

# Future Unions

Towards a membership renaissance  
in the private sector

Cameron Tait | November 2017



## CONTENTS

About the project	3
Acknowledgements	4
Executive summary	5
Introduction	10
<b>Chapter 1. The decline since 1979</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>Chapter 2: What workers think</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>Chapter 3: A membership renaissance</b>	<b>35</b>
Endnotes	58

Fabian Society  
61 Petty France  
London  
SW1H 9EU

**General Secretary**, Andrew Harrop  
**Deputy General Secretary**, Olivia Bailey  
**Editorial Director**, Kate Murray  
**Head of Media and Communications**, Claire Sewell

**Designed by** Georgie Lowry, [www.gslowrydesign.co.uk](http://www.gslowrydesign.co.uk)

This paper, like all publications of the Fabian Society, represents not the collective views of the society but only the views of the author. This publication may not be reproduced without express permission of the Fabian Society.

First published November 2017  
© The Fabian Society 2017  
[www.fabians.org.uk](http://www.fabians.org.uk)

## ABOUT THE PROJECT

This report is published under the auspices of the Changing Work Centre, an initiative set up by the Fabian Society and Community in February 2016 to look at the changing world of work, what it means for the workforce, and what government, politics and the labour movement should do in response. The research was designed to assess whether or not the decline of private sector membership is likely to be permanent and, if not, how the decline could be reversed.

The research for this report was undertaken over several stages between 2016 and 2017:

- We looked at UK union membership trends in recent decades. This included a literature review, analysis of available statistics on UK union membership, and interviews with experts on the trade union movement.
- We assessed workforce attitudes to unions. We worked with IPSOS MORI in July 2016 to conduct a face-to-face survey of a representative sample of 1,339 adults aged 18 and over who were in full or part time work in GB.<sup>i</sup> This survey matched the sample of a 2001 TUC survey, and we updated a number of questions to see how attitudes had changed.
- We followed up this survey with three focus groups of non-unionised private sector workers between the ages of 18 and 34 in London, Coventry and Cwmbran to gain a greater understanding about their attitudes to trade unions and collectivism in the workplace.<sup>ii</sup>
- We consulted the trade union movement. We conducted a series of interviews with trade union general secretaries and senior officers about the challenges faced by the movement and how unions were responding to them. We supplemented these interviews with two group interviews with lay union activists and workforce reps: one with Prospect and BECTU members from around the UK, and another with Community members in the East Midlands.

This research forms one part of a programme of work on the future of private sector unions. The Changing Work Centre also held a public event at Labour party conference in September 2017 with Chuka Umunna MP and Stella Creasy MP, and in December 2017 it will publish a collection of essays from leading trade unionists, MPs and thought leaders responding to this research and its lessons for the union movement.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Community for partnering with us on this research and for their continued commitment to the Changing Work Centre, our joint initiative which is now nearly two years old. In particular, I would like to thank Lauren Crowley, Matt Ball and John Park for their thoughtful contributions.

More than 40 general secretaries, union staff members and activists gave interviews, attended our roundtable and fed in to this report, alongside a number of experts on British trade unions, and I am extremely grateful to everybody for their insights and reflections. In particular, I would like to thank David Arnold, Antonia Bance, Alex Bryson, Kay Carberry, Sue Ferns, John Hannett, John Kelly, Ged Nichols, Naomi Pohl, Margaret Prosser, Carl Roper, Kevin Rowan, Melanie Simms and Dan Tomlinson. I would also like to thank Prospect colleagues who, along with Community, arranged for us to speak to union activists about the issues we were investigating.

Fabian Society colleagues also helped to develop and deliver the research, and I would like to thank Olivia Bailey and Andrew Harrop in particular for their support and feedback throughout.

I take full responsibility for this report, its findings, recommendations and all of its mistakes. The trade unionists who took part in this research did not sign it off, and Community were brilliant in giving me the space to write what I felt appropriate even if it was challenging. It was a privilege to meet so many inspiring and passionate trade unionists while undertaking this research and I hope this report will provide a useful and constructive contribution to the debate.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report is the product of a programme of Fabian Society and Changing Work Centre research on the future of private sector trade unions. The report charts the decline of British trade unions from being the most powerful union movement in the world to one facing a fight to remain relevant – and it sets out key steps on the road to recovery.

The research included analysis of trade union membership trends, a face-to-face survey with 1,339 workers, a series of focus groups across the UK with non-unionised private sector workers between the ages of 18 and 35, and a consultation with trade union leaders, officers and lay representatives. The research was supported by an advisory group of leading trade unionists and experts.

### MEMBERSHIP DECLINE

Membership in the private sector is less than a third of what it was at its peak, falling from 45 per cent to 13 per cent of the commercial workforce between 1979 and 2016. The key drivers of this change were legislation, industrial change, shifting business practice, and changing attitudes.

Considerable headwinds will need to be overcome for private sector trade unionism to recover:

- Industrial change is going to make life more difficult for unions. The five fastest growing private sector industries have low levels of trade union density. Each has less than half the trade union density of the UK as a whole, and lower levels of union membership than the private sector average.
- Over the last 15 years people have become more individualistic in their attitudes to work. Our survey shows more of the workforce now want to deal with their pay individually, which marks a stark contrast to previous surveys which have shown a preference for collective pay bargaining. This finding was confirmed in our focus groups of young private sector workers.

However, despite the long-term decline of trade union membership, trade unions are still the UK's largest voluntary movement and they remain a powerful force in the labour market.

Only

# 13%

of the commercial workforce in the private sector are members of trade unions – compared to 45% in 1979

## ENDURING PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR UNIONS

The Fabian Society's survey of the workforce shows the decline in union membership has not been matched with a decline in support for the role of trade unions in the private sector workforce:

- Three in five private sector workers (59 per cent) think trade unions are necessary to protect working conditions.
- Only a minority (20 per cent) of private sector workers agree with the statement 'trade unions have no future in modern Britain'. 44 per cent disagree, and a quarter of them are neutral.

The focus groups with non-unionised private sector workers echoed this support for trade unions, but highlighted important challenges for the trade union movement:

- Workers are instinctively positive about trade unions. When asked about unions, the participants' main focus was on the constructive work they do, like improving pay and conditions.
- Workers have a good understanding of what unions do, which is both good and bad news for unions. Unions will need to do more than just explain their role in order to recruit new members.
- Many private sector workers think unions are simply 'not for me'. Unions are seen as working well for people in public sector, long-term or highly skilled jobs.
- Unions feel distant from young private sector workers' day-to-day experiences. Unions are seen as institutions from history or 'guardian angels': benevolent but distant forces for good.
- Many participants thought that trade union reps and leaders are not 'like me'. Unions have a diversity problem that is putting off prospective members.

However, people are open to joining unions if they can make an appealing offer that is value for money. The non-unionised workers who participated in our focus groups offered their advice to trade unions. We have distilled their ideas into five broad statements that sum up what would make them join a union. The workers would join a union if:

---

# 59%

of private sector workers think trade unions are necessary to protect working conditions

- **...it could help me personally.**
- **...membership was value for money.**
- **...the union worked with my employer.**
- **...I had the right information.**
- **...I had sufficient problems at work..**

## A MEMBERSHIP RENAISSANCE

Trade unionists are clear about the scale of the challenge they face, with one saying: “We can’t rest on our laurels – we have to adapt.” But they also reject claims that private sector union membership is in permanent decline, with every trade unionist interviewed saying they expected to see union density begin to grow in time.

Stemming membership decline will require changes in the way unions recruit, organise and support workers. But reversing 40 years of falling density will require more than change to individual union practice. It will require unprecedented levels of collaboration and partnership, with unions working together to bring millions more into the movement, and working with government and business to ensure the voices of workers are fully heard as the UK economy enters its fourth industrial revolution.

On the basis of the insight from trade union leaders, officers and activists, we have developed 11 recommendations to drive a renaissance in private sector trade union membership. Many of them draw on existing good practice. Unions should:

- 1 **Answer the ‘what can you do for me?’ question.** Unions need to be able to give prospective members a tangible idea of what they should expect as a member, using case studies and qualified promises to echo the marketing strategies of disruptive start-up businesses.
- 2 **Be representative of the workforce.** Unions need to set out plans to ensure their reps, committees, staff teams and leadership are as diverse as the industries in which they organise.
- 3 **Introduce discount membership rates.** Unions should offer discounted membership deals to under 35s and to workers in unrecognised workplaces – to bring in younger members and to acknowledge workers in unorganised workplaces tend to get less from their membership.

- 4 Provide ‘instant breakdown cover’ for workers with pre-existing problems.** Unions should follow the lead of the AA by committing to provide non-members with instant support for pre-existing issues in exchange for a fee and an upfront commitment to membership.
- 5 Reach out to the workforce of the future.** Unions should understand the journey that brings workers into their industries and occupations and deliver outreach activities in key parts of this pipeline, in order to educate future employees about how unions can support them in their career.
- 6 Invest in technology to reach hard-to-reach workers.** Unions should invest in the development of tools, apps and other tech-based solutions to make it economically viable to organise isolated and dispersed workers.
- 7 Establish career development centres.** Unions must support workers who don’t expect to be in their job or sector for life by helping them develop their careers – to help people prepare for the future, while also bargaining for the here and now.
- 8 Make the most of available data.** Unions are sitting on an abundance of data, much of which can be put to better use to improve the effectiveness of campaigns, recruitment strategies and overall decision-making.
- 9 Set standards across multiple workplaces.** Unions should consider establishing or promoting sectoral standards to improve work across multiple workplaces.
- 10 Collaborate to increase bargaining power.** In the 150th anniversary of the foundation of the TUC, unions should come together to agree a new collective mission to reverse historic membership decline. This should involve giving the TUC a new role as a clearing house for union membership, through which workers can ‘join the family’ of the union movement.
- 11 Build a new partnership with government and business.** Unions should extend a hand of friendship to good, responsible employers with a new cross-union kitemark scheme to reward good employment practice. In return, government and business should acknowledge the vital contribution unions can make, especially as the fourth industrial revolution gathers pace, and give unions access



to all workplaces and end union-busting. This new partnership should form the basis of a new industrial relations framework for the UK, complemented by sector-level forums for unions, employers and, where necessary, government to co-create plans to boost productivity, fill skills gaps and improve work for all.

These 11 recommendations together can pave the way to a trade union membership renaissance that can apply and sustain upwards pressure on wages, working conditions and fulfilment at work for decades to come.

## INTRODUCTION

May is the cruellest month for trade unionists. Each spring the government publishes an update on the proportion of the workforce in union membership, and the movement is almost always one way: the proportion of workers who are members of a trade union has fallen nearly every year since 1979.

As this decline has taken hold, different generations of trade union leaders have attempted to arrest its course. There has been a prolonged period of consolidation to maximise bargaining power, with a series of mergers reducing the number of TUC-affiliated unions from 109 to 49 between 1980 and 2017. And we have had advocacy for new models of union organising, such as the 'new unionism' espoused by John Monks during his tenure as TUC general secretary between 1993 and 2003.

More recently, trade unions have embarked on new initiatives to reverse the decline. Unions have begun to reach out to previously lightly organised sectors of the economy, with several unions outlining plans to recruit more self-employed workers. And Unison, GMB and the IWGB have all won historic court battles against employers to improve workplace rights for millions. Despite all of this, membership decline continues apace.

When historians look back at the last four decades, they might say that the decline was inevitable given the concerted political and legislative attack on trade unions over the period. However, some might reasonably claim the underlying conditions for a trade union revival were in plain view, with the economic climate meaning large swathes of the workforce potentially stood to benefit from union membership.

