

Trade unions and institutional power resources in the United Kingdom

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Abstract

Purpose – The paper examines the approach of United Kingdom (UK) Trade Unions to the use of institutional power resources (IPR) in the second half of the twentieth century.

Design/methodology/approach – Using secondary material, it examines the unions' approach to IPR in three cases; collective bargaining; worker representation and trade union structure.

Findings – The paper concludes that unions did not appreciate the importance of, and lacked a strategic approach to, IPR. Although employer and government action were largely responsible for the decline of industrial relations institutions, the failure of the unions to engage with IPR contributed to this process. It explains the failure of the unions to engage with IPR by reference to their lack of strategic capabilities and skills in relation to power resources (PRs) in general and IPR in particular.

Research limitations/implications – It would have been interesting to collect primary data via interviews with union actors from the period examined to test the interpretation of secondary data contained in the article.

Practical implications – The paper has identified the kind of strategic decision-making which is necessary for unions to engage effectively with IPR. It has also indicated the key skills which unions need to develop to be able to manage their engagement with IPR.

Social implications – The paper has implications for the role of trade unions in society, showing the need for them to develop narratives to convince society of the importance of their role and action and to develop the skills which enable them to connect with other social groups, e.g. intermediation, engagement with coalitional resources.

Originality/value – Analysis of the decline of industrial relations institutions in this period has emphasized the role of employers and the state. This paper contributes to a more balanced perspective on this decline by drawing attention to the lack of a union strategy towards IPR and the importance of the detail of the management and employment of power resources.

Keywords UK, Trade unions, Institutional power resources

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Industrial relations institutions in the United Kingdom (UK) underwent dramatic changes in the last quarter of the twentieth century, changes which have continued in recent decades. Collective bargaining coverage stood at 70% in the 1970s but had declined to 26% in 2018 (Visser, 2019) while between 1979 and 2010 trade union membership density halved from 53% to 26%. The changes have been attributed to factors such as the movement from manufacturing to services, the growing international competitive environment faced by companies, the emergence of a less bridled form of capitalism and government legislation, all of which put pressures on the pattern of employment relations which had grown up after the Second World War. Membership decline was also related to the development of a more diversified labour force with significant proportions of women workers and workers in atypical employment presenting a greater recruitment challenge for the unions.

This paper considers the role of trade unions in the evolution of industrial relations institutions in post war UK and, in particular, their use of IPR, which, it is argued, have not been



given sufficient attention in the literature, which has tended to emphasize the economic and political environment and employer action to explain the unions' decline in recent decades.

Following a discussion of the literature on the power resources (PRs) available to trade unions which considers the characteristics of the different PRs and the value of the approach, the role of IPR is examined. After a methodological note, the paper considers three cases of union engagement with IPR: collective bargaining, worker representation and trade union structure. The paper ends with a discussion and conclusion.

Refslund and Arnholtz (2022) building on the work of Korpi (1974, 1983), Wright (2000) and Silver (2003) identified five PRs as the basis of labour power. Institutional power is the power actors derive from industrial relations institutions which on the one hand constrain and regulate actors in this field but also make available to them additional resources. In addition the authors distinguished: structural power, the position of workers in the economic system; associational power, referring to the organization and union membership of workers; ideational power whereby, through the creation of a persuasive and influential narrative, unions can support their objectives and strengthen internal cohesion; coalitional PRs which enable unions to form coalitions with other groups and collective actors. The five resources are not equally important over time and are inter-related.

According to Refslund and Arnholtz (2022) the value of the PRs approach is to bring back power as a subject of focus and turn attention on to the unions, too often relegated into the background by deterministic accounts of change. However, the same authors criticize elements of the PR literature. For example, it assumes workers' interests are uniform whereas diversity of interest is evident in most worker collectives and therefore there is a need to study the diversity of interests, coalition formation and the degree of coherence of union action. Unlike Korpi they suggest one cannot see the state as an empty shell – it plays an independent role, and more attention needs to be paid to how PR can influence state action. They also suggest one should not assume unions are the only representatives of worker interests. There is a need to look at wider coalitions.

