but it was important in legitimizing these developments, and was influential in providing the framework for understanding workplace industrial relations in the 1970s and in giving legislative support to workplace trade union organization after 1974.

The political debate on the Commission's report centred on legal restrictions on unions. The report also provided an opportunity for radicals in the trade unions and the Labour Party to rethink their attitude toward shopfloor trade unionism, and to consider the role the new workplace organizations could play in transforming work and society. The decentralized bargaining practices described by Donovan led, naturally, to political pressure for more institutional and "incorporatist" structures, such as drawing shop stewards into formal written agreements and procedures. It could have provoked, but did not, an explosion of interest in workers' control from the shopfloor upwards, and so would have supported the 1967 Labour Party report on Industrial Democracy. But instead there was a reaffirmation of the Labour leadership (and trade union) commitment to Fabian state collectivism and bureaucratic control, rather than the emergence of a radical vision of decentralized workers' self-management, which might have vied with, or even replaced, the received ideology of the Labour establishment.

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[15]A. Flanders, *The Fawley Productivity Agreements* (London 1964). A. Marsh, *Industrial Relations in Engineering* (London 1965).
[16]See A. Flanders, *Management and Unions, The Theory and Reform of Industrial Relations* (London 1970). For a critical discussion of the pluralist model of industrial relations, see A. Fox, *A Sociology of Work in Industry* (London 1971).

The Donovan Report strongly supported a pluralist view of industrial relations, recognizing the legitimacy of trade union organization and opposition. It accepted that conflicts of interest exist both within society and industry, and that such oppositional views are entirely legitimate within a democratic pluralist system. At the same time, it argued for more accommodation, conciliation, and arbitration — that is, for controlled and regulated conflict. The report not only reflected what its authors saw happening within companies — the growing recognition of work-place union representatives — but also reflected and anticipated changes within the unions themselves.[17]

A specific example of these changes occurred in 1968 when Bill Carron was replaced by Hugh Scanlon as President of the Amalgamated Engineering Union (AEU). The change registered increasing support for shopfloor activists. More important, perhaps, were Jack Jones' election that same year as General Secretary of the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU), and subsequent moves to open up the union's structures to lay activists. (The shift in TGWU policy began with Frank Cousins but the main changes in organization were due to Jack Jones.) Later, unions like the National Union of Public Employees were to be restructured and, like the GMWU (now General Municipal and Boilermakers), were to become more open to activist involvement. It can be argued, too, that the extension of "services," health and safety, education, research, etc., within unions supported lay and branch activists as much as full-time officials.

In part, the shifts and changes in national union leaderships and structures were responses to greater shopfloor activity. The growth of shop-steward, joint shop-steward committees, and combine organizations all were documented in the 1960s and 1970s. Organizational change at the local level was not confined to traditional industries, but spread to the public sector, where employment and trade union membership grew rapidly, and into services and small manufacturing plants. Trade union membership had grown from just over 40 per cent of the workforce in the early 1960s to more than 50 per cent by 1970. It was estimated that 5,000 "full-time"

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[17]Clegg, Fox and Flanders (later referred to as the Oxford/Warwick School of Industrial Relations) were very involved in the Commission's work. The Commission said that if there was a "problem" of industrial relations, it lay in the failure to bring together the formal and informal aspects of industrial relations, the industry agreements, and the verbal (oral) plant agreements. It argued for more recognition of workplace trade-union organization and of workplace representatives. In evidence the TUC called, for the first time, for integration of shop stewards into unions and bargaining. It called for more emphasis on the sorting out and recording of procedures and agreements at the local level, and for "fairer" payment systems, with less room for leap-frogging and individual work-group manipulation. The report argued that fragmented workplace bargaining needed to be systematized within an agreed-upon normative system and pointed out that the danger of failing to do this would be authoritarian state regulation. Parts of the Report, emphasising more time-off and training for shop stewards to fit them for this new role, were accepted readily by Labour politicians, but this did not mark a conversion to a political role for shop floor activists.

manual shop stewards (paid by the employer but spending all their time on workplace union business) existed in 3,000 different manufacturing workplaces by the late 1970s.[18] Union organization of public sector workers heralded wage demands for low-paid manual workers, as in the "dirty jobs" strike of local authority refuse collectors in 1969, and for low-paid civil servants. However, shop steward organization was slower to develop in the public sector, particularly in the National Health Service, since the national agreements on pay left little scope for local bargaining.

The early 1970s were important, too, in radicalizing some politicians. Tony Benn, in his previous role as minister for technology, had given ministerial support to the 1967 merger of Associated Electrical Industries, English Electric, and the General Electric Company (GEC), believing that the future of British industry depended on dynamic managers (like Arnold Weinstock) and big modern industries (like electrical engineering). But workplace trade union opposition at GEC Woolwich and attempted occupations in Liverpool, together with subsequent worker resistance to closures in other industries, helped make him more sensitive to the impact of government policy on working people.[19] Benn rethought his socialist perspectives and became a champion of workers' control of industry and services, and of democratic accountability of the Parliamentary leadership to the Labour Party membership.[20] He also became the first major post-war Labour parliamentarian to argue for the necessity of extraparliamentary activity to achieve social change.

The experience of workplace trade union organization also radicalized many of those involved in it. True, many trade unionists moved in and out of activity and many others were untouched by involvement in trade union organization, but a significant minority began to question and challenge managerial authority and win improved working conditions during the 1960s and 1970s. The right to challenge local-level management on a day-to-day basis, rarely contemplated before the war, had arrived for many workers by the 1970s. The limitations of this position, however, were also becoming clearer to many trade union and Labour Party activists.

The experience of the Wilson government had left trade union members, and the working class, unaware of any "fundamental shift of wealth and power," while the Donovan analysis left trade unionists, in a sense, a permanent opposition, never

[18]W. Brown, R. Ebsworth, M. Terry, "Factors Shaping Shop Steward Organization in Britain," *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 16 (1978).

[19]See *State Intervention in Industry* (1979), produced by the Coventry, Liverpool and Newcastle Trades Councils.

[20]"In 1969 when I went up to visit the GEC plants in Liverpool, I was very much impressed... [it] drove me more rapidly in a direction... in favour of industrial democracy." Letter from Tony Benn to author, 12 October 1971. K. Coates, *Work-ins, Sit-ins and Industrial Democracy* (Nottingham 1981), 29 describes T. Benn as "profoundly influenced by the Liverpool events."

to be in control of their work or their lives. So the demand for an alternative economic strategy, involving trade unionists (through planning agreements, for example), grew in the early 1970s.[21] At the national level, the Labour Party/Trade Union Congress Liaison Committee was formed to help develop aspects of an alternative policy. Many workplace union organizations, however, remained content with relatively easily-won improvements in wages and conditions. Only a minority of activists were beginning to raise questions about workers' democratic control of industry as a central plank of policy. In 1967, for example, Jack Jones had spent some time on a Labour Party committee developing proposals for a legal framework of trade union rights specifically designed to create a basis for moves towards industrial democracy.