Pay has flatlined in the UK over the last decade, with workers facing the continuation of an unprecedented era of low real terms pay growth. Levels of low pay are increasing each year, with nearly 6 million people paid less than the Living Wage, calculated as the minimum amount of money needed to meet basic living costs. Reported insecurity at work has risen substantially over the last ten years. And career progression is stalling for many, with millions finding themselves stuck in unrewarding jobs.

The vast majority of these workers are found in the UK's private sector, where low pay tends to be more prevalent, jobs tend to be more insecure and progression harder to sustain than in the public sector. And yet, just 13 per cent of private sector workers are members of a trade union.

---

# 49

The number of TUC-affiliated unions in 2017 – fallen from 109 in 1993

---

# 6m

Nearly 6 million people in the UK are paid less than the Living Wage

It is not only the many workers in low-paid, insecure jobs with little chance of progression who are losing out from the way the UK's economy works, but society as a whole. Productivity is stagnant, growth is sluggish and the government's tax take is under threat, putting public services at risk. Several international studies have suggested that boosting trade union membership and collective bargaining is likely to boost wages and reduce inequality.

There have been few moments in history in which more people have needed a trade union. Therefore, the research that underpins this report started by asking:

*'Is permanent decline of private sector trade union membership inevitable? And if not, what do we need to do about it?'*

The answer to the first question is a clear and emphatic 'no', and the latter half of this report sets out the rather more complicated answer to the second question.

During these tough times for trade unions, some commentators have begun to suggest policymakers should look beyond trade unions to new forms of collectivism and advocacy for workers' interests. The starting point for this report is to reject that analysis, which overlooks the vital role trade unions play not only in winning improvements for workers, but in guarding those improvements too.

The UK union movement may be smaller than it once was, but together trade unions still constitute a powerful force driving up employment standards for millions of workers. Millions more stand to benefit from a stronger union movement.

This report lays out a plan for a trade union membership renaissance. It sets out the scale of the challenge and shows that if unions can persuade the workforce they can help them personally, a major membership drive is possible. However, such a drive will require a concerted effort from unions individually, collectively and in partnership with government and business.

Forty years after the membership decline began, the challenge for unions is now well understood. This report contributes new thinking to the debate around the next steps that are needed. Now we need action from unions, business and government to reinstate the upwards pressure on wages and conditions and solve the country's productivity puzzle. It is a major but not insurmountable challenge, as long as we tackle it together.

---

**Trade unions  
still constitute  
a powerful  
force driving  
up employment  
standards for  
millions of  
workers**

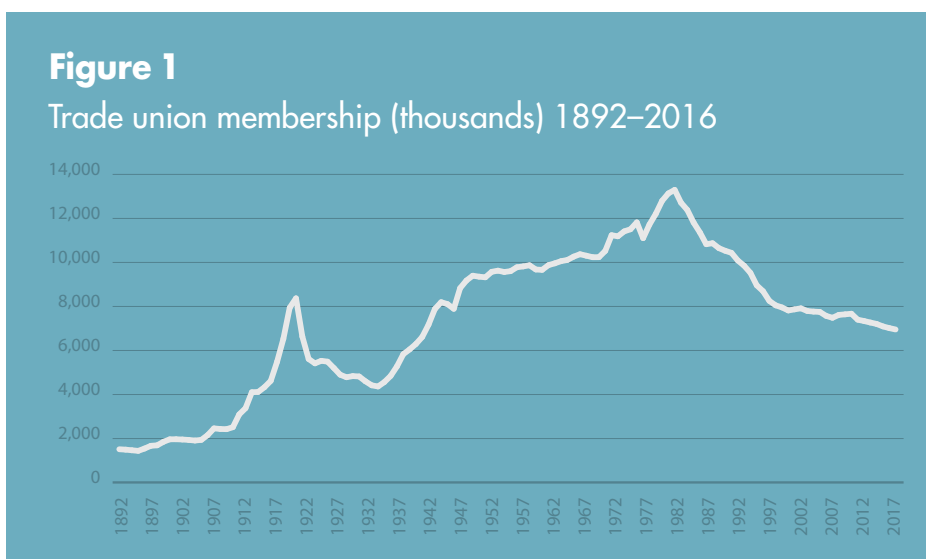
## CHAPTER 1. THE DECLINE SINCE 1979

Debates around the future of British trade unions tend to start from an assessment of their past. In the last 40 years, British trade unions have gone from being the most powerful union movement in the developed world to facing a fight to stay relevant. While the residual strength of the union movement should not be dismissed – trade unions still represent the UK’s largest voluntary movement with more than 6 million members – it is clear union power has been considerably weakened since its peak in the 1970s and early 1980s.

Anti-union legislation, changing business practices and shifting social attitudes have all played a role in the decline of union membership and collective bargaining across the UK. This chapter provides an outline of how and why unionisation has declined in order to set the context for the challenges unions face in growing their membership, relevance and power.

### UNION MEMBERSHIP DECLINE

Trade union membership in the UK currently stands at its lowest level since the second world war. As figure 1 shows, membership figures have been in steady decline since their peak of 13.2 million in 1979, at which point the UK was the most heavily organised large OECD country.<sup>iii</sup> This period of peak membership coincided with the escalation of industrial action across the public and private sectors and the final months of James Callaghan’s Labour government.



Source: Department of Employment Statistics Division (1892-1974); Certification Office (1974-2015).

Trade union membership fell by 41 per cent between 1979 and 1997, a period during which Margaret Thatcher famously weakened union rights, many heavily unionised industries declined in size, and standard industrial relations practice began to shift. The decline in membership has continued since then, albeit more gradually, dropping to an all-time low of 6.2 million in 2016. Today 21 per cent of people in employment are members of a trade union.

Trade union membership fell by

**41%**

between 1979 and 1997 and the decline has continued

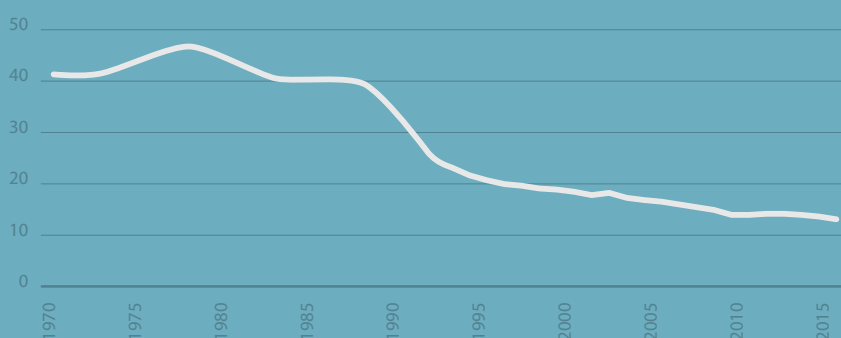
## Weakened presence in the private sector

The UK's trade union membership has traditionally had a higher density in the public sector than in the private sector, but this gap has grown over recent decades. In 1979, 45 per cent of private sector workers were members of a union. As figure 2 shows, this figure fell to 13 per cent of the private sector workforce by 2016 – just 2.6 million members. By comparison, public sector membership fell from 69 per cent to 53 per cent over the same period, with 3.6 million members recorded in 2016.

The long-term growth of the private sector, and accompanying decline in the size of the public sector, has made the challenge more difficult for unions. The proportion of the UK's total workforce employed in the private sector has gone through another period of growth following public sector cuts from 2009, rising to a record 83 per cent in March 2017.<sup>iv</sup> The fall in the number of (typically unionised) public sector workers and the rise of (typically non-unionised) private sector workers is pulling down overall union membership figures.

**Figure 2**

Decline of private sector density 1971–2016  
(proportion of private sector workforce in union membership)



Sources: OECD trade union membership and density data; Blanchflower, D. 'A cross-country study of union membership' in IZA DP No. 2016 (2006); BEIS Trade union statistics (2017).

## Decline of collective bargaining coverage

The decline of UK trade union membership has been accompanied by a sharp decline in collective bargaining coverage. At the peak of trade union membership in 1980, 64 per cent of employees had their pay and conditions agreed in negotiations between their employer and a trade union. In 2016, this proportion had more than halved, with 26 per cent of employees covered by collective bargaining arrangements. As figure 3 shows, collective bargaining coverage in the private sector fell to a record low of 15 per cent of employees in 2016.

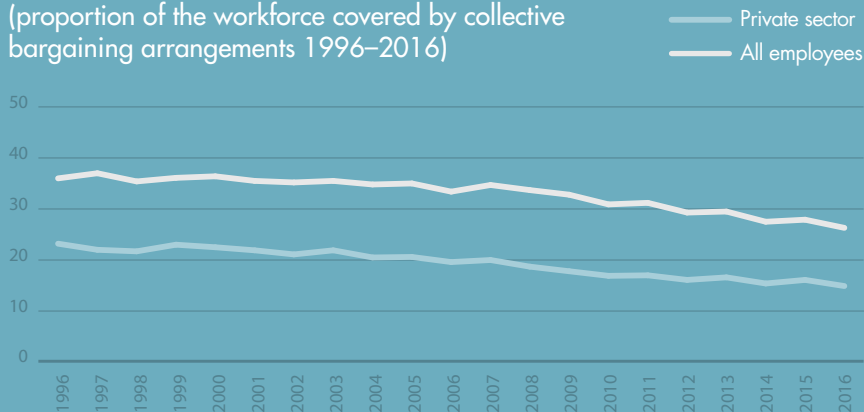
Collective bargaining has always sat at the heart of what trade unions do and the value they bring to their members. It provides a dialogue between workers and managers and gives workers a stake in their organisations. The decline of both collective bargaining coverage and membership levels creates a vicious cycle: as collective bargaining declines, joining a union becomes less attractive, but collective bargaining is unlikely to become more widespread without more union members.

# 15%

Collective bargaining coverage in the private sector fell to a record low of 15% of employees in 2016

**Figure 3**

Decline of collective bargaining coverage  
(proportion of the workforce covered by collective bargaining arrangements 1996–2016)



Source: BEIS trade union statistics.

## TRADE UNIONS ARE STILL THE UK'S LARGEST VOLUNTARY MOVEMENT

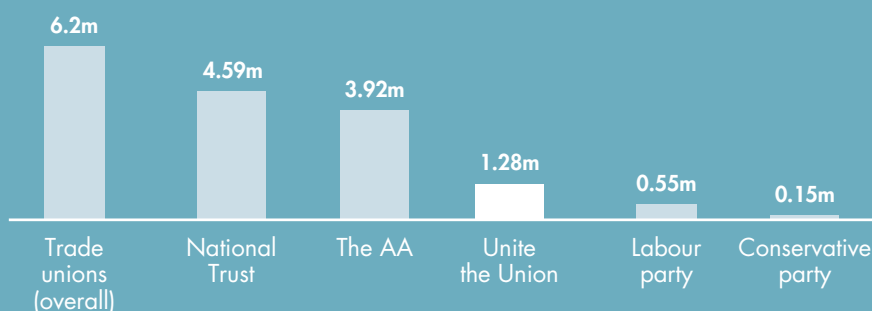
Despite the fall in trade union membership levels, it is worth remembering that trade unions – as a whole movement – are still the UK's largest voluntary movement with more than 6 million members. The next largest membership organisations are the National Trust, which has 4.6 million members, and the AA, which has 3.9 million members.

To put this into perspective, the chart below also shows trade union membership figures compared to the two largest political parties. Despite a recent membership surge, the Labour party only has 550,000 members, and the Conservative party is lower still, at around 150,000 members.