Institutions have been defined as social constructs manifested in patterns of social interaction, based on stable and lasting roles. They regulate and frame spaces for action in which a series of actors operate with their own, not necessarily converging, interests and objectives (Muller-Jentsch, 1998, p. 243). In doing so they establish limits to the possibilities of action and make available resources to the actors. Industrial relations institutions operate as regulating mechanisms which mediate between the various actors pursuing different combinations of economic and social objectives.

Frege and Kelly (2003)'s definition of industrial relations institutions includes collective bargaining structures, legal and administrative procedures of conflict resolution, the political system and corporatist relations. This paper adds the organizations of the actors, i.e. trade unions and employer associations which also regulate and frame the spaces in which the actors operate.

Institutional power is the power the actors derive from industrial relations institutions, usually a legacy of past struggles based on structural and associational power. It is important because it embeds past social compromises and gives trade unions a platform from which they can seek to develop other PRs (Pérez de Guzmán and Prieto, 2021). It is difficult for unions to function without a degree of institutional security (Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman, 2013). A characteristic of institutional power is its tendency to be stable over time since the social compromises which institutions embody can transcend economic cycles and short-term political changes (Schmalz and Dorre, 2018). Unions may still be able to use institutional resources even though their structural and associational PRs have declined. Thus, regulatory frameworks and associated institutional configurations can act to ameliorate inequalities of power arising from globalization and the role of multinational enterprises (Belizón *et al.*, 2014).

Researchers who have considered the role of institutional resources have, however, pointed to the problems of unions relying solely on them. Although IPR may appear to be stable, there may be significant change going on beneath the surface. They can be undermined by changes in the economic conditions and the distribution of structural power (Refslund and Arnholtz, 2022). It is therefore important for unions not to neglect other sources of power and maintain access to them. Thus, in the case of IPR, the ability of unions to build upon them can be significantly conditioned by their membership and organizing power. In their study of the Post Office in Spain Pérez de Guzmán and Prieto (2021) show how IPR depended not only upon the company putting into practice Spanish legislation but also upon the membership and organizational power achieved by the unions in the organization. In the case of the Portuguese unions' dispute with Ryanair it was the unions' use of IPR in conjunction with coalitional and ideational resources which enabled them to gain recognition at the company (Mendonça, 2020).

Korpi suggests that PRs are economical and do not require much effort to maintain. In the case of IPR this is questionable. The survival and effectiveness of institutions are related not only to their regulatory under-pinning and configuration, but to the actions of their actors. Unless actors work actively to maintain them, institutions can drift and atrophy (Streeck and Thelen, 2005). As with any PR, IPR are only effective if unions possess the necessary strategic skills to use them. Levesque and Murray (2010) characterize these skills as intermediation, framing, articulating and learning. Murray *et al.* (2020) in addition argue that institutional resources need to be adapted to accommodate changed circumstances and that such adaptation requires experimentation-new strategies, the search for new resources and allies and the building of new institutions.

The paper reviews the engagement of UK trade unions with industrial relations institutions since World War Two and examines the extent to which they made use of IPR and sought to maintain and consolidate them. It does so by considering three cases: Collective Bargaining; Worker Representation; Trade Union Structure. We have emphasized the role of changes in contemporary capitalism (and government legislation responding to these changes) in initiating change in industrial relations institutions and we are not suggesting that a different pattern of union engagement with IPR would have prevented this change. However, we do conclude that the unions' failure to maximize the use of IPR contributed to their decline. In reaching this conclusion we recognize in our case discussions that some union actors did argue in favour of greater institutional engagement at the time, but such arguments did not prosper.

2. Methodological note

The sociologist must interrogate social reality over a long period of time to increase their understanding of the development of social phenomena and the variety of factors which impinge upon the nature of that development.

It is in this context that we examine the strategies and practices promoted and deployed by trade unions in the United Kingdom from the Second World War, in relation to their engagement with IPR.

To achieve this, we have undertaken an extensive revision of the bibliography of the period covered.

It is challenging to cover a long period of history in a relatively short paper. We have sought to approach this challenge by:

- (1) Focusing in depth on a limited number of strategically selected cases
- (2) Giving voice in the case discussion to a variety of voices, both for and against the main argument of the authors.