The new Conservative government of 1970-74 initiated a deflationary economic policy; this period saw the development of workplace "occupations," "sit-ins," and "work-ins" and an attempt to coordinate and generalize these through the Institute for Workers' Control (an organization set up in 1964 by left academics and trade unionists to promote the ideas of workers' self-management of industry). Employers' rights to close workplaces and make workers redundant were challenged, and the TUC moved to defend workers' "rights" illegally to occupy employers premises. "Days lost" defending jobs and arguments over redundancy escalated in the early 1970s. Redundancy pay was only partly successful in buying off worker resistance to closure, and union opposition, dramatically demonstrated by the workers' occupation of Upper Clyde Ship-builders, contributed considerably to turn round the Heath government's economic policies. This period of union militancy witnessed a long campaign, primarily by the Amalgamated Union of Engineering Workers, against the Conservatives' 1971 Industrial Relations Act, which involved union registration, legally binding agreements, and enforced "cooling off" periods before strike action. It also saw the brief imprisonment of five dockers (TGWU members — the "Pentonville Five") which provoked support strikes by other workers. The TUC called a general strike, although in the end this was not needed as the dockers were released after various legal expedients by the government and the courts. But not all union campaigns were won — for example, three building workers (the "Shrewsbury Three") were jailed after their 1972 strike. Nevertheless, the 1974 Miners' Strike was the direct cause of a General Election which resulted in a minority Labour government.

However, the Labour governments from 1974-79 under Wilson and Callaghan were to abandon the radical manifesto of 1974. Heffer, Meacher, and Benn were forced out of the Industry Department by Wilson, after the European Economic

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[21]For a discussion of the AES, see Conference of Socialist Economists, *The Alternative Economic Strategy*, (London 1980). For a discussion of worker plans, see H. Wainwright and D. Elliott, *The Lucas Plan* (London 1982). Labour in opposition always shifted "left" only to find the policies founder on the "realities" or managing capitalism when back in power.

Community referendum had eroded the left's influence, and the few sponsored worker co-ops made little progress. When asked later on TV why he had sacked Benn, Wilson replied, "I didn't know the harm he could do — getting shop-stewards to make industrial policy."[22]

The Labour government repealed the 1971 Industrial Relations Act, and introduced the 1974 Trade Union and Labour Relations Act and the 1975 Employment Protection Act, thereby restoring trade union rights, and promoted time-off, information disclosure, and union recognition, thus enacting some of the 1967 proposals referred to above. However, this was in exchange for a "social contract" to restrain wages and salaries. Trade union leaders, such as Scanlon and Jones, gave their support once new labour legislation was promised.[23] Wilson had considered keeping some of the legal restrictions on trade union rights, but union leaders successfully opposed this. In turn, this brought forth Wilson's famed retort to Scanlon, "Get your tanks off my lawn, Hughie."[24] Jones believed, rightly or wrongly, that such a deal would save British workers from an armed, rightwing, Chilean-type takeover. There were press reports of former army officers getting together to defend "British democracy" from the threat of union militants.[25]

An alternative view of this period is that the radical commitments of the Labour Government as expressed in the 1974 Manifesto ran up against the constraints imposed by the frailty of the British economy. The "social contract" was an attempt to gain workplace cooperation rather than attack workplace trade unionism. Trade unions enjoyed more power and influence than ever before, and even when the government had to introduce wage restraints, the form of incomes policy was negotiated with union leaders and was characterized by Jack Jones's insistence on "pounds not percentages." But the 1975 sterling crisis and the 1976 International Monetary Fund deal forced changes in policy, and radicalism was abandoned. One example of this was the government's failure to implement or even discuss seriously the Bullock Committee Report on the extension of industrial democracy.[26] This view assumes that Wilson and most Cabinet members were originally committed to the radical reformist programme of the 1974 Manifesto, but it also focuses on the structural constraints inherent in any new "bargained corporatism."

[22]Restated in Terry Coleman's interview with Harold Wilson, *Guardian*, 15 October 1976.
[23]Some commentators have argued that this period should be seen as two-parts good intentions and commitment to deliver to trade unionists, followed by a retreat forced on the Labour leadership by economic crisis resulting in the social contract. [See D. Coates, *Labour in Power?* (London 1980)]. However, the difference between the 1973 Labour Party program and the manifesto, together with the lack of commitment by Harold Wilson to reasserting union rights or an economic management different from his previous administration, suggest an alternative view.
[24]*Guardian*, 15 October 1979.
[25]J. Jones, *Union Man* (London 1988), ignores these events.
[26]Bullock Report, *Committee of Inquiry on Industrial Democracy*, Cmnd 6706, (London 1977).

Whichever view of the troubled 1974-9 Labour government is adopted, analysis nevertheless centres around its relationship with the trade union movement. But negotiations between government and union leaders did not take place in isolation from developments in workplace industrial relations which underwent considerable change during the 1970s.

Although this period is often depicted as the high point of trade union power and influence at the national level, and of workplace trade unionism at the local level, the union militancy of the Heath period of 1970-74 had in fact subsided, and the Labour government was left with little pressure from below, particularly in 1975-77. There was a growth in trade-union membership and in shopfloor organization, but workers' demands, which had appeared so important in relation to the profits squeeze,[27] jobs, and opposition to legislation, were diverted; activity centred on finding ways around pay controls, and on new areas like health and safety. The period illustrates most clearly the contradictions of labourism from a trade unionist or working-class viewpoint. The union/Labour Party link was used by a Labour government to discipline workers and restrain wage demands; in return it offered reforms which could only be delivered if the economy recovered at the expense of workers' incomes.[28]

In general, the labour movement put little pressure on the Labour government and many activists, although complaining about wage constraint, did little to formulate alternative demands, partly reflecting their own acceptance of the limits of union action and of the social democratic/reformist ideology. Many trade unionists believed that the "social contract" type of deal was a real socialist advance, a compromise, maybe, but one associated with useful social reforms. The ideas for alternative economic policies generally had not involved shop-floor trade unionists, although the example of the Lucas alternative workers' plans was available and did prompt a few responses.[29] Benn had been assigned the energy portfolio, and now invited the miners to submit plans for democratic control and management of their industry, but this approach met with no response. Leftist leaders in the industry saw it as a distraction from collective bargaining and a national plan for coal, fearing that any scheme for "involvement" in management would compromise union independence and bring accommodation with management plans. This reflected a political view that reform from within was impossible, and that therefore the role for radical unions was simple opposition.[30]

There were a few attempts to involve "workers on the board," but the potential of the Bullock committee proposals, which included promoting joint shop-steward

[27] See A. Glynn and B. Sutcliffe, *British Capitalism, Workers, and Profits Squeeze* (London 1972).