The largest trade union is Unite, which alone has 1.3 million members, which is more than twice that of the Labour party, and around a fifth of the entire union movement.

**Figure 4**

Size of various membership organisations (number of members)



Sources: Trade union (overall) from Trade Union Statistics 2016 (ONS); National Trust and the AA statistics from annual reports; Unite statistics from entry to the Certification Officer, 2016; Labour and Conservative party from Membership of UK Political Parties (House of Commons Library).

## WHAT CAUSED THE DECLINE?

The origins of the decline of British unions over the last 40 years are now broadly understood. However, there is an ongoing debate around the relative impact of different factors, and in particular the competing roles played by government legislation and slow union modernisation, as well as changing social attitudes.

## Legislation

The extent of the role of legislation in the decline of UK unionisation is contested, though it is widely accepted as a factor. Between 1980 and 1993 the Thatcher and Major governments introduced six acts of parliament including measures to weaken trade unions. These laws banned a number of union practices including secondary ‘solidarity’ strikes, and added new restrictions to picketing and balloting for industrial action.<sup>v</sup>

Richard Freeman and Jeffrey Pelletier argue that these changes contributed to union decline during this period more than any other factor. They contend that because union density did not drop by the same extent in Ireland where there was a similar labour market to the UK but broad political support for unions, the key variable factor was government legislation.<sup>vi</sup>

More recent accounts of the decline of trade unions have tended to view government legislation as one of a number of driving factors, rather than the sole issue. David Metcalf, Neil Millward and others have identified the attack on, and eventual outlawing of, closed shop workplaces (in which all employees have to be union members) as a critical factor in union decline.<sup>vii, viii</sup> They argue that this led to a sharp fall in membership in already unionised workplaces.

## Industrial change and shifting business practice

The labour market economist Stephen Machin argues that, rather than legislation, the key factor underpinning union decline has been the failure of unions to effectively organise in new workplaces.<sup>ix</sup> Machin’s case is supported by research suggesting unions have only very rarely been derecognised in workplaces and that the decrease of unionised workplaces within industries is the result of a lack of active unions in new workplaces.<sup>x</sup>

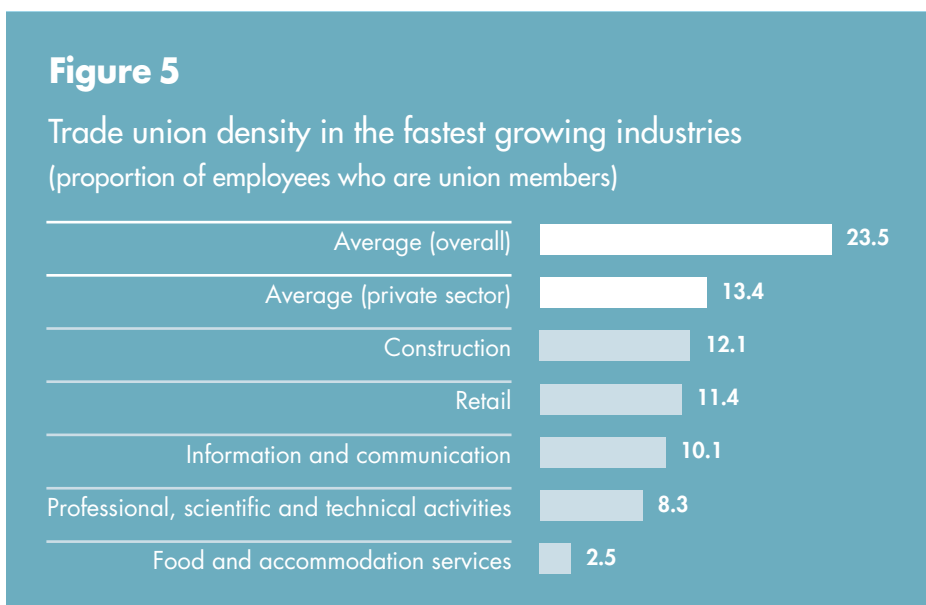
This argument is also supported by an analysis of trade union density in the fastest growing sectors. Figure 5 shows the trade union density in the five private sector industries with the highest projected employment growth, as identified by the National Institute of Economic and Social Research. Membership in all five industries is lower than the average union density for the private sector, and substantially lower than the average density for the UK as a whole. In particular, trade union membership in the food and accommodation sector, one of the three fastest growing industries, is just 2.5 per cent. This shows that trade unions have been less effective at organising in the growing areas of the economy than they have traditionally been in



declining industries such as manufacturing, as well as in the public sector.

David Blanchflower and Alex Bryson have argued that structural changes in the economy only account for a third of the decline in unionisation. They contend that changing standard business practice has driven most of the decline, with their research showing a clear shift in the likelihood of employers to recognise unions around 1980.

This argument is supported by the fact that, as David Metcalf puts it: “The trend away from manufacturing, male, large workplace-intensive employment towards private service, female, small workplace-intensive employment was already in existence in the 1970s when union membership rose by nearly 3 million.”<sup>xi</sup> Metcalf suggests employers changed their position because of a rise of “Thatcherite views among some managers” as well as a growth of investment (and therefore pressure) from overseas.<sup>xii</sup>



Note: The five industries are identified in Runge J., The Changing World of Work (NIESR / Unions 21, 2016) along with health and social care as the six fastest growing industries. The latter industry was omitted as it is a predominantly public sector funded industry. The trade union density figures are from the Labour Force Survey (ONS, 2017).

## Changing attitudes

Another contribution to the decline of union membership was a change in attitudes towards unions in the workforce. In one of the interviews conducted as part of this programme of research, a former trade union leader said:

*“The problem is that today’s young people seem so much more individualistic. That sense of the collective isn’t there.”*

– Former trade union leader, interview

The work of Richard Disney and others, and more recently from Gavin Kelly and Dan Tomlinson at the Resolution Trust, has shown that since 1980, each cohort of young people has been less likely to join a union than the one before it.<sup>xiii</sup> Kelly and Tomlinson attribute this to a change in social attitudes, suggesting that support for unions among younger generations has declined because of a fall in support for collectivism, as has been seen with the decline in support for collective welfare institutions.

Analysis of the British Social Attitudes survey supports this theory of a cohort change in collective attitudes to welfare institutions. Young adults today tend to be less supportive of the National Health Service than previous generations and less supportive of more generous social security payments.<sup>xiv</sup> However, there is an ongoing debate on whether this applies to collectivism more broadly, with serious analysts on both sides of the argument. The box below shows how polling conducted as part of this research (which is covered in more detail in the following chapter) sheds further light on this debate with evidence of a shift in preferred approaches to dealing with pay negotiation.

The combination of hostile legislation, the failure of unions to keep up with changes in the makeup of industries and business practice, and shifting attitudes has provided a serious challenge to the role of unions in recent decades. As David Metcalf pithily put it: “In the 1980s unions lost the support of the state and managers, whereas in the 1990s they lost the support of many employees”.<sup>xv</sup> In the 2000s and 2010s, with the downward trends continuing, unions are yet to win this support back.

### A PREFERENCE FOR NEGOTIATING PAY INDIVIDUALLY

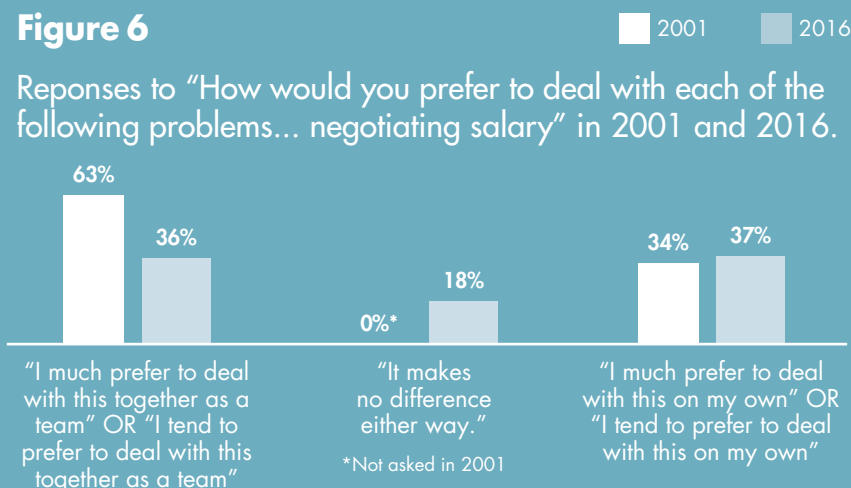
The case for a shift in social attitudes appears to be supported by Fabian Society polling as part of this research. The table below suggests there has been a significant shift in preferences for approaches to negotiating salaries, a core part of the work of trade unions. In 2001 almost twice as many preferred a collective to an individual approach, while in 2016 the workforce was split evenly on the question, (note the design of the question is not identical) with more of the workforce preferring to negotiate their pay individually than collectively.

It should be noted that (as figure 3 above shows) the proportion of the workforce covered by collective bargaining agreements declined from 36 to 25 per cent between 2000 and 2016. Therefore, it is likely that with fewer people working in unionised workplaces, the concept of collective bargaining is becoming less familiar to workers. Indeed, this was borne out by discussion in the focus groups with non-unionised younger private sector workers, who expressed general tendencies towards acting collectively in the workplace, but when it came to discussions on pay, preferred to deal with it individually, because, as one worker put it: "That's how I've always done it." This shift in preferences underlines the difficulty unions face to remain relevant in the workplace. As union membership and collective bargaining coverage declines, workers become on the whole less aware of the benefits of unionisation and collective bargaining. This can make rebuilding membership even more difficult for unions.

Note: Research was undertaken by Ipsos MORI between 10 and 23 June 2016 using CAPiBus, Ipsos MORI's computer-aided face-to-face in-home omnibus survey with 1,339 adults aged 18 and over who are in full or part time work in GB. Data have been weighted by age, gender, region, working status, social grade, tenure and ethnicity to the known population profile of working adults aged 18+ in GB. This survey was specifically designed to match the sample and methodology underpinning the 2001 BMRB survey presented in Diamond, W and Freeman, R, What workers want from workplace organisations (TUC, 2001). However, there were some changes to question design (including in the questions set out here) to account for changes in best practice between the two surveys.

**Figure 6**

Reponses to "How would you prefer to deal with each of the following problems... negotiating salary" in 2001 and 2016.



## CHAPTER 2: WHAT WORKERS THINK

To gain a deeper understanding of public attitudes to trade unions and to assess the potential for membership growth in the future, the Fabian Society conducted research into workforce attitudes. This chapter looks at attitudes towards trade unions, why non-unionised workers have not joined a union, and if and how unions could make non-unionised workers more likely to join a union.

The findings set out in this chapter are informed by a nationally representative survey of 1,339 workers and a series of focus groups with non-unionised private sector workers between the ages of 18 and 34 in Hammersmith in London, Coventry in the West Midlands and Cwmbran in Wales.