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- (3) Using a wide range of sources – academic industrial relations articles and books; relevant biographies; discussion in historical fora.
 - (4) Emphasizing the need for interpretations of trade union strategies to be adequate at the level of meaning to the actors and not based on *ex ante* criticisms.

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3. Collective bargaining institutions

The period of the Second World War with Ernest Bevin as Minister for Labour and National Service represented the peak of institutional development in UK collective bargaining with the introduction of Order 1305 which, as well as effectively banning strikes, established extension provisions for multi-employer agreements and a strong arbitration/conciliation system. Wages councils were established, and joint industrial councils and joint production committees were fostered. By 1946 bargaining coverage had reached 89% (Bullock, 1960).

The multi-employer bargaining structure which had developed in the UK was a system based on voluntary settlements between employer and worker representatives rather than on legal relations and state intervention (Flanders, 1970). Unions supported and promoted voluntarism, emphasizing the single channel of worker representation via trade unions and collective bargaining (Towers, 1997).

The most significant institutional development after the Second World War has been the decentralization of collective bargaining and the decline of multi-employer agreements. In the mid-1980s 150 multi-employer arrangements were in operation in the UK. By 2010 this number had declined to 30, including the abolition in 1993–4 of 30 Wages Councils which had guaranteed trade union input into pay determination in poorly organized sectors. Bargaining coverage stood at 70% in the 1970s but had declined to 26% in 2018 (Visser-ICTWSS, 2019) providing support for the link between multi-employer bargaining and high bargaining coverage (Traxler, 2007; Visser, 2013).

This decentralization of collective bargaining and the decline of multi-employer agreements has been largely attributed to employer and government strategies, conditioned by the new global economic environment and *financialization* (Grady and Simms, 2018). The growth of plant level bargaining and changing economic circumstances led to employers questioning the role of multi-employer agreements and from the early 1980s an increasing number of firms in sectors such as food retail, banking, engineering and the utilities (after privatization) abandoned multi-employer bargaining (Brown *et al.*, 2009). The Conservative Government elected in 1979 modified the regulatory framework to offer employers protection from industrial action and gave them the confidence to challenge existing bargaining relations.

Trade unions therefore have not been seen as the major players in the decline of multi-employer bargaining. A consideration of the trade union position on decentralization reveals a complex picture with a degree of debate within the movement. In the 1970 and 1980s there existed an official union rhetoric of hostility to decentralization (Korczynski, 1997) although some unions welcomed it because of the improvements brought by negotiations at plant level (Undy *et al.*, 1981). However, unions opposed to decentralization had difficulty taking action. Their own decentralized structures meant their voice was weak. Eventually the change was endorsed by major unions such as the TGWU and the AEUW, although some unions did engage more actively in the maintenance of national bargaining, e.g. the EEPTU successfully maintained multi-employer bargaining in Engineering Construction and Electrical Contracting.

The movement away from national negotiating had been given fresh impetus by the Royal Commission on Trade Unions and Employers' Associations (the Donovan Report) which reported in 1968. Given the lack of union consensus, when Donovan focused on the need to

formalize local bargaining and failed to explain how national agreements would be able to survive the impact of workplace regulation, no major union preoccupation was expressed. The Donovan programme for the reform of industrial relations was all but complete by the late 1970s. [Sisson and Brown \(1983\)](#) could write that so far as the private sector was concerned, multi-employer bargaining could no longer be described as the formal system. Unions had to rely on enterprise level bargaining power which quickly came under pressure as unemployment increased and reduced their structural PRs.

Subsequent commentators have regretted the demise of multi-employer bargaining. [Edmonds \(2016\)](#) is an example of a trade union actor bemoaning the absence of a stronger trade union strategy to defend it, suggesting the framework of National Joint Industrial Councils would have provided an institutional buttress for the unions in the difficult years which followed. [Dunn \(2009\)](#) suggests the problem was over-confidence on the part of the unions. Their structural power in the 1950 and 1960s gave the unions an exaggerated view of their strength. In colourful terms, they went on a “binge” (i.e. Plant bargaining) and abandoned their lines of defence.