[28] See Coates, *Labour in Power*, esp. Ch. 2 and 5.

[29] At Vickers and Chrysler, H. Beynon and H. Wainwright, *The Workers' Report on Vickers* (London 1979).

[30] A. Scargill and P. Kahn, *The Myth of Workers' Control* (Leeds and Nottingham 1980).

combine committees, was never fully explored by the Labour government or the trade union movement. Many in the official union organization were worried that such a development would be outside their control. Few proposals were formulated to influence investment, location or product mix. The Lucas type of initiative was applauded but not actively supported by the new Industry Ministers. One Minister, Gerald Kaufman, said the proposals were "a refreshing change" and described the union combine as a "constructive group of trade unionists."[31] On another occasion at Lucas on Merseyside, government loans and grants were made contingent on management considering the plan, but the company was not compelled to respond.

While it can be argued that shopfloor trade unionism raised few "socialist" demands, it must also be recalled that the Labour government failed to deliver on some key trade union demands. The extension of the Ports Scheme to other smaller ports outside of the legally-recognized national agreement (which was a form of industrial democracy, giving recognition and bargaining rights to registered dockers), for example, had only lukewarm support in cabinet, was misunderstood by MPs and others in the party,[32] and was to be a crucial weakness of unionism in the Thatcher years.

The 1970s had seen a growth in unemployment but this had little impact on trade union penetration or bargaining power. When the Callaghan government (supported by some union leaders) pursued further real-wage cuts in the 1978-79 wage round in an attempt to restore company profitability and investment and restrict public spending, low paid public-sector workers revolted. They were sufficiently well-organized to force concessions from what was by now a minority Labour government. The 1979 "Winter of Discontent" saw the highest number of days lost to strikes in the post-war period; this was played up by the press, and union-government relations were shown to be fragile. Some of the more elitist sections of the Party felt the episode only demonstrated the selfish nature of the organized working class. But whichever way it is viewed, during the 1979 General Election disgruntled working-class and trade-union Labour supporters stayed away or voted Conservative, and a new and radically different government arrived. The limitations of trade union power at the national and local level were soon to be demonstrated.

State Coercion and "New Realist" Union Responses

THE THATCHER GOVERNMENT'S immediate response to economic problems was to carry forward some Labour government's policies: public spending cuts, pay curbs, and monetary restraint. The total package, however, was a more coherent ideological approach to the crisis of British capital. In particular, the Thatcher government recognized that to maintain the Keynes/Beveridge policy consensus, there would

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[31]Wainwright and Elliott, *Lucas Plan* 126-7.
[32]MP Brian Waldren voted against the proposals and later left Parliament, taking labour's national majority with him.

have to be a further shift toward state intervention which it regarded as ideologically unacceptable. Rising unemployment and inflation meant that a choice would have to be made — either more state intervention in managing the economy, or more freedom for private capital. Control of inflation was declared the only legitimate economic policy for government to follow, and control of the money supply the only legitimate economic tool. The economy had to be freed from 'excessive' public-sector demands, and from monopoly labour power in order to regenerate itself. Thus, the economy was deliberately stalled, the tax-base shifted in part from direct to indirect taxation, and the public sector restricted and progressively privatized. Union "privileges" were to be withdrawn in an attempt to restrict and "depoliticize" the trade union movement. Welfare benefits were to be cut back.

This package was presented as the "only way forward" for the British economy ("there is no alternative"), and unions were told they had to operate in this environment. The government made it clear that it would not bail out industries or intervene to settle disputes.

The logic or consistency of these policies need not concern us here. In this context, what is important is the impact they had on union organization. Unemployment rose rapidly; the government refused, not surprisingly, to yield to steelworkers (on pay and jobs) and to TUC days of protest against rising joblessness and the new employment legislation. The new situation was perhaps most clearly demonstrated in the government's resistance to civil servants' wage claims. Agreements were disregarded, arbitration was refused, and the government expended considerable resources fighting and refusing to compromise on the claims. In this harsher climate, with millions on the dole, the government claimed that it did not have to pay more to attract job applicants — it needed only to pay the "market" price.

Despite some significant protests against government policies, with public opinion swinging away from the government (opinion polls showed majority support for Labour), public support swung back again during the jingoistic Falklands war campaign which carried the government through to a second term of office in 1983.

The TUC and individual unions had been reluctant to engage with the government and felt constrained by minority support among trade unionists for the Labour opposition. The new industrial relations legislation, with its populist assumptions of "giving the unions back to the members" and "curbing excessive union power," was both more subtle and difficult to argue against than that of the previous Conservative government. As a result, the TUC General Council opted for the "new realism" of a less-oppositional or less-confrontational approach to the government.

Part of the problem for the TUC, and for the labour movement as a whole, was the success of the Thatcher government's propaganda: union members had accepted many of the arguments about union power and about there being no alternative to Tory economic policies. This message was part of the ruling idea of the time — the hegemony of capitalist ideology spelt out as "common sense." The

TUC and Labour leadership in general were neither disposed nor able to challenge the government even if they had wanted to. The "new realism" held that unions had to accept the legitimacy of the (Thatcher) government and the rule of law. Unions would have to live with the new economic and political climate, and if they showed themselves to be "responsible," they might succeed in influencing some policies, pending the return of a Labour government.

The government, for its part, showed no intention of moderating its policies. The decision to outlaw union membership at General Command Headquarters (GCHQ), a civil service-run monitoring service, despite union offers of no-strike agreements and condemnation by the International Labour Organisation (ILO), illustrated the weakness of the TUC's position. The TUC failure to support ASLEF's attempt to defend manning and working practices on the railways and to assist the NGA dispute at Warrington over union membership were not rewarded by any Government concessions at GCHQ. These public defeats set the scene for the 1984-85 confrontation with the miners.

At the workplace-level, trade union organization was failing to cope with the new political and economic environment. The heartland of post-war workplace unionism, the motor and components industry, declined from 1.2 million to 400,000 workers in ten years. Shop stewards and members were ill-prepared for the shift to more authoritarian management which emphasized employer prerogatives, contesting negotiated procedures and practices. Perhaps the most overt example of the failure of steward organization was at British Leyland and in particular the sacking of Longbridge convenor Derek Robinson.[33]

Some recent evidence has suggested that the changed conditions of the 1980s have had less impact on shop steward organization than usually has been assumed. It may be the case, also, that emphasis on the political and economic climate, together with the attention directed at the role of management in "sponsoring" and "fostering" union organization for management's own ends, has partly overshadowed the ability of workplace organization to mount resistance during the recession. There is some evidence to show that less insular, more active, "politically-aware" and involved organizations have been able to draw on organizational resources and membership support to force management to consider alternative ways of responding to market forces.[34] Nonetheless, the general view of reduced workplace union confidence predominates.

