

# **Trade union renewal and responses to neo-liberalism and the politics of austerity in the United Kingdom: the curious incubation of the political in labour relations**

*Miguel Martínez Lucio*<sup>1</sup>

## **ABSTRACT**

One of the problems we have when discussing trade unions today, the role of collective action and the academically fashionable question of renewal or revitalisation is that we discuss it in terms of trade unions themselves and in isolation. However, trade unions exist within context and those contexts are political, social and economic, and historical. The remaking of trade unions in the UK has been in the main a solitary project which has had good intentions and been viewed by many observers as being highly innovative; but these are first steps which require resources, coordination, conviction and politics let alone state support. Yet trade unions and many networks of trade unionists have in some sense incubated and guarded the map of social and emancipatory possibilities in terms of the political and the social in curious if unsupported ways. They have stepped into a reframing of the left even if the outcomes remain very uncertain.

## **KEYWORDS**

unionism; neoliberalism; United Kingdom; globalisation; political innovation.

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<sup>1</sup> The University of Manchester.

This article discusses the developments and challenges facing the UK's trade union movement in a context of increasing globalisation, neo-liberal state strategies and economic austerity. The challenges facing the movement have been highly significant and multidimensional,<sup>2</sup> and in the UK the greater emphasis on neo-liberal policies since the 1980s and a lack of consistent support and on-going changes in terms of the state regulation of collective and individual rights means that trade unions have faced a significant challenge compared to other OECD and comparable northern European states. Whilst there are significant signs of trade union renewal and a range of responses across specific questions – and an on-going transformation of how trade unions organise and coordinate in the face of neo-liberalism and austerity – the outcomes of such strategies and repositioning are not clear. In this article, I will argue that the trade union movement exists in a hyper-globalised context and within a political system that has been highly problematic for the rights of workers. Despite the fact that since 1979 there has been a range of right-wing and systematically anti-trade union governments, there were also 13 intervening years of social democratic government. The on-going challenges of a fragmented workforce and economy which is controlled and regulated through various complex international networks have brought real dilemmas to the movement in terms of how it seeks to plough a more progressive and socialist furrow within the UK.

I start with a brief review of this highly globalised and corporatized context. I then look at how over the past half-dozen or so years especially, the trade union movement has, in the words of Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman,<sup>3</sup> tried to reimagine its role and developed responses to the current context. This has built on an on-going context of trade union renewal and modernisation that has underpinned some of the significant developments in terms of a community and organising direction within its strategies. McIlroy<sup>4</sup> in his review makes a point that we need to put these responses into the context of the on-going trade union changes that began before the current crisis. I deepen

<sup>2</sup> MARTINEZ LUCIO, M. "Trade Unionism and the Realities of Change". In: ALONSO, Luis Enrique and MARTINEZ LUCIO, Miguel, eds. *Employment Relations in a Changing Society*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.

<sup>3</sup> GUMBRELL-MCCORMICK, R. and HYMAN, R. *Trade Unions in Western Europe: Hard Times, Hard Choices*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.

<sup>4</sup> MCILROY, J. "Britain: How Neo-Liberalism Cut Unions Down to Size". In: GALL, Gregor, WILKINSON, Adrian and HURD, Richard. *The International Handbook of Labour Unions: Responses to Neo-Liberalism*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2011, pp. 82–103.

this argument further by showing how the lessons learnt from the 1980s and 1990s configure the responses of organised labour. In this context, the role of the political and the absence of any significant support from the political Right or the social democratic traditions is key. However, the emergence of a new set of left-wing coalitions around and within the trade union movement – of which the election of Jeremy Corbyn to the leadership of the Labour Party is an example – means that there were possibilities of a new political counter-climate that was more sensitive to trade union needs and roles regardless of the stability and sustainability of that ‘left’ project within a social democratic framework.

However, I will argue that the uneven leadership of a discourse of anti-austerity within the trade union movement and the fragmented nature of its responses remain significant issues in the configuration of what are in fact weak counter-politics to austerity. The inconsistency or lack of coordinated strategies around alternative workplace and community dimensions also weakens the more systematic response to government policies, although there have been a range of mobilisations, new forms of conflict and general responses across many trade unions. The uncertainty and internal differences within unions and across them mean that many of the innovations and responses have been uneven and at times inconsistent. The main challenge though has been the nature of the assault on workers’ rights and the move to forms of employment in terms of permanent stable work (extensive performance measurement and surveillance) and unstable employment (the on-going use of much individualised forms of employment such as zero-hours contracts). Added to this has been a political strategy from the Right that has, on the one hand, further developed policies and legislation of an anti-trade union nature and, on the other hand, literally stolen policies from the Left, redefined them in neo-liberal terms and undermined the social criticism of the neo-liberal state (e.g. the redefining of the living wage). Nevertheless, the trade union movement remains highly innovative and broader in its social and political direction when compared to the past, although the argument in this paper is that innovation has serious limitations and can become an end itself. What is more, the absence of a supportive political dimension, irrespective of the formalised link with the Labour Party, has meant that trade unions are more isolated and have to create their own political ‘eco-spheres’ to represent workers more fully. In addition, the impact of globalisation has been contradictory because, although it has on the one hand been a development that appears to have revitalised the innovative and international dimensions of trade union activity, on the other hand it has led to further forms of fragmentation and coordination challenges at the national level.