Such reservations “after the event” raise the question as to whether the trade unions could have ameliorated the decline in multi-employer bargaining if they had had a more realistic assessment of its importance to them as an IPR. Two reflections are relevant here. First, a recognition of the significance of the institutional resources of the multi-employer bargaining system to their position would have encouraged the unions to seek to “shore up” some elements of the system in the aftermath of the Donovan Report with the help of the Labour Governments of the 60s/70s.

Secondly, a more nuanced consideration of the evidence on the position of employers suggests that it is inaccurate to characterize them as united in seeking to abandon sectoral bargaining. The degree of conservative satisfaction with the existing system was commented upon by the Donovan Report itself as a worry for the prospects of implementing its recommendations. A survey of 79 employers’ associations in 1994 found that two-thirds represented employers in a negotiating body with unions to agree sectoral pay rates and they were highly satisfied with the arrangements ([Industrial Relations Services, 1994](#)).

There is evidence that the Engineering Employers’ Federation was divided on the issue ([McKinlay, 2011](#)). It tended to be larger firms which broke away from the multi-employer agreements. Small firms in engineering were more supportive of multi-employer bargaining because of the advantages it offered them -economies on bargaining costs, taking wages out of competition and minimization of the union impact at local level. Only the support of small firms for sectoral arrangements could explain that there was no significant pressure from the EEF membership in the early 1980s for an end to formal bargaining procedures beyond a preference for some modest streamlining ([Wiley, 1986](#)). Therefore, an approach by the unions, building upon coalitional PRs to maintain modified national bargaining structures with small and medium sized firms, might have had a sympathetic hearing from a significant number of employers. Such a model could have provided for exemptions for larger employers as is common in some EU countries such as Spain.

4. Worker representation and worker voice

On two occasions since the Second World War the UK trade union movement has considered initiatives on worker representation and employee voice. The first was the Committee of Inquiry on Industrial Democracy, chaired by Lord Bullock ([Bullock Report, 1977](#)).

The majority report of the Committee of Inquiry supported representation on the unitary boards of companies with 2000 or more employees, based on equal numbers of employee and shareholder representatives plus a small number of directors co-opted jointly by the two larger groups. The Labour Government accepted the principles of the majority report but the

White Paper, in 1978, diluted its recommendations, proposing that worker representatives should occupy one-third of the seats on a supervisory board in a new two-tier board structure in companies with more than 2000 employees (Davies, 1978). In addition, emphasis was placed upon the need for voluntary arrangements to be agreed between employers and trade unions, with legislation in a back-stop role.

The failure of the Labour Government in 1977/8 to legislate on industrial democracy has been explained by the government's weakness and the running out of parliamentary time. However, according to David Lea (2010), former TUC Assistant General Secretary and member of the Bullock Committee, the 1977 majority report recommendations were shelved in the end because the unions themselves could not agree to back them. A range of unions from different wings of the movement opposed the Bullock recommendations. For the EEPTU there was the possible contradiction of worker directors taking decisions contrary to their worker colleagues as collective bargainers. Unions should exist as an independent force and focus on extending the role of collective bargaining (Lloyd, 2000). The AUEW saw union involvement in the management of nationalized industries, run in the interests of the public, as a desirable objective but in the private sector considered it would weaken workers by committing them to policies made at board room level by their own representatives (Lewis and Clark, 1977). The GMWU was in favour of union involvement in corporate planning and strategy but via the extension of the collective bargaining rights rather than board representation (Davies, 1978). Thus, although the TUC, under the influence of TGWU leader and Bullock Committee member, Jack Jones, promoted the Bullock recommendations, and some small but influential unions such as the POEU (which had experienced worker directors at the Post Office) supported them, they could not claim to represent a united movement. Clive Jenkins, the other union representative on the Bullock Committee, eventually found that his own union, ASTMS, rejected worker-directors, preferring the extension of collective bargaining.

The recommendations of the Bullock report were about sharing power and their implementation was never going to be easy (Williamson, 2016). The uncertainty of the trade union movement about them was an ingredient in their eventual abandonment.