[33]This was for being co-signature to an "unofficial" union-combine pamphlet opposing the new management plans for the company and calling, if necessary, for the "blacking" of any transferred work which would enable management to close plants. This normal, indeed commendable, activity (from a union point of view) was not supported by his own union, the AUEW, under Duffy's leadership (although the TGWU did support him). Leyland Combine Committee, *The Edwardes' Plan and Your Job* (1979); also, M. Edwardes, *Back From the Brink* (London 1983).
[34]E. Batstone, *Working Order* (Oxford 1984). B. Spencer, *Remaking the Working Class?* (Nottingham 1989) Ch. 3.

The strongest challenge, particularly at the national level, to these government policies has come from public sector unions. The shift of union militancy from the private to the public sector can certainly be traced back to the 1970s, if not to the 1960s, and mainly reflects the concentration of incomes policies upon public sector workers. In the Thatcher period, this has been even more marked because of the absence of a formal incomes policy, co-existing with the reality of public-sector wage and salary restraints coupled with attacks on public services themselves. The cuts and privatization of services, together with attempts to break up established pay agreements by introducing regional differentials and incentives instead of nation-wide agreements, have brought public sector workers into the front line.[35]

The 1984-85 Miners' Strike deserves separate consideration,[36] given the important place miners occupy in working-class politics and culture, and the importance attached to their strike both it by government and the labour movement as a key to the future orientation of industrial policy. The miners' victories of 1972 and 1974 were regarded by the miners as "repayment" for their defeat in the 1926 General Strike, and gave a considerable boost to working-class and trade union confidence. The defeat of 1984-85, although remembered by many "as a heroic struggle for a just cause," had the reverse effect of very severely denting union confidence and in effect, destroying the NUM as a major element of the labour movement (membership declined precipitously from 200,000 to less than 100,000).

No doubt the government expected the defeat of the miners to discourage all other union militancy, but the activity of teachers and nurses unions in the mid-1980s and the resurgence of union militancy in 1989-90, including that ambulance crews, serves to remind us that, where grievances exist, even the least-militant trade unionists are prepared to undertake industrial action if no other course appears to be open to them.[37]

The Miners' Strike affected workers' consciousness in a number of ways. It heightened class consciousness for some, particularly those most directly involved. This resulted in the rapid growth of political affiliations in the coalfields, and was perhaps most spectacularly seen in the important role played by women during the dispute. Conversely, however, the strike also served to fragment working-class solidarity. Many miners, especially those in the large Nottingham coalfield, remained at work. Their example was followed by power workers and some steel-workers.

[35]MacInnes, *Thatcherism* 127-8.

[36]For a discussion of the issues in relation to the miners' dispute, see B. Fryer in H. Beynon, ed., *Digging Deeper* (London 1985), and J. and R. Winterton, *Coal, Crisis and Conflict* (Manchester 1989). G. Goodman, *The Miners Strike* (London 1985).

[37]K. Walsh, "Are Disputes in Decline?" *Industrial Relations Journal*, 18 (1987), points to their continuing "without any obvious signs of a fall in the overall trend." McInnes [*Thatcherism*, 108] points to Britain's "league position" rising in the early 1980s.

The defeat of the strike represented a major defeat for radical unionism and a major victory for Thatcherism. However, the setback was not absolute. The resurgence of trade union strike activity, particularly in the public sector, and the success of wage claims in the private sector, during summer 1989, indicate the persistence of trade unions as bargaining agents, although such developments also point, perhaps, to the unions' dependence for success upon the late 1980s' tighter labour markets.

White-Collar, Black, and Women Workers

THROUGHOUT THE POST-WAR PERIOD, there has been both an actual and proportional growth in white-collar and professional trade unionism. These workers with few trade union traditions have been characterized as less committed to trade union activity than manual workers. However, a number of writers have suggested that within this group lies a "new working class." They have focused on the impact of new technology, the restrictions to individual "career" or even job satisfaction within large organizations, and the role played by some white-collar workers in resisting plant closures.[38] This new working class is seen as potentially more radical than manual workers, because it is more self-conscious and ambitious in its demands, and seeks to control more and more of its working environment. It is worth noting that it is when technical and administrative staff have joined with manual workers that some of the more innovative challenges have been made to management — for example, the Lucas Combine Committee's Workers' Plans. But it is not clear whether many of these newer trade unionists see themselves as "radicals," and while there may be potential to develop increasing class consciousness, this "new working class" has not yet done so.[39] Also, in the late 1980s, the union movement has struggled to retain these groups in the face of sophisticated management techniques involving individualized benefits packages.

There has also been a growth in female membership of trade unions, accounted for in part by the shift away from manufacturing industry to the service sector. Traditionally, women members have not been aggressive negotiators over pay, and many male trade unionists regard their presence as a dilution of militancy.[40] On the other hand, women have been very active in defending jobs, be it at Lee Jeans in Greenock (1981) or in the National Health Service (NHS) fighting privatization and closure, particularly in the mid-1980s. Male workers, for example, at the Scottish motor plants, sometimes have proved to be less prepared to fight for jobs than some groups of women, thus challenging the traditional view of women as a brake on union militancy. There also is the recent example of women organizing

[38]S. Mallet, *A New Working Class* (Nottingham 1975).

[39]M. Mann, *Consciousness and Action Amongst the Western Working Class* (London 1973).

[40]This view is contradicted, of course, by the Ford "sewing Machinist" equal-pay claim, which was fought for despite some male resistance on the shopfloor. M. Stinson and B. Spencer, *Equal Pay 1968-1989* (London 1989).

during the Miners' Strike. Here, initial involvement was largely in traditional "servicing" areas — food kitchens, parcels, jumble sales — but this developed into speaking at meetings (often male-dominated), joining with other women, claiming the right to attend evening meetings and to join picket lines. Their subsequent claim for associate-member status within the NUM, although rejected, represented a challenge in the heartland of traditional male manual trade unionism.