### SURVEY FINDINGS

In 2016, the Fabian Society's Changing Work Centre commissioned Ipsos MORI to conduct a major piece of face-to-face research with workers across Great Britain. The research updated a 2001 survey on attitudes to work that was originally commissioned by the TUC, matching its methodology and sample.<sup>xvi</sup>

The survey results (see figure 7) show solid support for trade unions and the work they do. Three in five private sector workers (59 per cent) think trade unions are necessary to protect working conditions and the majority of private sector workers (51 per cent) think unions are necessary to protect wages. This supports the findings of previous Ipsos MORI research on attitudes to trade unions, in which attitudes to trade unions have remained fairly consistent over the last four decades.<sup>xvii</sup>

The 2016 survey results also show anti-union views are only found on the margins of Britain's workforce. Just one in eight private sector workers disagree with the statement 'unions play a necessary role in protecting working conditions' and only one in six (16 per cent) disagree with the statement 'trade unions play a necessary role in protecting wages'. When asked to respond to the statement 'trade unions have no future in modern Britain', 20 per cent of the private sector workers agreed, with 44 per cent disagreeing.

Furthermore, the more exposure workers have to trade unions, the more likely they are to support them: across all workers, 87 per cent of union

---

# 51%

of private sector workers think unions are necessary to protect wages

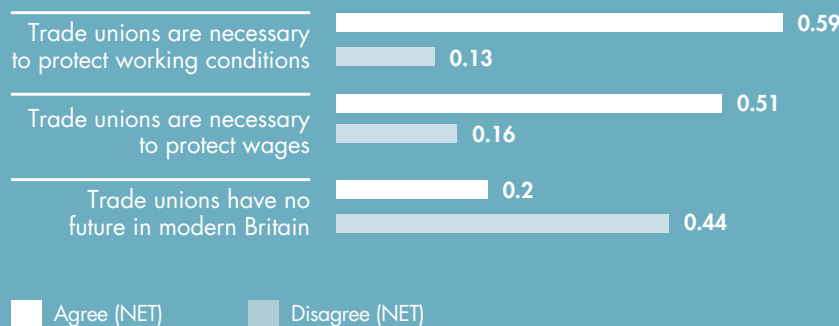
members agreed unions were necessary to protect working conditions, compared to 72 per cent of people who had a union rep in their workplaces, 58 per cent of non-unionised workers, and 55 per cent of those who were not union members and had no union rep in their workplace. There is also broad support for the involvement of trade unions in all of the areas in which they work: more than two-thirds of workers felt unions should be involved in promoting fair and safe working conditions, preventing discrimination and promoting equal opportunities, and protecting jobs. These findings should make welcome reading for trade union leaders. The survey results show the long-term decline of trade union membership has not coincided with an equivalent long-term decline in attitudes towards trade unions. And they prove that claims from right-wing politicians and commentators that unions are anachronistic and out of step with the public opinion are wide of the mark.<sup>xviii</sup>

**87%**

of union workers agreed unions were necessary to protect working conditions

**Figure 7**

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements? (Private sector workers)



Source: Research was undertaken for the Fabian Society by Ipsos MORI between 10 and 23 June 2016 using CAPiBus, Ipsos MORI's computer aided face to face in-home omnibus survey with 1,339 adults aged 18 and over who are in full or part time work in GB. Data have been weighted by age, gender, region, working status, social grade, tenure and ethnicity to the known population profile of working adults aged 18+ in GB.

**FOCUS GROUPS**

In order to gain a greater understanding of qualitative attitudes to trade unions and collective approaches to problem solving, the Fabian Society conducted three focus groups in London, the West Midlands and Wales in August 2017.<sup>xix</sup> The focus groups covered collective and individual approaches to problem solving and attitudes to trade unions, as well as a deliberative element exploring what trade unions could do to make participants more likely to join.

The focus groups produced a number of key insights:

## Insight 1: Non-unionised private sector workers are instinctively positive about trade unions

Respondents were broadly positive about trade unions and the work that they do.<sup>xx</sup> Facilitators opened the discussion on trade unions by asking participants to draw and then describe what they thought about when they thought about trade unions. Respondents tended to describe benefits that unions provided, and when asked, tended to see the attributes they had described as making a positive contribution to the workplace and society.

A female member of the Hammersmith group responded:

*“Normally when I think about trade unions, I think about trying to get more, better quality treatment at work or more money or things that benefit the employees.”*

[Interviewer:]

*“And of those things that you’ve drawn there...could you group them into things that are broadly positive and broadly negative?”*

*“OK. I would say they’re all positive. I would put them all as positive, because they all empower the employee in some way or other.”*

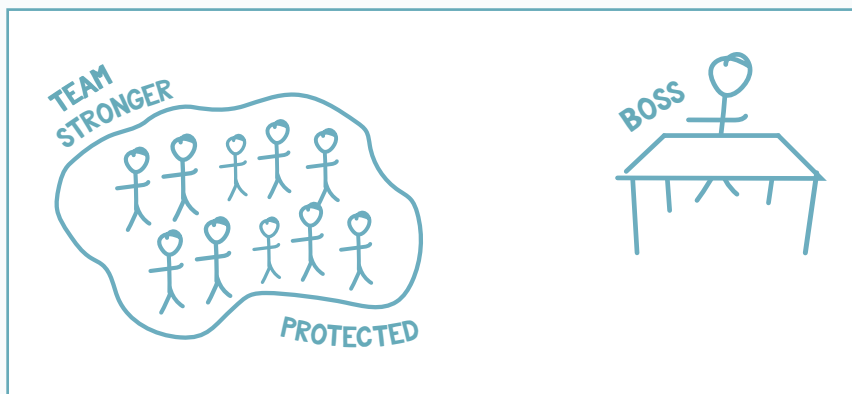
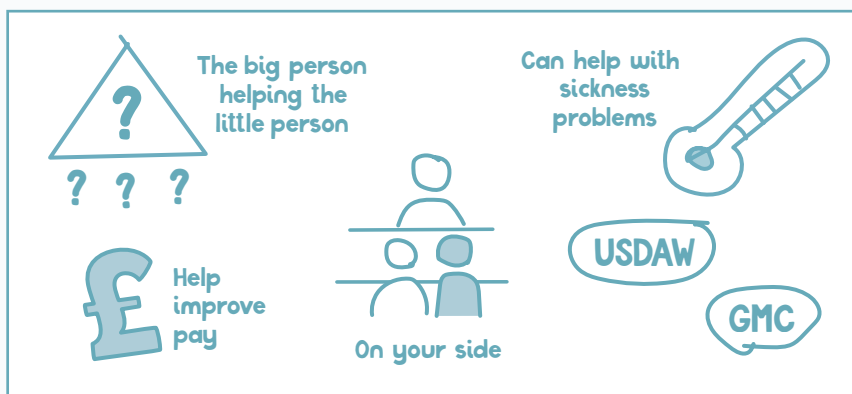
One member of the Coventry group responded:

*“I [view unions in] a positive way in the way that a lot of people can get together and work out what kind of rights they believe they deserve. It gets people all unified together to try and fight for a common thing. [There is] nothing negative really about it.”*

And a respondent in Cwmbran added:

*“When you say the words ‘trade union’ to me, the only thing that makes me think of is, if you’re part of a trade union, you’re protected by that, so you are a group, you are a team. You’re stronger in a union.”*

The pictures below typified the way respondents articulated their thoughts about trade unions and the work they do. The common themes were being stronger together, and acting collectively for common interests. It showed that without any prompts or previous discussion, workers tend to be instinctively positive about unions and the work they do.

**Figure 8:** Focus group participant's drawing**Figure 9:** Focus group participant's drawing

## Insight 2: Non-unionised private sector workers have a strong latent understanding of what unions do

Not a single respondent said they would join a union as a result of reading the 'why join a trade union' marketing material from a leading trade union. It was clear that a lack of information was not a reason for these participants not joining.

The focus group discussions also demonstrated a good awareness of what trade unions do and how they work. Even respondents who expressed anxiety or difficulty as the drawing exercise was introduced tended to reveal a latent awareness in the subsequent discussion. For example, one respondent in Cwmbran quickly progressed from telling the group: "I know nothing about trade unions" to neatly summing up the work of unions

*"[Trade unions are] fighting for better pay and for more holiday pay or whatever it is you're after. In my head, whether I'm right or wrong I don't know, they help you as a team get treated more fairly. To get what you deserve."*

Other respondents echoed this general understanding of what trade unions do:

*"Unions are there to help employees, give advice, support them, let them know what rights they've got, join together as a whole, stand up to what they believe in and it makes [the employees] feel safe and secure, having a union."*

*– Male respondent, Coventry*

*"When I think about trade unions, I think about trying to get more, better quality treatment at work or more money or things that benefit the employees."*

*– Female respondent, Hammersmith*

The latent understanding of what trade unions do was clearly demonstrated in all three groups during an exercise in which participants were asked to respond to an extract from a trade union's website entitled 'why should people join a trade union?' The extract included information about the trade union wage premium, the benefits of trained reps, and other benefits such as access to expert and legal advice and support for dealing with discrimination and improving health and safety at work.

Two respondents in Hammersmith felt they learnt very little from the text:

Male respondent 1:

*"That's kind of what I presumed trade unions would do for you anyway. It was very well written, but, yeah."*

Male respondent 2:

*"Yeah. I agree with [male respondent 1] as well. That's generally what I presumed trade unions do."*

And one respondent in Coventry agreed:

*"To be honest, I sort of knew. This is what I sort of thought they did anyway, so it hasn't necessarily changed my opinion."*



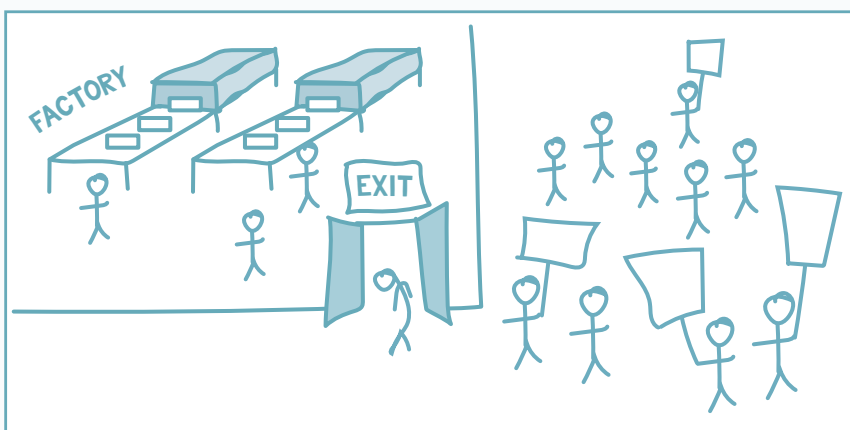
These non-unionised, younger, private sector workers displayed a strong understanding about unions and the work they do – and it is reasonable to assume that other areas of the workforce (which have higher levels of union membership) will be equally knowledgeable. This can be seen as good news or bad news for trade unions. There is good understanding of the union ‘proposition’ but this is not translating into recruitment. Going out and telling more people about what trade unions do will not be enough on its own to significantly boost membership levels.

### Insight 3: Unions feel distant from workers’ day-to-day experiences

Despite workers having a good understanding about what trade unions do, and instinctively positive attitudes towards them, the workers we spoke to in focus groups tended to place trade unions outside of their day-to-day experience.

Old industrial images were a common reference point for the workers. Many had drawn factories and coal mines, often featuring striking workers and referencing historical industrial disputes. These images (such as the one below) painted the unions as belonging to history rather than their present day.

**Figure 10:** Focus group participant’s drawing



One male respondent in Coventry compared his father’s very different experience of workplace conflict to his own:

*“So that’s the scabs going to work during a strike. Yeah, it makes me think... because my dad was a miner back in the Thatcher days. Being in Coventry, quite a lot of people probably were. And he worked for the union at one point. I think he was a union rep for their little colliery. So it makes me think about people bringing issues to their attention, sort of what it instantly brings to mind. With the work I do now, like you said, we do disciplinary meetings and things like that. I’ve never had one with a trade union rep there.”*

For this respondent, unions were a part of a different generation, existing in his mind through stories told by his father rather than any part of his day-to-day experience.