### **The context: the UK as a modern Mordor?**

The UK has always been a highly internationalised economy due to its imperial dimension which in the main continued until the 1960s, although it still has a strong neo-colonial presence in various parts of the world. Its system of capital has had, and has, a broad extensive reach beyond the nation itself. The position of multinationals in chemicals, pharmaceuticals, defence industries and banking have been an important feature of the economy. In the 1980s, the neo-conservative government under Margaret Thatcher developed a systematic approach to privatisation in key sectors such as telecommunications and energy utilities which has continued in various forms up until the present day. Globalisation was more inward in its direction as a range of key aspects of the economy such as electricity, telecommunications, airports, railways, car manufacturing and others became exposed to a more globalised and foreign system of ownership and control. In effect, large parts of the economy became directed externally, irrespective of the systems of regulation put in place by the state. In a recent book, Colin Crouch<sup>5</sup> has shown how financialisation and privatisation has impacted on British society and the state, creating a challenging set of corporate networks and problems of accountability.

Trade unions have opposed many of these privatisations and processes of commercialisation since the 1980s through a range of campaigns; yet they have not been able to halt their development and, during the (New) Labour Government of 1997–2010, the belief in privatisation was significant and unassailable.<sup>6</sup> The obsession with management education and *managerialism*<sup>7</sup> was a defining feature of the Tony Blair and Gordon Brown Labour Governments of that period, with Brown and his economics minister Alistair Darling taking up prominent positions within international financial corporations in 2016. The cult of the market has been a common feature of nearly all countries, but in the UK it has been a significant feature of its left politics with its requirement and belief that successful governments have to be ‘pro-business’ if they wish to be seen as credible and ‘electable’.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> CROUCH, C. *The Knowledge Corrupters: Hidden Consequences of the Financial Takeover of Public Life*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015.

<sup>6</sup> FINLAYSON, A. *Making Sense of New Labour*. London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2003.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> During the election for the leadership of the Labour Party, most candidates argued this, such that even the left alternative had to engage with the concept, albeit from a more alternative perspective.

What is more, since the 1980s there has been a greater move to outsourcing in terms of the private sector, along with the use of employment agencies.<sup>9</sup> In the public sector, the use of outsourcing for catering, cleaning and information technology has been intensified, with increasing parts of the public health services being pushed into the private sector on the basis of a contracting model.<sup>10</sup> This has led to greater fragmentation in terms of services and employment. The growing use of a more vulnerable workforce in these areas of work (migrant, poorer elderly, and disabled workers for example), and a greater presence of practices such as zero-hour contracts, are increasingly apparent. What is more, within the workplaces of more permanent or stable workers, we have seen an extraordinary use of performance management regimes and management-led surveillance.<sup>11</sup>

The Labour Governments mentioned earlier did not pursue a strategy of revoking earlier legislation that made it much more difficult for trade unions to engage with industrial conflict and passed what seem to be laws that minimally supported the recognition of trade unions within the workplace.<sup>12</sup> The general thrust of policy was that trade unions were not a major feature of the economy and of society, with their political influence steadily being reduced, although not eliminated, within the Labour Party. There were attempts at creating a more commercially oriented business unionism and system of social dialogue with businesses, but these were premised on not strengthening the trade union side of the equation in terms of regulation.<sup>13</sup>

This has led to an intensification of trade union mergers as they tried to share their facilities and coordinate and organise a more disparate workforce.<sup>14</sup> In

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<sup>9</sup> MACKENZIE, R. and FORDE, C. "The Myth of Decentralization and the New Labour Market". In: ALONSO, Luis Enrique and MARTINEZ LUCIO, Miguel. *Employment Relations in a Changing Society: Assessing the Post-Fordist Paradigm*. Op.Cit., pp. 69–85.

<sup>10</sup> BOWMAN, A., ERTRUCK, I; FOLKMAN, P; FROUD, J; HASLAM, C; JOHAL, S; LEAVER, A; MORAN, M; and TSITSIANIS, N. *What a Waste: Outsourcing and How it Goes Wrong*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.

<sup>11</sup> Since the early 1980s we have seen a systematic fall in the levels of organised labour caused by and in general accompanying the changes outlined above. Trade union membership has virtually halved since 1980, from about 12 to under 6 million during that period, although 1980 did represent a peak in some respects and the outcome of two decades or so of substantial growth.

<sup>12</sup> GALL, G. and MCKAY, S. "Facing 'Fairness at Work': Union Perception of Employer Opposition and Response to Union Recognition". *Industrial Relations Journal*. Vol. 32, n. 2, 2001, pp. 94–113.

<sup>13</sup> MARTINEZ LUCIO, M. and STUART, M. "Swimming against the Tide: Social Partnership, Mutual Gains and the Revival of 'Tired' HRM". *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*. Vol.15, n.2, 2004, pp. 410–24.