Some unions are changing — witness the National Union of Public Employees'(NUPE) 1985 National Executive elections resulting in 11 out of 26 seats going to women, and the TUC's 1989 decision to increase the number of seats reserved for women on its General Council. There is still a long way to go, however, before male dominance in the British labour movement will be eradicated.[41] Until trade unionists become more receptive to women's demands, and more ready to accommodate women's needs, the radical potential of the unions will be limited.[42]

The population of black workers in post-war Britain also has grown. Afro-Caribbean and Asian workers have established themselves within the workforce and joined trade unions. (Union membership is proportionately higher among black workers, and although this might only reflect their concentration in unionized public-sector jobs, it also indicates a willingness to join unions.) The struggle of the largely-Asian women at Grunwick (1978), with support from miners and other mainly white male trade unionists, has been presented as an example of solidarity across racial lines. Unfortunately, Grunwick was atypical. At the shop-floor level, defensive and reactionary elements within trade unionism have served to "ghetto-ize" many black workers and to exclude them from union activity — for example, by controlling entry to some jobs and promotions.[43] Some unions have had to disassociate themselves from the racist activity of elements of their membership and have become increasingly aware that making anti-racist speeches is not enough. Within the black communities there is evidence of workers organizing themselves: the Midlands-based Indian Workers' Association encourages its members to join trade unions, and in some union branches Asian and Afro-Caribbean members have established themselves in key positions — for example, the Asian workers in the Bradford TGWU bus workers who now contest union positions between themselves.

Discriminatory practices continue at work; recent studies have illustrated how deeply embedded they are.[44] Unions are unlikely to make progress in representing

[41]B. Campbell, *Wigan Pier Revisited* (London 1984), while occasionally overstating the case, is a powerful reminder of the changes needed.
[42]For a discussion of these issues, see J. Beal, *Getting it Together* (London 1982).
[43]The Grunwick struggles remains an important event in post-war unionism: see J. Dromley and G. Taylor, *Grunwick: The Workers' Story* (London 1978); B. Spencer and A. Khan, "Discrimination in union-influenced employment recruitment," *Industrial Relations Journal*, 17 (1986).
[44]Sherwood, *Many Struggles* P. Fryer, *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain* (London 1984).

all their membership until they can organize to combat this discrimination and take seriously the demands of black workers. The British Labour leadership's agonizing over black sections is a contemporary example of the labour movement's insensitivity to such demands, as well as the dilemma posed by separatism.

2. *Understanding Post-War Trade Unionism*

THIS HISTORICAL SKETCH needs to be set against an understanding of post-war trade unionism. The examination will range across a number of issues including consciousness, bureaucratization, and sectionalism; it also will consider some specific questions raised by other case-study evidence. This will be followed by a discussion of the relative decline of trade unionism in the 1980s.

"Trade Union" or "Class" Consciousness

EARLIER, I NOTED the "optimistic" view of Marx and Engels that unions would be a training ground for class struggle. Workers, it was argued, would recognize their common aims and objectives, their class-consciousness and, through struggle, would develop their socialist consciousness and their revolutionary potential. The proletariat would become not only a class in itself but a class for itself.

The British experience since the war has had a particularly sobering effect on this view. Huw Beynon's study of the Merseyside Ford workers (regarded as amongst the most militant of British workers) showed how union consciousness, in its opposition to management authority, was more an example of "factory" rather than "class" consciousness. It extended to other workers within the plant but rarely beyond the factory gate.[45] Beynon and Nichols' later study of ICI workers looked at how workers were divided by working conditions, shift patterns, and management policies, and illustrated the divorce between union membership and union consciousness, let alone class-consciousness.[46]

Yet despite these constraints, a common route for the development of class-consciousness among workers remains union activism. Even the many setbacks since the war, and the more-recent defeats of the labour movement in the 1980s, have not prevented at least some activists from being politicized by their union activity. The Liverpool city council workers' activity in local elections, for example, arose out of their concern for jobs and resulted in increased support for socialist arguments.[47]

[45]H. Beynon, *Working for Ford* (London 1973).
[46]T. Nichols and H. Beynon, *Living with Capitalism* (London 1977). T. Nichols and P. Armstrong, *Workers Divided* (London 1976).
[47]B. Spencer, *Remaking the Working Class?* (Nottingham 1989), Ch. 4. For an interesting account of shopfloor struggle spanning the later period under discussion, and illustrating both the extent and limitations of shopfloor control and managements' counterattack, see P. Thompson and E. Bannon, *Working the System* (London 1985). (E. Bannon, now a GMB full-time official, describes himself as having been politicized by his trade union activity).

This experience of collectivism cannot be easily undone, although it would be quite inaccurate to claim that union battles, be they defeats or victories, result in socialist conversion. Unions remain essentially defensive, reactive bodies, and as such reflect dominant working-class culture. They are at their most significant as expressions of collective resistance and at their weakest as avenues for radical social change. But why should this be so?

Management Sponsorship, Incorporation, and Bureaucratization

A NUMBER OF WRITERS have suggested that the post-war growth in trade unionism (including workplace union organization) owed more to management sponsorship than to aggressive union expansionism.[48] It is argued that the 1960s and 1970s found the private and public sectors operating in a climate favourable to trade unions — a climate marked by rising prices, relatively low unemployment rates, and public support for "labourism." By and large, employers accepted that unions existed and sought to make use of them in establishing agreement and discipline at the workplace level. Consequently, agreements were reached on closed-shop arrangements and facilities for plant officials, including stewards' meetings on site. Management bargained with "their" stewards, introduced new payment systems and thereby attempted to wrest back some control over the labour process lost in the 1950s and 1960s.

This view is supported by noting how unions failed generally to negotiate on the key management prerogatives of investment, location, product mix, and plant or service closure. There is also some evidence to show that management adopted sophisticated policies to incorporate unions at the plant level and to exclude unions from corporate management decisions.[49]

This view ignores, however, some of the sources of union strength and independence. Many employers assented to union demands only after initial struggle, and adopted sponsorship or incorporatist strategies only when these appeared to be a more cost-effective option than outright opposition.[50] Secondly, once established, even a "sponsored" workplace organization can develop a broader union consciousness than management (or the official union) had intended and can initiate independent action. Sometimes this results from loyalty to a national union or labour movement struggle outside the plant. The sponsorship and incorporatist critiques of workplace unionism, therefore, should be regarded as

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[48]See R. Hyman, "The Politics of Workplace Trade Unionism," *Capital and Class* (1978); M. Terry, "Shop Steward Development and Managerial Strategies," in G. Bain, ed. *Industrial Relations in Britain* (Oxford 1983).

[49]J. Purcell, "The Management of Industrial Relations in the Modern Corporation," *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 21, (1983).

[50]W. Brown, *et al.*, "Factors Shaping shop Steward Organization in Great Britain," *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 16 (1978).

explaining only partially, at best, the experience of the 1960s and 1970s: they were important tendencies but not determinants.