The second initiative on worker representation was the European Union Directive 2002/14/EC establishing a general framework for informing and consulting employees, adopted in March 2002 (European Parliament, 2002). The directive applies to undertakings with at least 50 employees or establishments with at least 20 employees and provides employees with rights to information and consultation on a range of business, employment and restructuring issues. The Directive allowed considerable flexibility to member states in respect of its implementation. The central UK employers' association, the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) opposed the Directive in principle and campaigned to prevent its adoption. Its main concern was to protect existing company practice and it praised the UK government for achieving the "least damaging deal available" during the negotiations on the Directive's final text (Carley and Hall, 2009).

Contemporary commentators saw the Regulations as an opportunity for the unions to extend the scope of the issues in which they were involved (Kelly, 2005) and use the consultative machinery to widen employee support and build up credibility (Terry *et al.*, 2009; Hall *et al.*, 2013). However unions' fear of being marginalized by information and consultation arrangements and insistence on retaining the single (union) channel of representation outweighed any drive to engage with the regulations and little strategic response of the unions to the Directive was evident (Butler *et al.*, 2018).

Given that most firms opposed a union-only channel in information and consultation (Koukiadaki, 2010) and that unions were not proactive in negotiating arrangements, the field was left open to employers. Most employers went for pre-existing arrangements on information and consultation and the regulations produced relatively little change (Koukiadaki, 2010).

The failure of the unions to engage in both worker representation proposals suggest again a failure to recognize the significance of IPR and a reluctance to engage in the kind of experimentation necessary to exploit IPR which may involve modifying existing institutions and institutional constraints in order to build new ones (Stone, 2014; Murray *et al.*, 2020).

5. The institutional structure of the trade union movement

Hyman (2001) suggested “Unions themselves are of course institutions and their own structural characteristics may form part of the analysis”. Their structures impinge upon the strategic options available to unions (Pontusson, 1992). In this section we examine the institutional structure of the UK trade union movement as an IPR.

Trade union movements in most European countries are organized in confederations although the relationship between confederations and their constituent bodies can vary considerably (Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman, 2013). Fragmented and decentralized trade union movements are handicapped in the development and implementation of union strategies whereas a strong confederation can overcome disagreements between unions and facilitate political action (Hyman, 1998). Thus, the relative weakness of the UK and US confederations limits their ability to act politically (Frege and Kelly, 2003). Most significant trade union leaders have agreed with the weak confederal role of the TUC. The last to consistently champion a significantly more expansionist role for the TUC were Ernest Bevin and Walter Citrine in the decade before the Second World War when the role of the TUC’s Economic Committee was developed, the TUC’s representational role was extended, and TUC leaders were regularly invited to serve on state bodies (Adonis, 2020). The TUC has limited constitutional authority over affiliated unions apart from the capacity to expel them, a penalty with few direct consequences. Affiliates have retained control over collective bargaining and excluded the TUC from involvement (Waddington, 2006). Dorey (2019) draws a parallel between the voluntarism the trade unions have promoted in collective bargaining and the voluntarism they exercise with respect to the TUC’s authority.

Criticisms of the weakness of the TUC are frequent among post-War commentators. Clegg (1976) argued that the trade unions needed a stronger central authority, pointing to Sweden where incomes policy worked, and wage drift was controlled because of strong central institutions. Towers (1997) compared unfavorably the TUC’s role in union renewal with that of the US AFL/CIO.

The TUC, itself and its General Council have rarely sought to extend their own authority and have been cautious in exercising the powers they did possess. Proponents of modernizing the TUC to take on more collective responsibility such as General Secretary George Woodcock have been exceptional (Taylor, 2000). The formal relaunch of the TUC in 1994 is instructive (Heery, 1998). It resulted in the slimming down of the organization, a reduction of its policy making role and the abolition of the Standing Committees of the General Council and the various Industry Committees. In their place were established task and project groups, usually related to specific campaigns. This increased emphasis upon its campaigning role did not challenge the existing power relationship between the TUC and its affiliates or increase its ability to co-ordinate their activities.