<sup>14</sup> It should be noted that these financial considerations have been a major driver of union reorganisation through the use of mergers.

fact, in terms of collective action, the focus in the past five or so years has been mainly in the public sector, with the private sector registering some of the lowest levels of industrial conflict in the country's history, suggesting a more business focused or partnership based system in that sphere. This created significant organisational tensions in some cases, where different trade union cultures and worker traditions and identities were brought closer, which, as we will discuss later, has led to the emergence of a more coordinated and focused approach, in some cases, both in terms of sector politics and political identity (e.g. the case of the trade union UNITE).

Yet, the situation since the beginning of the Great Recession of 2008, the election of a centre-right coalition in 2010, and a solely right-wing government in 2015 has brought a new challenge to the labour movement. This has focused on reducing public expenditure in social terms and restructuring large parts of the state. There have been further moves to the deregulation of public service provision in health and local councils. It has questioned the boundaries of the private and public with an eye to internationalising ownership of key parts of the UK economy. It has reinforced the vision of a contract state, with some local city councils seeing themselves as contractors of services offered and supplied by transnational corporations. In effect, it has intensified the emergent neo-liberal policies of the 1980s which were incubated and partially developed in the intervening right-leaning social democratic period.

### **The new approaches to struggle: new forms of conflict and alliance building**

So how have trade unions in the UK begun to respond to these developments? First of all it will be difficult to capture this in such a short space of time so there may have to be some generalisations and broad examples, though we will be able to see the wider manner in which responses have taken place.

Mobilisations have been significant at the national level around specific demonstrations and marches – normally held on non-working days and in the centre of larger cities. These have been organised through the National Trade Unions Confederation in alliance with specific movements that have emerged against the public cutbacks initiated by the government since 2010. They have been significant in some cases, as in the London demonstration of 26 March 2011 – the ‘March for the Alternative’ – with estimates ranging from a quarter to a half a million individuals. Alternative economic arguments were presented by various trade union organisations which countered government policy on the need for reductions in state expenditure in the face of the fiscal

crisis. Such mobilisations have not been common or consistent. Some argue that there was a concern that such demonstrations – especially when they broke down into rioting or acts of violence against banks, perpetrated by a minority – could have a negative electoral impact on the Labour Party. The media in the UK kept focusing on these specific features of the demonstrations, which is common in the depicting of industrial relations issues.<sup>15</sup> Others argued that there was concern as to whether the high numbers could be kept up, with any decrease being perceived as a decline in the opposition to the government. It needs to be said that these large scale demonstrations have not been that common with the focus being on smaller regional level demonstrations.

Short one-day strikes have been seen in local government/council organisations involving various types of public sector workers, as in the 24-hour strike on 10 July 2014, which was one of the largest in that sector's history. We have seen a range of public sector workers, from teachers to local city council administrators, having their pay reduced in real terms, pension conditions changed, and working conditions worsened by the impact of restructuring. Increasing levels of disputes in terms of local transportation, such as with London Transport, have been common throughout the past few years and have addressed the cuts in the provision of services and changes to them and attempts to reduce staff. In the area of private sector transportation, British Airways has witnessed a series of disputes on pay and supplements as managers have aimed to shift the culture and create different conditions for entrants and incumbent staff alike. In the case of the national postal service, the Royal Mail, which was privatised during the 2010–15 coalition government, disputes of an unofficial nature emerged around the treatment of local staff, the use of disciplinary procedures and the general culture of management bullying within the organisation.<sup>16</sup> The steady radicalisation of public sector trade unions that had started – very generally – in the 1970s has continued, although these disputes are both national and local in orientation, given the nature of the employers. On the other hand, the level of collective action in 2015 in private sector manufacturing was almost negligible.

The development of short one-day or similar forms of strikes that raise the profile of the issues and have a strong media orientation have become

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<sup>15</sup> See the right-wing newspaper the *Daily Mail* for 29 March 2011 as an example of this narrative: [www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1370468/TUC-anti-cuts-march-200-arrested-protesters-cover-Trafalgar-Square-graffiti.html?ito=feeds-newsxml](http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1370468/TUC-anti-cuts-march-200-arrested-protesters-cover-Trafalgar-Square-graffiti.html?ito=feeds-newsxml).

<sup>16</sup> BEALE, D. and MUSTCHIN, S. "The Bitter Recent History of Employee Involvement at Royal Mail: An Aggressive Management Agenda versus Resilient Workplace Unionism". *Economic and Industrial Democracy*. Vol.35, n.2, 2014, pp. 289–308.



increasingly common. In the private sector – especially in manufacturing – this has been less common, as stated earlier, but the role of disputes has been key to galvanising and developing new activists and cementing a more radical politics in the public sector trade unions generally, especially in the civil service trade union, the PCS. There have been concerns that strikes are still generally in decline and that, due to the legislative environment and the internal politics of some trade unions, activists have less autonomy from their trade union officials on such matters.<sup>17</sup> So this strengthens the argument that the nature of collective action is very different now than what it was and that alternative worker occupations of their workplaces have not been as extensive as one would imagine.<sup>18</sup>

In addition, many trade unions, especially in the public sector, have developed counter-strategies around individual responses to performance management and the increasing quality monitoring by organisations such as schools and colleges. Be it the civil service, the education system or the health service, the use of quality audits and individual performance measures have intensified in recent years (on the civil service, a good case study is Carter et al.<sup>19</sup>). During the intervening period of the Labour Government (1997–2010) such developments were not restrained, quite the contrary. Trade unions increased their representation on cases related to the misuse of performance management and intervened heavily in cases such as the university system, in some cases to mediate and negotiate the nature of such systems in terms of equity and fairness. The growing number of individual legal and internal organisational cases supported around bullying and harassment of staff and management is one response which curiously does not get much academic attention as it does not fall into the rubric of collective responses, although one could argue that trade unions and workers' responses are collective in the way they deal with these individual cases.<sup>20</sup>

However, there remain many cases where trade unions in the public sector have attempted to engage with management in local city councils or national

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<sup>17</sup> JOYCE, S. “Why Are there So Few Strikes?” *International Socialism*. N. 45, 2015, <http://isj.org.uk/why-are-there-so-few-strikes/>.