A further development of the incorporatist critique of workplace unionism is the charge that lay officials at local level have been subject to "bureaucratization." This is not to suggest that they have acquired all the advantages of operating as key members of a bureaucratic organization, but rather that they tend towards accepting a bureaucratic way of operating. Unions tend to generate "processes" which can restrict spontaneity and stifle membership demands: for example, an insistence on adhering to grievance or disciplinary procedures or other written agreements when dealing with management. This tendency, supported by increasing legalism, can work against immediacy and channel grievances into the annual negotiations. Thus, officials at the local level can become just as remote as officials at higher levels. Of course, discipline is an important ingredient of effective trade unionism, but there is the danger that the means can overlook the end in emphasis and objective.

This argument has been used to suggest that today there exists "a complex system of linkages between the relatively inactive membership on the shop-floor (or office floor) and the top leadership in the TUC Economic Committee."[51] It is claimed that this explains the ability of national leaders to win membership consent for policies, such as incomes policies, which are against members' immediate interests. If this is true, it also begins to explain why the potential of "independent" or "unofficial" shop steward organization has not developed as some might have predicted. The Donovan strategy may have succeeded to some degree by encouraging more managers to institutionalise workplace unionism and even more so by getting union structures to open up to lay activists and incorporate the local leadership, thus bringing the "two systems" of industrial relations closer together. This is a complex relationship, however, and while workplace organizations can still be regarded as centres of "workers' self-activity," relatively distinct from both management and official union organization, large-scale challenges to companies, industries, and the state do seem to require support from official channels beyond the resources of an "unofficial" movement acting alone. (It is also interesting that in the recession, the phrase "wild-cat settlements" has been used to describe workplace organizations which have gone against union policy, as well as agreed-upon redundancies and job losses in return for pay rises, etc.).

Therefore, while such claims of incorporation can be overstated, perhaps they do help to explain, in part, why the increase in trade-union membership and activity at local level did not generate the kind of challenges that might have been predicted in the 1960s or early 1970s. A further explanation has been the continued section-alism of trade union activity.

[51]Hyman, "Politics."

Sectionalism

TRADE-UNION SECTIONALISM has its ideological roots in the origins of unionism in the 18th and 19th centuries. However, it can be understood today in different ways: the pursuit of the interests of one union in isolation and at the expense of others; or craft workers against unskilled; or white-collar against blue; or workers in one industry or service against those in others. These occupational divisions can also mask divisions of gender or race, and those in employment against those not in employment. In other words, all the divisions which afflict the working class can be and are represented within trade unionism and can deepen existing splits within the working class.

Sectional concerns need not be a purely negative force. Sectional interests within union or workplace membership can, for example, allow minorities, who could otherwise be suppressed by trade-union ideology ("the need for unity," "majority rule"), to surface, for example, witness the Ford women sewing machinists.[52] Also, sectional demands are difficult for management and the state to control; they often spring up outside the remit of the TUC or union General Secretaries and can sometimes clear a way for more general union demands. On this analysis, success for one group can mean some progress for all.

Generally, though, sectionalism is a regressive force, promoting the interests of the few rather than the many. Will Paynter, the former national president of the NUM, interviewed by Tony Lane, highlighted his reservations, as a socialist, about the shift to workplace bargaining. He argued that whether or not workplace bargaining was successfully "managed" by employers, it nonetheless promoted only sectional and not class concerns. A concentration on workplace problems may serve the members' immediate interests but does little to change their objective circumstances. A layer of new activists may have been created, he argued, but their energy has been diverted from political and industrial policy demands. A national union with nationally-relevant objectives is more politically significant.[53]

Paynter overstated his case, because workplace bargaining does not inevitably exclude a concern with national issues or the demands of the national union, and in any case is an avenue for workers' self-activity that does not rely on national union initiatives. A good, active, and largely-successful local organization may be a prerequisite for membership activity, particularly in a situation where traditional union or class loyalties cannot be relied upon. The danger of sectionalism, represented through workplace bargaining, is that it increases the possibility of workplace trade unionism being absorbed economically and politically, but workplace trade unionism does not have to be considered as inevitably sectional; it could be linked to broader structures and concerns.

[52]Stinson and Spencer, *Equal Pay.*
[53]T. Lane, *The Union Makes Us Strong* (London 1974). T. Lane, "The Unions: Caught on the Ebb Tide", *Marxism Today* (Sept. 1982).

This negative view of sectionalism recently has been challenged by Kelly, who argues that unions should concentrate on what they do best, namely bargaining for wages and conditions, and that this activity, although sectional, carries with it the potential to challenge capital and, from time to time, will provide opportunity for mass actions bringing key advances for organized labour.[54] Within the context of Thatcherism, however, this argument seems unconvincing.

Perspectives on the Workplace Drawn From Case Studies

IT MUST BE REMEMBERED that much of the literature of the 1940s and 1950s made little reference to the existence and growth of shop stewards within the bargaining process. However, according to the literature of the late 1960s, this was the period when the growth and development of independent steward organizations can be identified. In fact, the research for the Donovan Commission on what shop stewards actually did, was drawn, to a large extent, from American experience. An example here is McCarthy's Research Paper on the "Role of Shop Stewards in British Industrial Relations," which refers to the works of Slichter, Healey, and Livernash in discussing the limitations to output and restrictions on working hours.[55]

The Donovan analysis has led also to investigation and comment concerning a wider range of workplace issues: the relationship between workplace and union structure, wages drift and local bargaining, workgroup controls and their effect on the introduction of new technology, and the impact of formal agreements on union and management control.[56]

There has been much more discussion of the role of shop stewards, particularly in relation to the restriction on production, since the Donovan Report; but again, little of this is actually based on detailed analysis of what shop stewards were doing. (Not until the work of researchers like Brown, Batstone, and Terry in the 1970s did this begin to be reported.) A number of themes emerged in the early literature on shop-steward organization, with one particularly fiercely-contested argument about whether shop stewards contributed to trade-union democracy, or interfered with the linkages between the workplace and the official union organization. To a large extent, the positions on this question depended on how trade unionism was seen. If writers were looking for a responsible trade-union structure and organization which played a role within liberal democracies with national leaders agreeing to incomes policies and so on, then shop stewards certainly could be seen as an irritant within this process. On the other hand, if writers, particularly of the New

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[54]Kelly, *Trade Unions*.

[55]W.E.J. McCarthy, Research Paper No. 1, HMSO (London 1966). S.H. Slichter, J.J. Healy, and E.R. Livernash, *The Impact of Collective Bargaining on Management* (Washington 1960).