When the TUC took an initiative such as the Organizing Academy, established in 1998, which did affect individual unions directly, the response could be mixed. The non-involvement in the early years of the Academy of key affiliates such as the GMB and the TGWU (which later changed its position) reflected in part concern at the TUC overstepping the bounds of its traditional role (Heery *et al.*, 2000), while another major union, USDAW, decided in 2002 to set up its own Organizing Academy on the grounds that the organizing approach of the TUC’s Academy did not reflect sufficiently the problems of working in the retail sector (Parker and Rees, 2013). Subsequently merger processes and the concentration of

the unions have had consequences for the role of the TUC (Waddington, 2006). Traditional roles such as adjudication in inter-union disputes have been undermined: the larger amalgamated unions sort out problems internally or between themselves. The decline in the number of smaller unions has reduced the demand for confederal services. The development of a limited number of large unions has threatened to redraw the power relationships between the TUC and its major affiliates. Although 'super-unions' such as Unite and Unison have not totally displaced the TUC, a weakening of the TUC is undeniable and can be seen as part of the context for the movement of the TUC into a largely campaigning role.

The weakness of the TUC has implications for the development of social dialogue at national level. In 2016 the UK was one of only two states in the European Union to have no tripartite bodies and one of only five states to have no national tripartite institution discussing general and social economic issues (the National Economic Development Council was abolished by the Government in 1992) (European Commission, 2016). Of the social dialogue-based institutions established during the 1960 and 1970s only bipartite examples, largely dedicated to programme management in certain functional areas, survive, e.g. ACAS.

Tripartite social dialogue in the 60 and 70s increasingly revolved around incomes policies, with the unions subjected to attempts by governments to draw them into a productive partnership (Towers, 1997). Although the TUC attempted to play a co-ordinating role, the union involvement was not really a result of TUC co-ordination but of the influence of several strong union leaders such as Jack Jones (Ackers, 2016). Eventually the policy ran up against inflation and individual union claims returned to the fore. The TUC was incapable of persuading individual unions to buy into a solidaristic national pay policy that threatened traditional salaries differentials (Oude Nijhuis, 2011). This failure made subsequent social dialogue pretensions less credible.

The UK trade unions therefore have not exploited the IPR most under their control, their own structure. As a result, it has not been possible for the TUC to provide leadership to affiliates and to express the internal solidarity and unity of purpose necessary for it to be a significant power resource for the trade unions (Levesque and Murray, 2010).

6. Discussion

The paper has presented a more nuanced analysis of the decline of the trade unions in the United Kingdom which has traditionally attributed this decline to the role of employer and government actors operating within an increasingly globalized and competitive business environment.

Using literature on PRs the paper brings trade unions back into focus, as advocated by Refslund and Arnholtz (2022) and argues that their failure to effectively manage the PRs available to them contributed to their decline.

The paper has focused on the union approach to managing IPR by examining three cases: collective bargaining, worker representation and national union structure. In each case the unions were unable to optimize the IPR available to them: losing the support of multi-employer bargaining; failing to build institutions of worker representation; retaining a weak confederal structure.

The paper responds to some of the weaknesses identified in relation to PR literature. Refslund and Arnholtz (2022) criticize the lack of attention in research to the nuts and bolts of the management and employment of PRs, as well as assumptions about union coherence and uniformity. Preminger (2020) argues for more attention to be paid to ideational power and the role of ideas in providing legitimacy for action. A consideration of the reasons for the failure of the unions to develop a more strategic response to the management of IPR enables us to address these issues.

An initial error of the unions was their dependence to a high degree upon two PRs - the structural and associational power, based upon full employment, which supported a high bargaining coverage and membership density for more than three decades after the Second World War. No provision was made for this configuration to change. PR literature emphasizes the dangers of depending on one or two PRs and the need to maintain the liquidity of other PRs. The failure of the unions to do this was related to an over confidence in the permanence of the post war model.

A key PR to which insufficient attention was paid was ideational PR. The public image of the unions which became established after the Second World War was not a very positive one. They were often blamed for poor industrial relations, low productivity and inflationary wage settlements. Such a narrative was not inevitable, and its content could be challenged using contemporary data (Wrigley, 2002) but its existence weakened the PRs of the unions, particularly when the movement was threatened. A more concerted effort to question this narrative emphasizing the “sword of justice” role of the unions would have increased the legitimacy of union action and made it easier for them to optimize their IPR.