<sup>18</sup> GALL, G. “Worker Resistance and Response to the Crisis of Neo-liberal Capitalism”. *Employee Relations*. Vol.33, n.6, 2011, pp. 588–91.

<sup>19</sup> CARTER, B., DANFORD, A; HOWCROFT, D; RICHARDSON, H; SMITH, A; TAYLOR, P. “‘All They Lack Is a Chain’: Lean and the New Performance Management in the British Civil Service”. *New Technology, Work and Employment*. Vol. 26, n.2, 2011, pp. 83–97.

<sup>20</sup> MARTINEZ LUCIO, M. and STEWART, P. “The Paradox of Contemporary Labour Process Theory: The Rediscovery of Labour and the Disappearance of Collectivism”. *Capital & Class*. Vol.21, n.2, 1997, pp. 49–77. However, it must be said that many cases are often between fellow workers and absorb an inordinate amount of time in terms of trade union resources.



public administrative bodies to limit or determine the impact of the government's cuts in public services and managerial strategies of 'change'. In some cases, the fact that it is central government that determines the reductions in resources is what has allowed in some city councils and public bodies a narrative to emerge in which the changes are perceived as not being the responsibility of the organisation's management – that it was in the interests of all sides to collaborate and work on a social dialogue based approach to the 'problem'.<sup>21</sup> In fact, it would be premature to argue that the social partnership approach that the previous Labour Government had tried to develop was not persisting in certain dimensions of the state. In this respect, social partnership of a defensive nature did not dissipate, but sustained itself, albeit in less grandiose terms, as an option for trade unions in their response to austerity and the crisis, especially within the lower reaches of the public sector.<sup>22</sup> In terms of the private sector, this use of a truncated version of social dialogue has been at the heart of international trade union strategies through the use of European Works Councils and other forms of consultation within multinational corporations. The attempt to build a greater degree of engagement within these forums, when compared with the UK's relatively low-trust industrial relations system as a whole, has been a major focus of trade union action in terms of education and strategy. These have been key international spaces for union activity, although the extent to which they have spill out effects on local trade unionism depends very much on the company and workplace traditions in question.

Another dimension to the trade union response is the use of social alliances. In the UK, this has been built over time around anti-racist struggles and LGBT issues, amongst others.<sup>23</sup> This very much links to the notion that what is needed is a new utopian counterpoint in the discourse of the trade union movement that connects to a social and broader identity.<sup>24</sup> Boothman argues that this approach to social movement unionism was driven in large part by

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<sup>21</sup> Interview by author with two human resource managers from a leading city council and a major government agency.

<sup>22</sup> Whilst critical of this position, I differ from positions that see social partnership as having run out of steam (McIlroy, "Britain: How Neo-Liberalism Cut Unions Down to Size". Op.Cit.), although it is not the 'engaged' high trust approach initially expected of it.

<sup>23</sup> GUMBRELL-MCCORMICK, R. and HYMAN, R. *Trade Unions in Western Europe: Hard Times, Hard Choices*. Op. Cit., p. 147.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 191–205.

certain aspects of the far left in its attempts to engage with ethnic communities and the women's movement in the 1970s and after.<sup>25</sup>

The role of trade unions and trade unionists – not always the same thing – in anti-austerity movements such as the People's Assembly Against Austerity has been an important feature. Both formally through their trade union structures and also informally through trade union activists and representatives, the national and local structures of the People's Assembly, which leads local campaigns against the restructuring of the welfare state, have been a focus of much support. In the initial years of the Coalition Government of 2010, it was increasingly active. This movement was able to create a new type of social alliance around a range of campaigns (the social welfare reforms around disability was one feature that was highlighted in its campaigns).<sup>26</sup> What was noticeable too in the case of the UK, and which reflects the importance of alliances around race and ethnicity issues, is the emergence of black and minority ethnic activists who led groups against the government policies of austerity, such as BARAC (Black Activists Rising against the Cuts). BARAC is an organisation with a strong presence drawn from highly regarded and active trade unionists amongst others who have a black and minority ethnic background. They have highlighted specific and general outcomes of the reductions in welfare support and services, and the impact in terms of the loss of jobs. They also ensure that key trade union annual conferences consider and hold meetings on such issues. These social responses are not simply alliances as such, but actually have trade union organisations and activists playing lead roles and linking such bodies together across the labour movement. They represent a network of activism which has come to the fore in the past ten or so years in the UK, based on a history of increasing sensitivity to social struggles.