[56]M. Terry and P.K. Edwards, eds., *Shopfloor Politics and Job Controls*, (Oxford 1988); S. Tolliday and J. Zeitlin, eds., *Shop Floor Bargaining and the State: Historical and Comparative Perspectives* (Cambridge 1985).

Left genre, were looking for evidence of independent working-class organization and activity, then rapport between workplace leaders (shop stewards) and their shop-floor members was heralded as a "rebirth" of trade union democracy: a democracy grounded on the instant accountability of the steward, and on policies which were determined in discussion with the membership. It is interesting to note that some of the early debates focused on the need to increase steward-training in order to ensure that stewards understood union policy and were able to play a role within workplace bargaining that was responsible and responsive to the needs both of management and of the national union.[57] Also, some commentators, such as Roberts,[58] pointed to the unofficial strike as an example of the breakdown in union democracy, an illustration of the failure of agreed-upon national policies and elected national leadership to influence local events. These views have been substantially rejected in later works which see strikes as a reflection of workers' self-activity, and of the growth and potential of workers' control.[59]

Is Trade Unionism in Inevitable Decline?

UNION MEMBERSHIP in relation to the national employed workforce declined from a maximum of 55 per cent in 1979, to 43 per cent in 1988. The number of members in TUC-affiliated unions fell to 9 million: even if allowance is made for mass unemployment and increased self-employment, union membership among the employed remained on the decline in the late 1980s. However, this downward trend is not so marked when membership is divided between public and private employment. Union density in the public sector is approximately 80 per cent, and about 40 per cent in private manufacturing; this is similar to the levels ten years earlier, though privatization may distort the figures and make comparisons less accurate.[60] Union activity would also appear to be in decline with, for example, the annual number of days lost through strikes falling in the mid-1980s (ignoring the Miners' Strike).[61]

Some of this can be explained by the accelerated decline of traditional industries such as coal, steel, and shipbuilding, and by the rapid decline in employment in manufacturing since 1980, all of which enjoyed heavy unionization. It is further explained by the relatively-enhanced importance of the employment of private services, be it financial services or fast food, where unionization has

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[57] A. Flanders, *Trade Unions* (London 1952).
[58] B.C. Roberts, *Trade Union Government and Administration in Great Britain* (Cambridge, Mass. 1956).
[59] R. Hyman, *Disputes Procedures in Action* (London 1972).
[60] J. Kelly, *Labour and the Unions* (London 1987); J. Kelly, "The Decline of Trade Unionism?" *Industrial Tutor*, 4 (1988).
[61] Although this decline is overstated, see K. Walsh, "Are Disputes in Decline" *Industrial Relations Journal*, 18 (1987); MacInnes, *Thatcherism*, 108.

always been low. But these explanations do not answer, but rather reinforce, the question. Given such trends, is trade unionism in inevitable decline?

The decline of trade unionism has been linked to a decline in traditional labourist support, if not radical politics in Britain, which expressed itself, in *Marxism Today* for example, as a call for a broad, anti-Thatcherite alliance and tactical voting at the 1987 general election. However, the suggestion that the "Forward March of Labour" had been halted was first floated in 1978, and was in part a reaction to the failure of the Labour government's "social contract."[62] It was argued that class-consciousness was in decline because of changes in class composition and the growing affluence of ordinary workers, which would require a shift in Labour and trade unionism toward a much-broader and more popular appeal. The political ramifications of this debate have been hotly disputed,[63] but conclusions still remain unclear. A sharper picture may emerge over the next few years when the experience of the 1980s and "new realism" can be seen in the context of voting patterns in the 1990s' general elections.

Whatever the impact of changing political ideology, one thing remains clear: the extent of decline in union members depends in part on the continued failure of the unions to penetrate new areas of employment and to unionize the more peripheral workforce — part-timers, temporary staff, contract workers, and others. The failure of unions to achieve this cannot be taken for granted: for example, even better-paid workers in the new technology industries are selling their "labour power," as indeed are professionals and managers, so it is not inevitable that they be non-unionists. The evidence to date of union penetration into these new industries and services is somewhat contradictory, but even if it is accepted that union density is significantly lower than it is for comparable firms in traditional industry, it is not totally absent. For example, a survey of the North West, which underlines the trend away from unions, reports that just under 50 per cent of such new technology companies are unionized.[64] There will be problems for unions in recruiting low-paid, temporary, and part-time workers, but not all the trends are against unionization: the creation of hyper-markets, for example, may bring together 100 or more workers, and so make it easier to recruit and activate these distribution workers than was possible previously with more-traditional, dispersed outlets.

Therefore, although some of the basic tenets of this argument must be accepted — for instance, changes in the nature of work and in the composition of the working class pose problems for trade unions and, indeed, for the political representation of labour — the outcome is neither uniform nor determined, but will depend in part on how the labour movement responds. Even the 1987 election-result, with its low

[62]E. Hobsbawm, "The Forward March of Labour Halted?" *Marxism Today* (Sept. 1978).
[63]J. Curran, *The Future of the Left* (Cambridge 1984); M. Jaques and S. Hall, *The Politics of Thatcherism* (London 1983); Kelly, *Trade Unions*, 90-4.
[64]*Financial Times*, 16 July 1987.

level of support for the Labour party, particularly among working-class voters, does not in itself contradict this analysis. As Larry Whitty, formerly a national union official and now General Secretary of the Labour Party, has remarked:

It is disappointing that only 42 per cent of trade unionists voted Labour.... However, there was a 10 per cent higher vote amongst trade unionists [in each social group]. Trade union membership is still the most available and most direct introduction to politics and in particular to the collective ideas which the movement stands for.[65]

There also have been a number of reports from the TUC which suggest trade unions have:

started to address core issues for the unions which two terms of Thatcherism have thrown up: the recruitment and retention of members, trying to organize in areas long ignored by unions, attempting to come to terms with employment change, with why people join trade unions at all.[66]

However, if there is to be a resurgence of trade unionism, in addition union members and activists in the workplace will need to combine to make demands on official union organization and link together to press workplace concerns. And if socialist ideas are to grow among trade unionists, there is also a need to rekindle the vision of "socialist" society envisaged in most union rule books and in the Labour Party constitution.