One exchange in the Hammersmith focus group highlighted the positive, yet distant attitude to trade unions held by many of the private sector non-unionised workers we focus grouped. During the drawing exercise, one participant drew what he described as a “work guardian angel”:

Male respondent 1 in Hammersmith:

*“So I’ve got this work guardian angel. It’s pretty dope...It’s an angel who flies around and protects your working rights.”*

Interviewer:

*“And why is it an angel?”*

Male respondent 1:

*“It’s a guardian angel, so it’s looking out for your best interests.”*

Others agreed this was a poignant image:

*“I like the guardian angel. I think it’s a little too optimistic about trade unions, but I completely got the sense of what you were going for and I did like that idea. It ties into the whole protection [theme]”*

*– Female respondent, Hammersmith*

For these participants, the guardian angel represented a powerful and benevolent force that at the same time existed outside their day-to-day lives, this time in mythology rather than history. Of course, it is likely that an absence of trade unions in the workplaces of the workers in our focus

groups was a factor in them thinking of unions as distant – if you asked a worker in an organised workplace the same question they would be less likely to describe unions as such. These depictions of unions demonstrate the need for unions to be and to be seen to be relevant to people’s day-to-day experiences, existing as a tangible point of reference rather than an abstract concept.

**Figure 11:** Focus group participant’s drawing



#### Insight 4: Non-unionised private sector workers feel unions are 'not for me'

The focus group participants raised a series of substantive issues that prevented them from making the jump from passive support to a 'will join' mentality. In different ways the participants all believed that trade unions were 'not for me'.

Some felt that their job was temporary, and therefore they had little interest in improving it:

Interviewer in Hammersmith:

*"...are any of you members of trade unions?"*

Male respondent 1:

*"No."*

Interviewer:

*"No, OK. Can I ask you why that is?"*

Male respondent 1:

*"I don't think I'll be in my sector for the rest of my life."*

Male respondent 3:

*"Same for me. I don't think I'm going to be in the same sector for the rest of my life."*

In Coventry, others said that if they did not like their work they would leave instead of seeking a union's help:

Female respondent 1:

*"I feel like if I felt that wronged in a company, I would leave. I wouldn't go to a trade union. Because I feel like after you've been there, working in that company after, you'd feel isolated."*

Female respondent 2:

*"Oh, yeah, yeah."*

*"If I felt that wrong done by, I'd just go to another place."*

*– Male respondent, Coventry*

Another reason was that participants felt they did not have any real problems at work and therefore had no need for a union:

*"I think, I haven't really had an issue in the workplace. Maybe if I'd had an issue in a previous job and I'd gone into a new job, it would be more in the front of my mind to join a trade union. But I haven't really had a significant issue that would make me want to be part of one, to be honest."*

*– Female respondent, Hammersmith*

*"If it's comfortable, if you're getting good pay, if you've got good colleagues around you and there's no problems and no issues and stuff and the firm are doing well, then you don't think about that stuff. It's when those things aren't going well that I suppose you would need it."*

*– Male respondent, Hammersmith*

Some respondents felt unions were for people working in sectors other than theirs:

Female respondent 3:

*"I think it depends what sector I've been working in. Because my dad is a probation officer and because he's part of a trade union... I don't know if working in the public sector, if I was working in that, I would most likely definitely do that, or find a way to, especially if I worked for the NHS. But because I don't, I've never felt the need to."*

Male respondent 4:

*"I do see it more as if you're working for the city council or a civil servant kind of thing. I associate it more with that. "*

Female respondent 4:

*"What if it was something you'd been to uni for though, for four or five years? You've spent 50 grand."*

Female respondent 1:

*"Yeah, that's different."*

Female respondent 4:

*"You're like, 'I can't get out.' That's when I'd [join a union]. If I was going to train to be a nurse or something."*

For some respondents, this was because trade unions were for people in larger companies:

*"What I think of trade unions is big companies basically. A lot of big companies use them. I remember my sister used to work for BT and she used to have one."*

*– Female respondent, Coventry*

And a number of respondents said they did not want to create a confrontational atmosphere by joining or setting up a union, particularly those in small organisations, and that they worried it could hurt their career:

Female respondent 1:

*"I think it would divide our company. A lot of people would fall out with you."*

Female respondent 2:

*"I just feel like they wouldn't ever give you an opportunity to go up the ladder and progress really."*

There was a widespread feeling in the focus groups that membership of a union was something for other people.

### Insight 5: Many non-unionised private sector workers feel trade unionists are not 'like me'

Some focus group participants commented on trade union members and leaders not being 'like me', which made them less likely to join a union. In Hammersmith, one participant told the group that she did not feel trade unions adequately represented women or people from ethnic minority backgrounds, and her fellow participants agreed:

Female respondent 3:

*"There's definitely not enough representation for women, and if you're from an ethnic group of any shape, there isn't [representation] and I think that's sometimes, as well, a turn-off for me, because they don't identify with anything that I do. So why am I going to pay you money to represent me when...they don't know my story. So why am I paying you to help me?"*

Male respondent 3:

*"It does still come across as extremely white male-dominated. "*

Female respondent 2:

*"Older white males."*

A similar discussion took place at the Coventry focus group, in which participants also visualised trade unionists and trade union leaders in a similar way:

Male respondent 2:

*“Yeah, when you asked about an impression of trade union leaders, I almost had the same image for every single one of them. And it’s like, you know, a middle-aged, slightly balding, slightly overweight man, just a bit short. That’s almost the impression that sticks with you.”*

Male respondent 3:

*“Absolutely. It’s the stereotype that sticks with you.”*

Male respondent 2:

*“Whether it’s right or wrong, I don’t know. There might well be some good trade union leaders, female, of many ethnicities, but I’m not informed enough to [know].”*

The participants’ observation that trade union leaders were ‘not like me’ contributed to their conclusion that trade unions were ‘not for me’ either. On the other hand, participants said that if they saw more trade unionists that were more like them, they would be more likely to join a union. This sets a clear challenge for trade unions to do more to reflect the diversity of the workforce— and to be seen to by prospective members.

### Insight 6: Non-unionised private sector workers are open to joining a union if they can make a value for money offer

Despite a feeling from many respondents that unions are ‘not for me’, there was no outright opposition to becoming a member. The offer that membership provided, as they saw it, just did not do enough to justify the monthly outlay. Respondents agreed that if a union could provide them with something they felt was valuable, they would consider joining one. One respondent in the Cwmbran group commented:

*“I’d love to be part of [a trade union] if that is what it is. I’d quite happily do it. But where I work, there’s nothing like that... If there was something at our place where I work, then I would be part of it, because I would feel stronger, definitely, fighting for whatever we deserve.”*

At the Hammersmith group, the conversation continued between respondents as they were packing up after facilitators had concluded the session:

Female respondent 2:

*"So do you think [you] would consider joining a union?"*

Female respondent 3:

*"I'd have a look at it."*

Male respondent 3:

*"I'd certainly look into it."*

Female respondent 1:

*"I'd ask people that I know that are part of them what their experience is of it and stuff like that."*

This lack of outright opposition shows there was not an 'anti-union' mentality amongst these workers. Rather than a widespread ideological opposition to trade unions, non-unionised workers tend not to be members for more practical reasons.

## **WHAT WOULD MAKE NON-UNIONISED WORKERS JOIN A TRADE UNION?**

Each focus group contained a deliberative exercise designed to support the respondents to come up with, prioritise and develop ideas for how trade unions could recruit more members. Facilitators asked respondents to split into groups and come up with a series of ideas for trade unions that would make them more likely to join one. The groups then reconvened and collectively ranked the ideas in priority order. Finally, respondents were asked to write down one sentence to say what a trade union would have to do to persuade them to join.

The requirements for trade unions can be categorised into five overarching statements. These statements inform the recommendations for unions and others set out in the next chapter. The non-unionised workers would join a trade union if:

- ***...it could help me personally.***
- ***...membership was value for money.***
- ***...the union worked with my employer.***



- **...I had the right information.**
- **...I had sufficient problems at work.**

The respondents placed an emphasis on trade unions being able to *help them personally*. Whether that was providing them with guaranteed security at work, improvements at their workplace or in their job, respondents wanted evidence of how it could help them, rather than vague commitments to improving working lives for workers in general. For some, this desire came from a belief that trade unions would not be able to understand the complexity of their day-to-day situation, whether that was their sector, their occupation, or the dynamics of their workplace and team.

*Value for money* was a major issue for these younger private sector workers. If they could see that the benefits they might reap were likely to be more than they spent on their membership, they would be willing to make the jump to join. For many of the respondents who had a general but not detailed understanding of what trade unions did and how exactly they brought about change, the membership cost was prohibitive.

The non-unionised workers said that if the union *worked with their employer*, rather than simply against them, they would be more likely to join a union. Many respondents expressed an anxiety about union membership as being potentially antagonistic to their working relationships with colleagues and their employers. However, if trade unions could demonstrate that they were committed to supporting the success of their organisation and work with their employer, it would give them the confidence to join a trade union.

Despite a generally good understanding of what trade unions do, many of the private sector workers said they had *insufficient information* to allow them to make an informed decision about joining a union. The workers said that if unions – or colleagues or employers – could provide them with the information they were looking for, the concept of a union would shift from abstract to available in their minds.

Finally, a number of workers said they would join a union if they had *sufficient* reason to do so. These workers generally had a good understanding of what unions did, but felt that they wanted to be able to turn to one in a time of need or crisis, rather than investing in one as an insurance against undesirable situations occurring. These workers said that if they felt they needed to join a union, they would.

If unions are able to meet these five requirements, they will be in a stronger position to boost their membership and reverse long-term membership

decline. The following chapter looks at how unions, working collaboratively and in partnership with government and employers, can meet these five requirements and bridge the gap between passive support and a 'will join' mentality.

Figure 12 contains the final summary statements written by each focus group member from across the three groups. Each final statement has been grouped into one of the five summary statements.

<b>I would join a union if...</b>				
<b>It could help me personally</b>	...I got the impression that they cared and wanted to improve my workplace and situation.	...I could see the full benefit for myself individually and I had evidence that they were making a difference for all.	...there's guaranteed job security on offer.	...there was job security, the price was affordable, no help was too big or too small, and if there was an incentive to join in help with discounts on necessities, bills and food.
<b>Membership was value for money</b>	...it was free or very cheap/good value relative to the service it provides.	...I felt like it would be an overall benefit to me in terms of the time spent in comparison to its reward.	...the price was value for money for what I was getting. For example, if the union could help me with certain issues I had at my workplace and whether it would be cost effective to do so.	...the price was right and the rep didn't work at my place of work.
<b>The union worked with my employer</b>	...I felt I was joining them as a whole team, working together with my employer to get what's best for me and what benefits the company.	...I knew what the union was about, their reputation and if I felt that they were as much about the business I was working for as I do. I think that makes sense.	...they were to encourage better cooperation between employer and employee, thus not to sour a relationship between workers and between employee and employer.	
<b>I had the right information</b>	...I knew how and why I should.	...I was given all the relevant information about a union connected to my job by my employers and it could be seen to already be having an effect.	...I was more knowledgeable about them in the first place, as I don't feel the general public realise whether a trade union is readily available to them.	
<b>I had sufficient problems at work</b>	...I felt that I needed to	...I felt I could not gain the support and/or information from myself or my employer.	...I primarily felt the need to, ie I found my rights were being abused or my pay was not matching to my hours or workload and I believed that a trade union could enforce or produce a change to come about.	