An offshoot of this, and by no means a recent phenomenon driven by the question of austerity, but more a response to the question of an emerging vulnerable workforce, has been the appearance of a community orientation within the trade union organisation. For some time the trade union movement in the UK has taken an interest in the potential for community unionism and has looked closely at the USA.<sup>27</sup> There have been various dimensions to this strategy which will be commented on more objectively later. On the one hand,

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<sup>25</sup> BOOTHMAN, D. "El nexu clase-etnia: inmigracion en Gran Bretaña: una lectura a partir de Gramsci". In: PALA, C; FIRENZE, A; GARCIA, J. Mir. *Gramsci y la Sociedad Intercultural*. Barcelona: Montesinos, 2014.

<sup>26</sup> For an outline of the range of trade union support, see [www.thepeoplesassembly.org.uk/supporters](http://www.thepeoplesassembly.org.uk/supporters).

<sup>27</sup> SIMMS, M., HOLGATE, J; HEERY, E. *Union Voices: Tactics and Tensions in UK Organizing*. Cornell: Cornell University Press, 2012.

there have been attempts to run local campaigns from local offices where community groups could meet – although this was not very common. The General Municipal and Boilermakers Union began initiatives to link with local community groups and create forms of dialogue and, in some cases, joint training programmes. The more radical National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers (RMT) – as a union which disaffiliated from the Labour Party and moved further to the left – has been systematic in its attempts to link cuts in transport jobs with the negative impact of transport commuters in terms of their travel experiences: this broadening of the agenda of industrial relations had a strong political dimension and represents a widening of the union agenda.<sup>28</sup> In the case of UNITE, there has been the development of a community membership and community representative programme aimed at organising around local campaigns and bringing the trade union into the community.<sup>29</sup> They have developed a community representative network in an attempt to create local links and connections with the more marginalised parts of the workforce. These have organised in various ways around local work and social campaigns. What is more the work of trade unions around learning and development which have in part been funded by the Union Learning Fund – which receives support from the government, although this support has been reduced and is subject to constant negotiation – has tended to use trade union learning centres and workplace based learning representatives as a way of reaching out to more vulnerable workers in the community.<sup>30</sup> Hence, the trade union movement has developed various strategies for raising the plight of those affected by austerity and neo-liberalism more generally, but also provided new forms of support services although the extent of such developments is uneven.

At the heart of the move to a new community and locally based approach, which has been constructed as the main vehicle for reaching the lesser paid, more vulnerable and hyper-exploited workforce, is the *living wage campaign*. This concept has a long history in economics and a diverse and complex set of political origins. The idea that we should go beyond a minimum wage and

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<sup>28</sup> DARLINGTON, R. “Britain: Striking Unionism with a Political Cutting Edge”. In: Heather CONNOLLY, Heather; KRETSOS, Lefteris; PHELAN, Craig, eds. *Radical Unions in Europe and the Future of Collective Representation*. Oxford: Peter Land, 2014, pp. 69–88.

<sup>29</sup> See [www.unitetheunion.org/growing-our-union/communitymembership/](http://www.unitetheunion.org/growing-our-union/communitymembership/).

<sup>30</sup> WALLIS, E., STUART, M.; GREENWOOD, I. “‘Learners of the Workplace Unite!’ An empirical examination of the UK trade union learning representative initiative”. *Work, Employment & Society*. Vol.19, n.2, 2005, pp. 283–304; RAINBIRD, H., & STUART, M. “The state and the union learning agenda in Britain”. *Work, Employment & Society*. Vol.25, n.2, 2011, pp.202-217.

engage with the actual costs of living for a more dignified life has become a major reference point for trade unions and social organisations in relation to what is commonly termed the ‘hard to reach’ workforce. There has been a strong involvement from social movements and even religious social movements, as in the context of the London Living Wage Campaign.<sup>31</sup> The use of local alliances between trade unions, social movements and even more forward thinking employers – along with the support of the local state – has been a highlight of the campaign against austerity which has built on the politics of trade union renewal and the community unionism which emerged over the past 15 or so years. It also forges an alliance between indigenous and migrant workers, broadly speaking.<sup>32</sup>

Hence the trade union movement has managed to respond to the context of neo-liberalism in a variety of ways and build on its traditions of renewal which have come out of earlier struggles and moments of reflection. McIlroy has argued that any attempt to understand responses to globalisation or neo-liberalism – or now austerity – must be guided by a historical sensitivity to the broader politics of renewal of the past few decades within the UK, although how successful that renewal has been is another matter.<sup>33</sup> There have been greater strides in terms of international coordination, especially around the European sector trade union federations, and the use of bodies, as noted above, such as European Works Councils. In terms of learning and training, trade unions have begun to do more on the skills and development of the workforce generally through specific types of public funds, although political trade union education has declined and the focus is on specific aspects of social inclusion.<sup>34</sup> What is more there has been a major push towards union organising since the early 1990s in the UK which have been focused on targeting new members and hard to organise workplaces, although the extent to which this has been systematically and politically coordinated is

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<sup>31</sup> WILLS, J., DATTA, K; EVANS, Y; HERBERT, J; MAY, J; MCILWAINE, C. “Religion at Work: The Role of Faith-based Organizations in the London Living Wage Campaign”. *Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society*. Vol.2, n.3, 2009, pp. 443–461; WILLS, J. “The Geography of Union Organising in Low-Paid Service Industries in the UK: Lessons from the T&G’s Campaign to Unionise the Dorchester Hotel, London”. *Antipode*. Vol. 37, n.1, 2005, pp. 139–59.