Conclusions and Inferences for Canadian Unionism

THE PERIODIZATION chosen in the first part of this article will be familiar to Canadian readers: the prelude to the 1960s was a time of the re-establishment of Canadian unions (union membership grew from 17 per cent of the non-agricultural workforce before the war to 30 per cent by 1948, representing 1.5 million members by 1960), the early 1960s saw the rise of concerns about inflation and union power and led on to the Woods Task Force, and a similar outcome to that of Donovan. The growth of workers' militancy in the late 1960s and early 1970s took a different form than in Britain, with the events in Quebec and the creation of national unions, but the rise of public-sector unionism was similar, as was the growth of strike activity. There was a flirtation with corporatism in the mid-1970s, although not on the scale of UK experience, and it could be argued that Canada led the way in the switch to overt state coercion from 1975. The change in the UK beginning in 1979 was dramatic and perhaps more extensive than in Canada, at least until the 1982 "6 and 5" legislation. The 1980s has proved to be a difficult decade for Canadian unions, just as in Britain, but they have emerged in reasonable shape and with 37

[65]*Tribune*, 26 June 1987.
[66]*Financial Times*, 23 June 1987.

per cent of the non-agricultural workforce unionized, are close in density to that of the UK — and significantly different from the position in the USA (17 per cent). The changes in the structure of the workforce, and of union membership, in Canada also bear comparison with the growth in female workers resulting in approximately 36 per cent of trade unionists in both countries being female.

Trade union organisation in Canada and Britain is often grouped with that in the USA, and similarities between the labour movement in all three countries have been perceived (unitary central structure, emphasis on collective bargaining, strike activity, and so on).[67] More recently however, a distinction has been drawn between developments in the UK and in the US particularly in relation to the decline in trade-union membership. This difference has often overshadowed enduring similarities between Britain and Canada, and the importance of looking at developments in these two countries before attempting an analysis of decline. For example, Richard Hyman's 1989 revised version of his "Class Struggle and the Trade Union Movement"[68] comments that British unionization of the workforce "is more than double the rate in North America." What this comment overlooks is that unions in Canada are different from the US in terms of union density, public sector unions with considerable white-collar and professional union memberships, and perhaps a clearer over-arching commitment to something more than business unionism.

The understanding of the nature of workplace trade unionism put forward here may appear to be more specific to the UK, but nonetheless the parameters of the arguments about bureaucratisation, incorporation, sectionalism, and management sponsorship are common to both Canada and Britain. The dichotomy between business unionism and more radical unionism may, in part, take a different guise with international unions vs national unions, but the debates have, if anything, been around in Canada longer. Bob White of the Canadian Autoworkers prefers the phrase "social unionism," while his UK counterpart, Ron Todd of the TGWU, uses "new unionism" to recall the unions radical beginnings; both would deny their organizations are simply "business unions." Although arguments about union decline have particular piquancy for the UK, with more than 10 per cent loss of union membership recorded, they also apply in Canada where unions face problems posed by the impact of free trade, and by the reduction and privatization of public services.

What inferences can be drawn from UK experience to aid Canadian unionism? The most important might appear to be rather dismal, but ought to be drawn nonetheless, and is that, despite fifteen years of post-war Labour government, the two trade union organisations are in a remarkably similar position. Politically, working for a federal government favourable to labour may be very time-consuming and disarming (resulting in wait-and-see tactics) and might result only in limited gains. Union political activity has to be more broadly-based, linking with other

[67]M. Poole, *Industrial Relations: Origins and Patterns of National Diversity* (London 1986).
[68]R. Hyman, *The Political Economy of Industrial Relations* (London 1989), 224.

social movements and campaigns, and industrial action should not be constrained, perhaps, by worrying about the electoral impact of strike activity on political partners. To some extent, Canadian unions are already doing these things, so the inference should be to carry on, and do more of it, and UK unions could learn from Canadian experience.

The post-war experience of trade unionists in Britain and Canada has been an important factor in working-class life and politics. Unions have presented some dramatic challenges, at work and to the state, since the war; indeed, they occasionally have been credited with bringing down governments. Deeper analysis might reveal that union resistance, particularly in the workplace, most often has been a reaction to post-war economic crisis, the failures of labourism, and the seemingly inherent impossibility of achieving reformist aims and objectives.[69]

The experience for trade unionists obviously has been keenest at the workplace, and one of the enduring feature of British trade unionism during this period has been the growth and influence of workplace trade unionism, along with the rise of national unions in Canada.

Contrary to a popular view that economic prosperity would defuse class antagonisms, the emergence of the "affluent worker," of trade unionists with an instrumental view of both work and of their unions, coincided with (some would say contributed to) a high level of workplace union-militancy but a decline in political radicalism.[70] This workplace trade unionism, in turn, has immersed workers in collective actions which have reinforced "class" experience, at least at the level of recognising their role as "labour" in the production process. The explanation, both for the activity of the late 1960s/1970s and the comparative reduction in strike activity of the mid-1980s, might be this heightened "economic consciousness" of workers, which also can result in well-paid sections (in either country) voting for a tax-cutting Conservative government.

It would be quite wrong to claim that the experience charted in this article supports only a particular and specific set of conclusions. What it does indicate is that even among the most organized, active, and aware sections of British trade unions whether private- or public sector there is a feeling that little has changed in the post-war period in their position as "labour;" it might also indicate that some are abandoning the idea that it ever can change, and perhaps are buying shares in privatized companies. To some extent, they have become more self-confident within the workplace, more involved in their immediate working environment, but have lost faith in the capacity of working-class politics to change things. To this extent they are more entrenched in capitalist relations, and arguably closer to the position of Canadian trade unionists. For many of those involved, any call for a "new radical unionism," and therefore their renewed activity and sacrifice, would

[69]D. Coates and G. Johnston, *Socialist Strategies* (London 1983).

[70]J.H. Westergaard, "The Myth of Classlessness," in R. Blackburn, ed., *Ideology in Social Science* (London 1972).

have to be associated with a demand for a new "socialist" politics — a promise of a real stake in society, of workers' ownership and control. To succeed, it would have to include all sections of the working class, and promise an end to their treatment simply as "labour" in the processes of capitalist production, distribution, and exchange. To abandon socialist objectives now is to condemn present and future generations of workers to an endless organizational struggle within, rather than against, capitalism; to a repetition of post-war experience, and therefore to a trade unionism and a workplace democracy which can at best be described as "a permanent opposition never a government."[71]

In this situation, it has become common both in Canadian and British labour movements to call for a new vision, one that takes account of developments in Eastern Europe, the Third World, and the environment.[72] It is difficult to sustain such an all-embracing notion of a just society in the 1990s, but it is crucial that workers' organizations continue to seek alternative, less-alienating means of production. They should celebrate successes, no matter how small or localized, and keep alive the potential of workers' self-management for the 21st century.[73]

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[71] Hugh Clegg's phrase, to describe the industrial democracy of collective bargaining.

[72] For a good discussion of the issues in relation to Canada, see C. Heron, *The Canadian Labour Movement* (Toronto 1989), ch. 6.

[73] For a more-reasoned discussion of these points in relation to UK experience, and the example of the Mondragon cooperatives of Northern Spain, see Spencer, *Remaking*, Ch. 5-7.

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