## CHAPTER 3: A MEMBERSHIP RENAISSANCE

Trade union leaders should find reassurance in the absence of opposition to unions from non-unionised workers. However, union leaders should also be honest about the challenge of turning positive attitudes into millions of new members.

Revitalising union membership is essential to winning and maintaining improvements in working conditions, wages and worker voice. Any wins for working people in firms, industries or across the economy will only be sustainable if there are strong trade unions with the resources and mass membership to sustain and build on that change.

The reversal of a 40-year membership decline will take substantive action from trade unions individually, as a whole movement, and in partnership with employers and government. This chapter sets out how trade unions can become the organisations prospective members want them to be through individual organisation, collaboration as a whole union movement, and in partnership with government and business.

This chapter is informed by interviews held with trade union leaders and senior officials, two group interviews with lay activists and reps from Prospect and Community, a high-level roundtable held with senior trade union leaders and experts, the focus groups with non-unionised workers, and additional background research. Many of the recommendations have been drawn from the ideas of union leaders, officials and activists themselves.

### THE CHALLENGE

Trade unionists are very clear about the scale of the challenge they face. Reversing membership decline requires a mixture of reflection and modernisation: doing the things that unions currently do but better, as well as experimenting and exploring new opportunities.

*“I think trade unions have to get better at attracting people in. We can’t rest on our laurels, we have to adapt to our changing industry.”*

– Trade union assistant general secretary, interview

*“It’s not as simple as saying ‘the reason most people don’t join a union is because they’ve never been asked’. In too many [organised]*

*workplaces, there's no imperative to recruit more members. Is the union reaching out? Are campaigns relevant to the needs of the workforce? Are we seen to have an offer to members? Are unions too political? Clearly there's something not happening."*

– Trade union general secretary, interview

*"We've been struggling with [membership decline] for the last three decades, and so far, we haven't come up with any answers."*

– Former trade union leader, interview

However, trade unionists see no reason to simply accept the decline will continue. In each interview, the interviewees were asked whether or not we should simply accept private sector trade unionism is in permanent decline. Here is a typical selection of replies:

*"No. There's no reason to be defeatist."*

– Former trade union leader, interview

*"No. I don't think it is permanent, the need for trade unions has never been greater."*

– Trade union general secretary, interview

*"I've never seen any evidence people don't want to join unions."*

– Trade union general secretary, interview

*"If it were, my union wouldn't have grown."*

– Trade union general secretary, interview

Trade unionists were clear: we should not be accepting that permanent decline is inevitable.

This chapter sets out how trade unions can reverse the long-term membership decline, with many of the solutions drawn from interviews with trade unionists themselves. These recommendations include nine practical recommendations targeted at trade unions that will help to put them on a path to membership growth, and two broader recommendations setting out proposals for a new commitment to collaboration with unions working together, and the outline of a new industrial relations framework for the UK.

The final recommendation requires unions to win the support of government and business.

The consultation with trade unionists highlighted the diversity of the trade union movement, the sectors in which different unions operate and the occupations, backgrounds and needs of the different workers that unions tend to organise. It is clear that there is no 'one size fits all' solution for all of Britain's trade unions.

The consultation also revealed a huge amount of good practice, innovation and effective work from trade unions. And while all the trade unions we spoke to had carefully considered the challenges they faced and had comprehensive plans to build membership in the coming months and years, every union can learn something from other unions about the way in which they have approached common issues. Therefore, many of these recommendations draw from existing exemplary practice of some unions, with the aim of mainstreaming best practice across the union movement.

If unions are able to embed these changes across their practices, collaborate to pull new members into the union family, and partner with government and business to change the UK industrial relations framework, they will potentially be able to recruit millions of new members and reverse the membership decline.

### THE ORGANISING AGENDA

Amidst the pursuit of much needed innovation and fresh thinking, trade unions should not stop banging the drum for old fashioned face-to-face organising that remains the most effective means to win improvements for the workforce. One trade union activist put this more succinctly in a group interview:

*"You don't have to be innovative to be effective. Most things [trade unions do] have been tried for a couple of hundred years. We've done campaigns that have been very effective but I wouldn't call them innovative."*

– Trade union activist, interview

The organising agenda will mean different things to different unions, activists and officials depending on the industrial, political and social

contexts in which they are organising. However, all union organising models operate around the general purpose of facilitating change in the interests of workers on relevant workplace issues, usually through face to face interaction.<sup>xxi</sup>

In fact, the ways in which most trade unions in the UK and across the world organise members and prospective members today remains very similar to how unions organised their members 70 years ago, and for good reason. Historic ethnographic accounts of trade union organising from the 1950s include the same hallmarks of unionism we see today: rank-and-file reps recruiting members in their workplaces; localised issues; face-to-face meetings; and channelling individual dissatisfaction into collective action.<sup>xxii</sup>

Today's trade union leaders are clear that the changing economic, political and social backdrop has not negated the time-honoured pillars of trade union activism:

*"There are still large numbers of non-unionised workers in Britain that can be organised through traditional union methods."*

– Trade union officer

*"There's nothing better than standing in front of someone and explaining to them what unions do."*

– Trade union general secretary

The evidence suggests they are right. For example, Usdaw, which mainly organises in the retail industry, has been able to grow its membership over recent years. Despite working in a sector with a below-average trade union density and an above average staff churn, Usdaw has consistently been able to recruit more members than it loses each year.

Therefore, this report calls for investigation, development and implementation of innovative methods to organise and service members does not mean unions should deviate from the time-honoured organising agenda. On the contrary, without substantial change to the industrial relations framework in the UK, unions must continue working the organising agenda and using traditional methods to recruit new members if they are to end the membership decline.

**STATEMENT KEY**

There is a list under each recommendation indicating which of the five statements set out by the focus group participants (covered in the previous chapter) each recommendation meets.

The five statements are:

- ✓ ***...it could help me personally***
- ✓ ***...membership was value for money***
- ✓ ***...the union worked with my employer***
- ✓ ***...I had the right information***
- ✓ ***...I had sufficient problems at work***

**1. Answer the 'what can you do for me?' question**

- ✓ ***...it could help me personally***
- ✓ ***...membership was value for money***
- ✓ ***...I had the right information***
- ✓ ***...I had sufficient problems at work***

Trade unions should share positive stories about their work and aim, where possible, to quantify the benefits of union membership in a clear and understandable way in order to answer the 'what can you do for me?' question.

One of the key drivers behind the feeling that unions 'aren't for me' that we heard from the focus group participants was a sense that unions would not make a difference in their context. The workers worried that unions would not understand the complexities of their workplace situation and would be unable to change the things that they felt dissatisfied with. The focus group participants had no direct experience of trade unions, and therefore found it difficult to comprehend how a union might help them. When workers ask the question 'what can you do for me?', unions need to have a clear answer.

The private sector workers we spoke to in focus groups were clear about the risks posed by trade union membership – chiefly potentially upsetting their relationship with their colleagues and employer, as well as the financial cost – but they found it difficult to identify or measure the opportunities and benefits that membership could bring. A desire for this information fuelled their request for more information and proof that union membership would be value for money.

These reasons are why industrial relations experts Rafael Gomez and Morley Gunderson have drawn parallels between trade union membership and 'experience goods'.<sup>xxiii</sup> Experience goods are goods or services whose attributes are hard for consumers to fully understand prior to purchase. Gomez and Gunderson argue that unions need to try where possible to market themselves as 'search goods': when the benefit in question is known to prospective customers (or in this case, members).

The first way trade unions can do this is to become more comfortable talking about their successes, no matter how small those successes are. In a group interview, one union workplace rep said that their branch had grown its membership in part because "we use positive stories that directly affect" prospective members. The key for this activist was not just waiting for big wins on staff pay or sweeping changes to improve conditions, but shouting loudly about small, incremental successes from changes to uniform rules or defending an innocent staff member in an unfair disciplinary process.

These small successes are the bread and butter for union workplace reps and officials. They are often also achieved in partnership with employers or other actors, and can sometimes be sensitive and so there is often an instinct not to shout about them. But these little victories help non-unionised staff in organised and unorganised workplaces to draw parallels with the problems at work they face. These stories begin to give prospective members an idea of what they might achieve in a union.

Secondly, trade unions should find inspiration from brands that have successfully transitioned from experience to search goods. A good example of such brands can be found in the recently disrupted online mattress market.

Vendors like Eve, Simba and Casper have persuaded hundreds of thousands of people in the UK to spend a substantial sum of money – between £400 and £900 – on a new mattress without having the opportunity to feel the fabric or test the firmness, as one would be able to do on the high street. The online mattress brands have achieved this by quantifying the benefits they provide including a 100-day (or variation on that) grace period in which the products can be returned free of charge.

The other way these and other disruptive online start-up brands are able to give prospective customers a better idea of the experience their good or service will include is through case studies and testimony.

Trade unions can learn from the way these start-ups have successfully given prospective purchasers the information they require to understand



the benefits of their purchase and answer the ‘what can you do for me?’ question. This approach is particularly relevant for unions because union membership tends to be sticky: once people join a union they tend to remain in one, even if they move jobs.<sup>xxiv</sup> And unlike the mattress start-ups, unions do not need to commission scientific studies to quantify their tangible benefits: the evidence is already clear.<sup>xxv</sup>

## 2. Be representative of the workforce

### ✓ *...it could help me personally.*

The focus group participants voiced concerns that as well as trade unions not being ‘for me’, they were also representative of people not ‘like me’, either. In particular, participants across the focus groups described a similar image of what they thought about when they thought about trade union members and leaders: white, older, and male.

In our interviews, a number of trade unionists were quite clear about the diversity problem in the trade union movement. One trade union leader said:

*“Nobody wants to see a shouting bloke on the telly anymore. We need a greater mix, more women, more people of colour.”*

A senior trade unionist from a large union said it was a source of ongoing amusement in their union that the officer responsible for young members was over 50. Another union organiser was less phlegmatic about the problem, saying the inability of unions to recruit younger workplace reps had become chronic, and was hampering the ability of unions to operate effectively in predominantly younger workplaces.

Unions need to demonstrate to prospective members that they are as diverse as the workforce they are representing. This is partly about showing workers that trade unions are more diverse than they once were. There are now more female trade union members than male trade union members in the UK, and many trade unionists paid tribute to the positive influence Frances O’Grady (the TUC’s first female general secretary) has had on the image of trade unions. But too many trade union leadership teams are still more male than their membership, and BAME workers and other groups remain woefully underrepresented at the top table.

Rather than just viewing diversity in unions as an image problem, one union

leader recognised the need to see it as a composition problem:

*“We have to look at representatives in our workplaces and on our committees. Trade unions are traditionally male-dominated, but [the main industry we tend to organise in] is very diverse and we don’t reflect that.”*

– Trade union leader, interview

Trade unions should aim for their reps, officers and leadership teams to be representative of the workforce they represent. This should include setting targets for composition of their reps, officers and leadership teams to include the same proportion of women, BAME workers, young workers, workers with a disability and other underrepresented groups as in workers in the industries in which they organise.

Many unions will have a good idea of how close they are to these targets. However, some will not have access to the data they need to plan the required organisational change. Therefore, all unions should put in place ongoing monitoring, supplemented by regular surveys as needed; and then set out a plan to ensure their union looks more like the workforce as a whole.

If unions can show workers they are more ‘like them’, it will be much easier for unions to show workers they are ‘for them’. Addressing the trade union diversity deficit will unlock real potential for membership growth.