<sup>32</sup> However, in some cases trade unions have been ambivalent about their links with specific religious organisations due to their position on gender politics.

<sup>33</sup> MCILROY, J. “Britain: How Neo-Liberalism Cut Unions Down to Size”. *Op.Cit.*

<sup>34</sup> There is a fascinating discussion on the question of how strategic such learning strategies are for those interested in: RAINBIRD, H. and STUART, M. “The State and the Union Learning Agenda in Britain”. *Work, Employment & Society*. Vol.25, n.2, 2011, pp. 202–217; MCILROY, J. and CROUCHER, R. “British Trade Unions and the Academics: The Case of Unionlearn”. *Capital & Class* Vol.37, n.2, 2013, pp. 263–284.

another matter.<sup>35</sup> Trade unions have developed cadres of people with specific project briefs to organise workers and build and sustain union organisation within various workplaces. What is more the Union Modernisation Fund, which was a project financed by the Labour Government in the first decade of the millennium, provided resources to trade unions for the purpose of, amongst other things, reaching out to the more vulnerable workforce through leadership training, equality training, mentoring schemes, disability strategies and other forms of inclusion strategies.<sup>36</sup> In fact, the greater sensitivity – relatively speaking – to equality strategies have allowed trade unions to build a broader agenda around the negative impact of neo-liberalism and related strategies, although the use of conflict strategies are not always central to these.

### **The challenging context of UK trade union politics: the problems of unbalanced and unsupported ‘revitalisation’**

As noted earlier, the context of the UK is one of a liberal market system based on financial priorities and employer oriented state policies.<sup>37</sup> This is relevant because with a further internationalisation of capital the space within which industrial relations is conducted makes reciprocal action and consistent forms of regulation between different actors more difficult. Within this context there are employer traditions that are increasingly bypassing the trade union movement in a variety of ways.<sup>38</sup> There are four further issues which are important to consider in relation to the specific and not just contextual challenges facing union revitalisation.

Firstly, the structural changes and the fundamental decrease in the resource base of the union movement means that it is difficult for unions, and union officials and representatives especially, to run with a range of projects and areas of activity in a consistent manner. Membership decline implies the need for a more scrutinised use of resources and a more difficult context within

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<sup>35</sup> MARTINEZ LUCIO, M. and STUART, M. “Organising and Union Modernisation: Narratives of Renewal in Britain”. In: GALL, G. ed., *Union Revitalisation in Advanced Economies*. London: Palgrave, 2009, pp. 17–37.

<sup>36</sup> STUART, M., TOMLINSON, J; MARTINEZ LUCIO, M. “Women and the Modernization of British Trade Unions: Meanings, Dimensions and the Challenge of Change”. *Journal of Industrial Relations*. Vol. 55, n.1, 2013, pp. 38–59.

<sup>37</sup> HALL, P. A. and SOSKICE, D. eds. *Varieties of Capitalism: The Institutional Foundations of Comparative Advantage*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.

<sup>38</sup> DUNDON, T. and GALL, G. “Anti-unionism: Contextual and Thematic Issues”. In: DUNDON, Tony and GALL, Gregor, eds. *Global Anti-Unionism: Nature, Dynamics, Trajectories and Outcomes*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, pp. 1–20.

which to organise activity consistently. Many projects within the movement – such as recognition campaigns, alliance building and even internal development – are often reliant on specific key individuals whose working patterns are more stressed and unsupported. The lack of resourcing and the problems of organisational memory within unions have been spoken of in various studies, as it means longer term planning and strategy is affected.<sup>39</sup> As we stated earlier, the fragmentation of conflict and the individualisation of conflict (including inter-worker conflict of an individual nature) means that many resources and capabilities are drawn into these issues and away from those of a broader political nature or industrial politics.

Secondly, coordination between trade unions is a major problem, and in the UK context, regardless of the development of larger or merged trade unions, there remains a high degree of fragmentation, a complexity of trade union identities and a lack of joined-up discussion about revitalisation regardless of the coordinating efforts of the main trade union confederation. There is not quite the inter-trade union competition of France or Spain for example. There is a more shared ‘social democratic’ sensibility within the movement, but it is still quite fragmented at the leadership and national levels. There is also a reticence with overt political and public mobilisation, as seen with the relative abandonment of large scale demonstrations against the right-wing or previously centre-right governments’ austerity policies, although one could argue, to be fair and balanced (and as mentioned earlier), that the concern with not being able to mobilise sufficient individuals or undermining the electoral possibilities of the main left-wing party is a factor that trade union leaders actively consider when deliberating on these ‘choices’.