The subsequent failure to respond to the threats to their role and to engage with IPR as a possible substitute for PRs of declining utility can be related to several factors. First the changes in the economic environment and responses of other key actors increasingly transmitted to the unions the severe limits of their own agency. The competitive environment faced by employers resulted in a more aggressive stance in relation to the unions. Political actors also reflected this. Although most attention has been given to the 1980s legislation of Conservative Governments in this respect, one must also emphasize that the unions began to realize the limits of the support they could expect from the Labour Party. In the 1970s relations between the unions and Labour Governments became strained over union opposition to incomes policy and government attempts to regulate union activities. In the 1980s the leadership of the party under Neil Kinnock sought to show it was not unduly influenced by the unions, indicating a future Labour Government would not repeal the Conservative legislation on strike ballots. The New Labour Government under Tony Blair, elected in 1997 was also concerned not to be identified with the unions and introduced a legislative programme focusing upon individual employment rights rather than restoring rights lost by the unions.

Secondly, the lack of unity and coherence of the trade unions’ policies related to the lack of confederal co-ordination was a major impediment to the development of strategic behaviour within the movement. The experience of the UK unions suggests that the ability of actors to fashion a common approach to the challenges they face from their disparate parts is a precondition for the effective exploitation of PRs. It is not a coincidence that where there were examples of unions engaging with IPR they were able to develop such a common approach. Thus, the ETU’s ability to retain multi-employer bargaining in the Electrical Contracting Industry was facilitated by the centralized nature of the union which made unity and coherence easier to maintain (Korczynski, 1997). The CWU’s engagement with worker directors similarly was made easier by the homogeneity of the union and the existence of one main employer.

Thirdly there was evidence the unions did not have some of the strategic capabilities which would have enabled them to take advantage of PRs (Levesque and Murray, 2010). Intermediation skills were not sufficient to develop the coherence between plant and national levels of the unions’ structures to progress strategy nor to explore with employers supportive of multi – employer bargaining the possibility of maintaining some kind of sectoral bargaining structure. The trade unions did not seem to be willing to experiment and explore the value of new PRs (Murray *et al.*, 2020). The failure to establish a stronger confederal role for the TUC suggests a lack of capacity to reflect upon and learn from experience to maximize the effectiveness of the unions’ own institutions.

The institutional framework of collective industrial relations in the UK has been at a low ebb for more than four decades. In the last decade there have been developments in trade union thinking on institution building, most clearly in relation to collective bargaining where the TUC (2019) has argued for the re-establishment of sectoral bargaining to establish minimum platforms for pay and conditions in sectors where the Secretary of State decides there is a need to boost pay, working conditions, skills, or productivity. In the area of worker representation, the Williamson Report (TUC, 2016) argued for mandatory worker representation on company boards. The TUC's *Democracy in the Workplace* (2014) recommended obliging companies by law to establish a works council once a specified number of workers are employed, suggested a change in the thinking of the TUC. Such policies indicate a greater engagement with IPR, but their implementation will require considerable development of the movement's strategic capability.

7. Conclusion

This paper has focused on the failure of the UK trade unions to engage with IPR in the decades after the Second World War. This unstrategic behaviour was related certainly to their lack of agency given the hostile context in which they were operating. However, it was also related to their failure to recognize the need for such engagement and the lack of the skills needed to develop it.

As the years of decline progressed, it became increasingly difficult for the unions to see any way back to the kind of IPR they had enjoyed under multi-employer bargaining and realism led to the acceptance of and the need to work with a decentralized system which, in turn, became consolidated.

The paper has made several contributions. In adopting a very different frame to most analyses of the decline of the UK unions it has been able to pose issues in relation to union action in the UK which have been rarely addressed.

It has also displayed the difficulties of unions adopting a passive stance in relation to PRs and relying on one or two sources of power. The experience of the UK unions emphasizes the need for the deployment of several resources and for contingency planning to facilitate changing between them.

Finally, the paper has provided a detailed examination of the challenges facing unions seeking to engage with IPR and other PRs, such as the importance of unity and co-ordination. This is particularly relevant at a time when the UK unions have begun to consider more actively the advantages of a greater engagement with IPR.

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