### **3. Introduce discount membership rates for under 35s and workers in unrecognised workplaces**

✓ ***...membership was value for money.***

The young private sector workers in the focus groups set value for money as a key requirement for taking the step into union membership. Trade unions should review the costs of membership and introduce new discount rates to bring in workers below the age of 35, and consider lower rates for workers in unrecognised workplaces who therefore are likely to receive less value from their membership.

Many trade unionists are clear about the need for their membership rates to represent real value for money:

*"[Union membership is] an optional extra... so you've got to make sure it's value for money."*

– Union activist

*"You have to sell. You have to find something they want to buy into."*

– Union activist

Unions should meet this aim by reducing the price of membership, at least at the point of entry, for key target groups of workers. One general secretary of a trade union that organises many lower wage workers said that "the main reason people leave is because they're not earning enough to sustain" membership costs. The focus group participants were clear that the price of union membership was a major barrier for them.

It is obvious that simply reducing membership rates for all members would undermine the financial sustainability of trade unions: membership rates provide the income that allows unions to operate. And even under current membership rates, a number of unions with large financial reserves are spending more than they are raising each year.

Therefore, unions should view discounted membership as a 'loss leader' to bring in prospective members, rather than an across-the-board change. In this sense, unions should look at newspaper companies that offer discounted papers in university shops or big tech brands that offer substantial discounts to build loyalty for their brand.

In fact, many unions already have heavily discounted student rates. These discount schemes should be extended to all members under the age of 35, the key (price-conscious) demographic in which unions need to build membership.

Unions should also consider new lower rates for workers in unrecognised workplaces. This would acknowledge that these workers tend to get less value from their membership than those who are able to collectively bargain through a recognition agreement, and the low cost could entice more workers to join a union or set up a branch.

This investment in discounted membership should bring in substantial returns. This is because, as highlighted above, union membership tends to be sticky compared to other goods and services. Once people join a union, they tend to remain a member. Therefore, the incentive for a heavily discounted scheme is substantial.

## 4. Provide 'instant breakdown cover' for workers with pre-existing problems

### ✓ *...I had sufficient problems at work.*

Many of the focus group participants said that while they did not feel they currently had sufficient problems at work to join a union, they wanted to be able to join one if problems arose. However, many unions do not currently tend to support workers who come to them with issues that arose before their membership commenced. Unions should establish a new road into membership to meet this need.

Trade union membership has often been described in marketing literature as a form of insurance against problems at work: you pay into the scheme in the good times so the union is there for you when something goes wrong. The common union policy not to support workers with issues that pre-date their membership is designed to ensure unions can maintain the value of this insurance mechanism, and ensure that members have a strong reason to remain in a union.

However, one trade union official said that unions ought to find a way to bring workers with pre-existing problems into the union movement. They said these workers would have the most to gain from union membership and that unions should look at how the AA responds to inquiries from non-members: "If you call them when you're broken down from a motorway [the AA] don't tell you they can't help you if you're not a member, they sell you a more expensive membership and send out the breakdown van."

Indeed, the AA, RAC and other providers offer various forms of 'instant breakdown cover' to all non-member drivers, with anybody able to get immediate assistance by paying an additional fee and often having to pay for a period of membership in advance. The additional premium allows the AA and other providers to bring drivers with problems into membership while also maintaining the integrity of their offer as an insurance mechanism.

Unions should introduce their own 'instant breakdown cover' by setting up new routes into membership for people with pre-existing problems at work. This would involve committing to give prospective members instant advice, support and representation to deal with their pre-existing problems in return for an additional fee and upfront commitment to membership for a period of around 12 months.

Workers coming in to the union through this new route may well go on to be ambassadors for the union and the services they offer. One union activist said in a group interview that “our biggest activists are often people who the union has helped” to sort out a problem of their own. If the union is able to solve a worker’s pre-existing problem at work, the worker might be more able to realise the benefits of union membership and to tell their friends, family and colleagues about it.

## 5. Reach out to the workforce of the future

- ✓ **...it would help me personally**
- ✓ **...I had the right information**
- ✓ **...the union worked with my employer**

Many of the young private sector workers in the focus groups did not feel confident they had all the information they wanted about what trade unions did, despite most participants going on to demonstrate a good if latent understanding of the work of unions. The shift in many employers’ attitudes and practices means that there are fewer sanctioned opportunities for unions to educate newly enrolled staff about the work they do.

One frontline organiser said their union recognised this barrier and had come up with a plan to overcome it. The union plans to identify people that may go on to work in the industries they organise in, and begin the education before they even reach the workplace:

*“We go into universities before they get a job. We often give talks about the pitfalls of [working in our industry], and how unions can help. We tell people that by complaining about a bad day at work on social media you only receive sympathy and cat pictures. By joining a union they can really change things.”*

– Trade union organiser

All private sector unions should establish their own outreach programmes. The first step to doing this successfully will be to canvass the current membership on the routes they took into their job. Analysis of this data should throw up common entry routes and pipelines – such as particular training courses, university degrees, or other workplaces – in which outreach activity could reach a large number of future workers. The introduction of T levels and the expansion of apprenticeships may offer a particular opportunity.

Unions should then use the same data to identify potential ambassadors who can go out and speak to prospective members of the future. If unions can send in people that understand the courses and routes into work that the prospective members are taking, it will help these prospective members to assess and visualise how unions could help them in the future.

Outreach approaches like these could help unions set up new routes in to membership, and it will particularly help unions to grow the number of younger members and change attitudes from younger workers to trade unions. Selling a career in the industry could also allow unions to build constructive relationships with employers.

## 6. Invest in technology to reach hard-to-reach workers

- ✓ **...it could help me personally.**
- ✓ **...membership was value for money.**
- ✓ **...I had the right information.**

The economic viability of organising is a key concern for trade unions. In our interviews, Alex Bryson, professor of quantitative social science at UCL, said: “There is a disparate cost of organising members who are physically disparate.” John Kelly, professor of industrial relations at Birkbeck, echoed this sentiment, saying: “It’s not rational for unions to organise in small workplaces.” Trade union leaders tended to agree with this analysis:

*“We need to be honest about whether [organising small groups of workers] takes up disproportionate resources. We need to take business-like decisions.”*

– Assistant general secretary

*“The only small workplaces we organise tend to be part of a bigger company. I’m not sure organising in local [workplace units] would be worth our while.”*

– General secretary

Trade unions need to make appropriate decisions, after weighing up the costs and benefits when deciding on target workplaces and industries they should organise within in order to make the most of limited resources. When it comes to traditional organising, this means harder to reach workers, such as those working in small workplaces, freelancers and workers in industries or occupations with high levels of churn will often be overlooked in favour of larger, easier to organise workplaces.

However, many trade unionists spoke about the opportunities that have come with technological development. One trade union organiser said:

*“There is a value in digital platforms, particularly for homeworkers.”*

And an assistant general secretary told us:

*“We’re recruiting more members online than ever.”*

Unions are also developing new tools to organise and service workers. GMB is currently developing a ridesharing app to rival Uber with plans for a pilot in Leeds;<sup>xxvi</sup> Unison has developed an app for care workers to record their travel time; BECTU has set up a crowd-joining tool for workers to join a union en masse (and therefore not personally antagonise their employer); and the TUC has established the online petitioning tool Going to Work to help unions identify workers in workplaces they aim to organise.

Innovation is also happening outside of trade unions that could potentially help unions. The Resolution Trust has partnered with Bethnal Green Ventures to fund WorkerTech – new tech-based tools and resources to help improve people’s working lives. One of their first funded start-ups, the Organise Platform, has set up an online tool to network and organise workers on specific issues, which has been used to campaign for improved parental leave at ITV. Matthew Taylor’s review of modern working practices also set out recommendations for the development of similar WorkerTech solutions.

Unions should embrace these new technologies and set aside appropriate resources to develop new tools and resources that can help make the organisation of hard-to-reach workers more economically viable. Unions should set aside a proper budget for innovation, and they should not be afraid of working with partners where there is insufficient expertise within the organisation. Working with these new initiatives will also help those working on the new platforms to coordinate their targets to ensure maximum effectiveness, for example, by ensuring they are not undermining existing union campaigns.

This investment and partnership will potentially unlock new pools of prospective members, which until now have simply been too expensive to organise.

## 7. Establish career development advice centres

- ✓ ***...it could help me personally***
- ✓ ***...the union worked with my employer***

The young private sector workers in the focus groups were more concerned about their future career than asserting their rights in the present. Many of the participants, particularly those in the services sector, felt they would not be working where they were forever, and if a major problem did arise, they would rather leave than fight it.

This transient mindset is a challenge for trade union organisers, many of whom ruefully reflected in their interviews that young workers on low wages with little control over their hours in industries like retail and hospitality are exactly the sort of workers who would benefit most from a trade union. Trade unions need to tap into the career-driven mindset of young workers.

Trade unions have always played a role in ensuring staff have the right training and career development opportunities, as well as delivering courses too. Unionlearn enrolls more than 220,000 trade union members on courses each year. Unions should further develop this aspect of their work, offering workers personal support in their career development and giving them a proactive reason to join a union.

Unions should build out their advice functions beyond support for dealing with problems at work. Union advice operations should become proactive as well as reactive, drawing on the union's industry expertise to offer independent, confidential career advice to members. Employees might feel more able to speak to their manager about problems at work than they did fifteen years ago,<sup>xxvii</sup> but their manager will not be able to give them the impartial career advice that a union could.

Establishing a strong proactive career development unit will give unions something to offer those transient workers who don't want to tie themselves down. It will enable unions to position themselves as a positive force of change in the minds of workers who want to develop their career.

## 8. Make the most of available data

- ✓ ***...it could help me personally***
- ✓ ***...I had the right information***



From membership surveys to democratic elections, trade unions have always prided themselves on being responsive to their membership. The sheer amount of data trade unions already keep, and are able to collect, can provide new ways for unions to gain an even deeper understanding about their membership and prospective members, and how well they are performing in different areas.

A number of trade unionists referred to the rigorous appraisal of campaigns and initiatives in their unions. One general secretary said:

*“We measure everything we do. If we run a national campaign and we get only a few members we’ll ask serious questions about that campaign.”*

– General secretary

Union leaders are able to take such a clear-eyed view about their performance because it is possible to follow the real-time impact of campaigns. Data analysis can provide crucial insights to shape and develop national campaigns and initiatives.

Unions are also collecting data on prospective members so they can pull them through a journey towards membership. One assistant general secretary spoke about the steps they have taken to improve the quality of the data they collect, and how they use it:

*“We’ve developed new plans to collect data on prospective members. At the moment we make our [advice] documents public, but we’re going to make people give us their email addresses in the future to create relationships and pull them into membership. We’ve not really done that in a strategic way in the past.”*

– Assistant general secretary

Many unions already use customer relationship management (CRM) tools designed by companies like Salesforce to streamline journeys towards membership, and to improve the servicing and retention of members once they are in membership. However, it was clear from the interviews that not all unions are equally rigorous in their approach to the collection, organisation and use of data about members and prospective members. At the very least, all unions should ensure they have a strong, up-to-date CRM system.

All unions should also look at what role collected data plays in their review of campaign effectiveness, and identify data gaps that should be filled.

Unions should also mine the data they already have.

From the way prospective members use their website to the growth of members in specific workplaces and the salience of particular issues, unions should look at the data they own in the round to improve their operations and strategic decision-making.