Thirdly, there is still fragmentation vertically as well. The extent of shop floor organisation is not as extensive as it was in the 1960s or 1970s for example (see Terry<sup>40</sup> for a study of such traditions). There remains a lack of support of organisational networks that tie trade union representatives on the ground across different workplaces within and between sectors. The uncertainty towards networks such as the National Shop Stewards Network<sup>41</sup>, and others, within some though not all trade unions, indicates a lack of trust within

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<sup>39</sup> STUART, M., MARTINEZ LUCIO, M; TOMLINSON, J; PERRETT, R. *The Union Modernisation Fund-Round Two: Final Evaluation Report*. London: Department for Business, Innovation & Skills, 2010.

<sup>40</sup> TERRY, M. “The Inevitable Growth of Informality”. *British Journal of Industrial Relations*. Vol. 15, n.1, 1977, pp. 76–90.

<sup>41</sup> The National Shop Steward Network is a network which brings together workplace and union representatives from various industries trying to link them and create mutually supportive activities in the absence of systematic support from higher levels of their formal organisations. This network creates horizontal relations and engagement with a broader political space and is supported by various trade unions in various capacities.



organisations and political concerns with autonomously based movements. In part these may be due to the political characteristics of some of the networks and the history of parts of the left organising around workplace and local representatives,<sup>42</sup> but there remain many gaps and tensions in connecting with the politics of the workplace.<sup>43</sup> Political education and local political activism within trade unionism has diminished to some extent, although this may be due to broader political factors and barriers we will discuss below. There are also question marks over the extent of community unionism and the way in which a stable, trade union presence in the community, which is open and resourced, is being supported, apart from such exceptions as UNITE. Even then the ability to connect with more vulnerable and hard-to-reach workers remains due to the lack of a systematic community orientation.

Hence the horizontal and vertical relations – to use these simple terms – within the trade union movement bring challenges, given the extent of fragmentation and change within them. This means that there is also a lack of consistency in terms of international campaigning and involvement, even if the leadership and general senior officers of various UK trade unions have played an influential part in the development of the International Trade Unions Confederation and the European Trade Union Confederation: and even then this is due to the personal negotiating skills and culture, linguistic attributes and North Atlantic connections of key individuals within the British labour movement in the past 30 years or so. However, many trade unionists through political and social networks (especially charities such as War on Want) have played a part in key campaigns in terms of worker rights in the Indian and Bangladeshi agricultural and textile sectors, Palestinian rights, and others. The Trade Union Congress's international department has been a hub for coordinating a range of social and international campaigns, although how these link to the workplace and local activists varies.

The fourth factor in terms of challenges is political and emerges from the nature of the present political regime in 2016. The trade union movement is demonised by the Right and a very large part of the media (much of it owned by organisations linked to the media magnate Rupert Murdoch). The right-wing Conservative government of 1979–97 passed a range of legislation restricting collective action and influencing internal trade union affairs, which represents some of the strongest anti-union legislation of any developed

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<sup>42</sup> DARLINGTON, R. "Shop Stewards' Leadership, Left-wing Activism and Collective Workplace Union Organisation". *Capital & Class*. Vol. 26, n.1, 2002, pp. 95–126.

<sup>43</sup> COHEN, S. *Ramparts of Resistance: Why Workers Lost Their Power, and How to Get It Back*. London: Pluto Press, 2006.



liberal democratic system.<sup>44</sup> In 2015–16, the Conservative Government proposed legislation aimed at making it more difficult to develop strike action in any workplace or company: a majority vote in favour of collective action would be valid only if a particular percentage of those eligible to vote actually participated in the strike ballot in the first place. The legislation proposed other conditions as well, and even at some point the proposals called on restrictions in the use of social media in certain contexts and greater flexibility in the employer use of employment agency staff during industrial conflict. Much of this was couched around the ‘right to work’ and the perceived impact of strikes in public services on the public. The fact that even certain right wing politicians critiqued the legislation, likening it to the approach of the previous Spanish dictator Franco, indicates how problematic this legal context is for trade unions.<sup>45</sup> Without appreciating the very difficult context facing trade unions in the UK one cannot really appreciate the limited spaces – or perceived limited spaces – that exist in terms of formal counter-mobilisation. On the other hand, the current government at the time of writing has developed strategies that, whilst focused on reducing the role of the state and in following what are generally termed ‘austerity’ strategies to rebalance the public finances, have redefined and re-articulated<sup>46</sup> the social causes of trade unions in curious and in effect quite devious ways. For example, the notion of labour market inclusion has been used by the current government as a way of ensuring that working is economically more attractive to an individual than being on state benefits (especially as the government is reducing such benefits). This has brought criticism from trade unions and social movements who have seen poorer and/or disabled individuals indirectly forced into work (normally at a relatively low level of pay). So in many ways this has pushed the critique of austerity into a difficult position. More importantly, the use in 2015 of the notion of the ‘living wage’ by the Conservative government – and of supporting the development of a recommended living wage albeit at a different level to what is normally demanded – has brought a challenge to the incumbent living wage campaigners, in part trade unionists.<sup>47</sup> This is because it highlights the risk of focusing too much on specific and disconnected campaigns that can be redefined and undermined in terms of their political impact. The trade union movement thus faces a political assault which is both coercive, in some forms, but also ideologically *nimble* and astute in others.

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<sup>44</sup> For a detailed discussion on the legal context in general, see the following major intervention which focuses on the undermining of basic employment rights and concepts by the 2015 elected government: SMITH, P. “Labour under the Law: A New Law of Combination, and Master and Servant, in 21st-century Britain?”. *Industrial Relations Journal*. Vol. 5, n.6, 2015, pp. 345–364.

<sup>45</sup> See [http://local.teachers.org.uk/wakefield/Campaign\\_materials/Campaigns.cfm](http://local.teachers.org.uk/wakefield/Campaign_materials/Campaigns.cfm).

<sup>46</sup> LACLAU, E. *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory*. London: New Left Books, 1979.

<sup>47</sup> See: [www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-33437115](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-33437115).

Hence, while systematically collated data and evidence in 2011 pointed to the decline in union power and the role of regulation since the early 1980s as in some aspects beginning to stabilise and level out,<sup>48</sup> the impact of the new current anti-trade union policies and the political economy of austerity since about 2010 may create a new set of challenges and potential for decline. With the national political referendum vote of June 2016 to leave the European Union the prospect of further anti-trade union legislation (as well as legislation which undermines worker rights in areas such as health and safety) is a real possibility and further challenge should worker rights, partly linked currently to the social dimension and legislation of the European Union, be further undermined by the state.

### **Conclusion: the challenge of isolation**

One of the problems we have when discussing trade unions today, the role of collective action and the academically fashionable question of renewal or revitalisation is that we discuss it in terms of trade unions themselves and in isolation. Much may be due to the nature of some aspects of the industrial relations traditions – or labour and employment relations as the North American tradition prefers to use in its attempt to renew the presentation of the discipline. However, trade unions exist within contexts and those contexts are political, social and economic, and historical, and somehow any strategy we discuss makes sense only in terms of the resources, understanding, development and context tied to its evolution. In the UK the challenge to the presence and role of trade unions since the late 1970s, or the absence of political support from the state of a systematic nature when allied parties were in power, means that trade unions are isolated in their responses irrespective of the ‘choice’ (limited in parts, however) of building social alliances. No trade union movement proceeds without creating partnerships in the broader sense of the terms with other actors or interests: some of these choices as Hyman<sup>49</sup> notes can lean towards focusing relations with employers, the state and society (or a peculiar combination and selection of these).

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<sup>48</sup> VAN WANROOY, B.; BEWLEY, H; BRYSON, J; FORTH, S; STOKES, L; WOOD, S. *Employment Relations in the Shadow of Recession: Findings from the 2011 Workplace Employment Relations Study*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

<sup>49</sup> HYMAN, R. *Understanding European Trade Unionism: Between Market, Class and Society*. London: Sage, 2001.

The remaking of trade unions has been in the main a solitary project which has had good intentions and been viewed by many observers as being highly innovative; but these are first steps which require resources, coordination, conviction and politics. Within the UK, the understanding of trade unions has slipped from much of management and state concerns: there remains an absence of awareness of how socially innovative they have actually become in many ways. Within social democratic elites they are seen as part of a historical configuration of the country's progressive politics, but not integral to it.

However, trade unions and unionists have in some sense incubated and guarded the map of social and emancipatory possibilities in terms of its internal discussions and in terms of, what McIlroy quite rightly points out (although to my mind in somewhat pessimistic terms), the political shift towards the left that has been building up since the mid-1990s or so. Within the trade union movement of the UK, the Communication Workers Union, the PCS public service union, the RMT, the FBU, UNITE and others have actually looked to a more political identity and set of priorities by working within established networks and relations as in the Labour Party in some cases and/or other political networks and movements which have mobilised around anti-austerity campaigns. The role of trade union activists – perhaps often as individuals or as parts of alternative political networks – have been at the heart of anti-austerity campaigns and many social struggles in relation to the state. The multiple role and identity of trade unionists is a curious phenomenon which the studies of social movements tend to ignore. That there has been no automatic reimagining of the Left and the role of swords of justice is understandable due to the isolated and demonised role of such discourses in the UK.

Yet whatever happens after the events of 2015 – when Jeremy Corbyn as an explicitly left candidate to the Labour Party was elected against all expectations as the leader of the Labour Party, in great part due to trade unions and their members – the political networks, organisational roles and energy of trade unions and trade unionists have shown their ability to influence political spaces in curious and discreet ways. For all the fragmentation – vertically and horizontally – and organisational challenges facing them, the campaigning ability and grounded imagination of the movement in general has demonstrated its capacity to innovate politically and on occasions influence agendas. This has come from a process of political renewal around social inclusion agendas and a greater albeit relative sensitivity to the very nature of social and economic fragmentation itself. It is this political

dimension<sup>50</sup> we need to study and nurture as well; a need to appreciate what Martin Upchurch calls the curious consistency of the current inconsistencies of struggle.<sup>51</sup> Therefore, to understand globalisation and the position of organised labour we need to understand the way in which these changes are nationally contextualised and lead to new forms of fragmentation and new spaces for struggle – which require a linking together through political processes and activism.

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<sup>50</sup> UPCHURCH, M; TAYLOR, G. J.; MATHERS, A. *The Crisis of Social Democratic Trade Unionism in Western Europe: The Search for Alternatives*. Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2009.

<sup>51</sup> M. Upchurch, presentation at the Critical Labour Studies Day Seminar held on 14 November 2015, the GMB, London.