## 9. Set standards across multiple workplaces

- ✓ ***...it could help me personally***
- ✓ ***...membership was value for money***
- ✓ ***...the union worked with my employer***

The costs of trade union organising make it financially difficult for unions to actively organise small workplaces. However, a number of unions have worked around this problem by setting standards across multiple workplaces where there are similar positions and contracted jobs.

BECTU, the media and entertainment union now part of Prospect, has used a ratecard system to establish the going rates for different predominantly self-employed trades. In practice, it is a way of collectively bargaining without a recognition agreement.

The Musicians Union has a Fair Play Venues scheme, which it uses as a kitemark for music venues that sign up to its fair play principles. The principles include a commitment from venues that they will appropriately reward artists for gig promotion. More than 50 venues have signed up to the principles and have received the kitemark. The Musicians Union says that as well as incentivising improved employment and contracting standards from venues, the kitemark has also made musicians more likely to report venues for improper practices.

The ratecard and Fair Play Venues schemes are two good examples of making the economics of organising disparate workers work for unions. All unions should look at this setting of standards across multiple workplaces and consider how they might establish similar initiatives in the industries in which they organise. Setting standards allows unions to work with workers in smaller workplaces, self-employed workers and workers who don't tend to be in the same place at the same time as their colleagues.

## 10. Collaborate to increase collective bargaining power

- ✓ ***...it could help me personally***
- ✓ ***...membership was value for money***
- ✓ ***...I had the right information***

In 2018 unions will celebrate the 150th anniversary of the TUC's foundation. The TUC brings together 49 different unions with more than 5.5 million members between them. Over the last 150 years it has grown from an annual meeting of trades councils to a substantial institution that leads the way in supporting unions to grow, publishing economic and policy-based research, running learning programmes for union members, and speaking up for workers' interests at a national level.

In the TUC's 150th year, unions should make a fresh commitment to take on the challenge of reversing membership decline collectively. This year's Congress unanimously voted for a CWU motion on a 'new model of trade unionism'. The motion calls on the TUC general secretary to table a paper to the March 2018 meeting of General Council including consideration of how unions can together "improve cooperation, methods and the effectiveness of organising".

This new programme of work provides the opportunity for all unions to come together, compare best practice, and invest in the innovation needed to reverse a 40-year trend of decline. Unions must make the most of this opportunity by giving this workstream the engagement and resources it needs.

Unions should consider a new, central clearing house role for the TUC. A number of focus group participants said a lack of information was a barrier to them joining a union. If they knew how to join a union and which one they should join, they would be more likely to join one. The TUC could help these prospective members by acting as a shop window for trade union membership.

During the interviews one general secretary called for "a more central role for the TUC, where people can join the family". They said the organisation could "be like a clearing house for membership". This clearing house function could provide a single joining form for all prospective union members, and could even include the option of portable or joint membership in workplaces where there is no recognised union.

Joining trade unions through the TUC's clearing house function could also

provide workers with the opportunity to transfer their membership when they move jobs. As well as joining the individual union, they would be joining the family. The ability to transfer membership could mitigate concerns from workers who view their current jobs as temporary that they would not be in their job for long enough to experience tangible benefits from their union membership.

The TUC has already developed an online tool for workers to find out which unions are organising in their industry and occupation, with several thousand users each month.<sup>xxviii</sup> The TUC should develop this further, integrating joining forms for prospective union members, and potentially offering joint memberships where workers have multiple industrial identities. For example, the Musicians Union and the National Education Union offer joint membership to music teachers.

Some unions may be reticent about a clearing house function, as well as recommendations for portable and joint membership, because it takes away from what they feel is a unique package of representation, services, and advocacy that their union offers. Some unions may also prefer to maintain a more competitive environment for union recruitment, feeling they have an edge over other unions that will help them to grow in the coming years. However, all unions would benefit from a collectively stronger union movement. In the same way it is beneficial for a group of workers to come together to increase their bargaining power, unions can increase their collective bargaining power through collaboration too. Growing the union movement, and ensuring that as many people who join the movement remain in it, can enhance the credibility of unions, and put unions on the front foot in industrial discussions: not only at a firm level, but at a sectoral and economy-wide level too.

Increasing the collective bargaining power of unions will benefit the members of unions, and in turn, will make the case for joining a union stronger. Reversing the vicious cycle of ever weaker unions making membership less likely to be beneficial to workers could give unions the momentum they need to reverse historic membership trends. In this respect, unions should practice what they preach, even at an organisation-to-organisation level: workers are stronger together and weaker apart.

## **11. Build a new partnership with government and business**

- ✓ ***...it could help me personally***
- ✓ ***...the union worked with my employer***

Trade unions will be able to stem declining membership through better organisation and improved collaboration with each other, but wider changes are required to restore trade union power to levels seen in recent decades. A new industrial partnership between government, unions and business could lay the foundations for strong unions applying much needed upwards pressure on wages, working conditions and the quality of work across the country.

A new industrial relations framework – in which government, business and trade unions commit together to improve the quality of work, tackle the nation’s productivity crisis, and improve social wellbeing – would restore the key role of unions in the national conversation about the future of work.

At a time when employers are deciding how to anticipate industrial change as part of the ‘fourth industrial revolution’, new evidence has restated the important economic and social contribution trade unions make in the UK. A series of new papers from labour market experts Alex Bryson and John Forth prove unions improve pay, skills and family life, and unionised workplaces are likely to be both more stable and more innovative. At a time of growing levels of low pay, worries about skills mismatches in the rapidly changing world of work, rising reported insecurity at work and an ongoing productivity crisis, these virtues have never been more important.

The government should therefore set out a new aim to unleash the potential of trade unions to improve working lives and boost the nation’s flagging economy. As part of this, and if unions can demonstrate their own commitment, the government should bring forward plans for a new partnership between unions, business and government.

## A hand of friendship

At the firm level, having businesses on side can make it easier for unions to organise. In one group interview, an experienced trade union activist compared their experience of enrolling into union membership to the experience of young workers joining the workforce. “When I turned up on my first day, my manager handed me a trade union form, but it’s just not like that for young workers today,” they said. For this member, a lack of buy-in from the employer was contributing to a more difficult environment in which to recruit new members.

The focus groups show that this drop in trust from employers is having a wider depressing effect on the likelihood of workers to join unions. Not only

are workers not being given the information they need about unions as they join (let alone the form to join one) but they worry joining or setting up a union could be seen by their employer as antagonistic. The workers in the focus group said that if a union worked with their employer, they would be more likely to join one.

These facts outline a difficult contradiction for trade unions. Trade unions exist to ensure employers are treating their staff properly, but often trade unions rely on the same employers to trust them, work with them, and inform the staff team about them. The vast majority of recognition agreements in the UK are agreed directly with employers, and there are only a handful of cases each year in which unions have forced their recognition through by meeting the thresholds required by the Central Arbitration Committee.

Trade unions should respond to worker appetite for partnership between unions and employers by committing to win the trust of all good, responsible employers. Unions should start to measure the trust good employers have in unions as a whole. A new annual survey should measure the trust from managers in companies with high employment standards, including those employers that do not currently recognise trade unions but who pay their staff well, have high staff satisfaction ratings, and have no black marks against their employment history. Unions should set a collective mission to build this trust over time.

In addition, trade unions should learn to be more comfortable celebrating good practice by responsible employers by setting up a new kitemark for employers who meet excellent employment standards. Such an approach could allow unions to set new higher benchmarks for employment standards, and work proactively to move employers up to meet them. The Living Wage campaign has shown how effective responsible business kitemarks can be, and often working with trade unions, the Living Wage Foundation has used the kitemark simultaneously to entice employers to be publicly seen to be improving pay, and pressure low-paying employers to change practice. Building trust in this way would not only increase the likelihood of more large employers agreeing to recognise trade unions, but it would also show a tangible commitment from trade unions to a partnership approach with business. Such an approach would allow a sympathetic government to ask for an equally strong commitment from business in return.

## Access to workplaces

The political mood music has always been an important factor in

affecting the likelihood of workers choosing to join trade unions. During the interviews, union leaders highlighted a correlation between union membership levels and the political approach to unions from governments of the day: we saw a sharp fall in membership during Thatcher and Major's union-busting premierships, followed by a more gradual decline while Labour were in power, during which unions were given more freedoms and financial support but previous anti-union legislation was not withdrawn.

However, the prevailing mood in Westminster is showing signs of shifting. The Labour party under Ed Miliband and now Jeremy Corbyn has become more and more supportive of trade unions and the work they do, and Theresa May has attempted to differentiate herself from her own predecessors by calling for the Conservatives to become the 'party of the workers'. And while Matthew Taylor's recent review of modern working practices only made passing references to trade unions, it has – at least for the time being – established improving the quality of work in the UK as a point of political consensus.

Government should mark this new era of consensus by calling on employers to provide trade unions with access to their workplaces. Too many large employers have established policies not to recognise or engage with unions: Lidl is the latest example, recently losing a lengthy court battle with GMB over recognition. And unions regularly report 'union-busting' activities from employers, when businesses actively take steps to restrict union organising. These practices inhibit the employee voice and they should have no place in an industrial relations framework built on partnership.

Government should issue new guidance to employers to halt all union-busting practices and to allow unions into their workplaces. Ministers should commit, if the guidance is ignored, to changing trade union legislation to reduce thresholds for recognition and end loopholes such as allowing employers to set up their own staff associations in order to deny unions the opportunity to organise.

These measures would allow unions to ensure all workers have adequate levels of information about unions and the work they do. Workers would be able to meet union reps and organisers and find out how they can join or set up a union in their workplace and how it would help them in their job and career.

Access for unions would ensure unions could open up lines of communication with workers who are employed by Britain's most unscrupulous employers, who would have the most to gain from trade union

membership. And it would ensure that the right to being a member of a trade union is adequately enforced across all workplaces.

Providing trade unions with access to all workplaces would be a symbolically powerful move. It would be a way of government showing its solid support for trade unions and the work they do to improve work, improve business performance, and achieve economic growth. This shift in the political mood music could really unlock major growth for trade unions.

## Sector-level forums

Meaningful dialogue is a prerequisite for meaningful partnership. Over recent decades, workers have found they have had fewer opportunities for meaningful dialogue with key decision-makers as decisions are being made far away from where they work, whether that is because of mergers, acquisitions, opaque management structures or an increasingly disparate workforce. This has made traditional forms of collective bargaining more difficult.

A number of unions have found innovative ways to set cross-cutting standards to overcome this difficulty. And the TUC has led the way in getting HS2 and Heathrow Airport to agree to a number of cross-cutting minimum standards for all of the work they do and directly contract out.

Similarities can be drawn between these cross-cutting standards and partnership-based institutions in the UK. The UK Automotive Council brings together trade unions and employers to discuss how they can together improve productivity and motivation, while ensuring rewards are fairly shared. Similarly, the Low Pay Commission, which is made up of trade union, business and experts, has used using evidence and dialogue to set the national wage floor since 1998.

This partnership approach should be applied to employment and skills standards in the UK's industries. The current government has adopted a sectoral lens for its industrial strategy work, recognising the different requirements each industry has for achieving its potential. Ministers should adopt this same logic for establishing forums for dialogue between unions and business.

New forums should be established in every major industry to bring together employers and unions with the aim of co-creating routes to increasing productivity, filling skills gaps, and making work better. These forums should,



over time, agree pay scales and going rates within each industry to guard against a race to the bottom and provide a basis from which unions and employers can bargain in individual workplaces.

These forums should complement the relationships between employers and unions within individual workplaces, and therefore they should not aim to set the full gamut of pay and conditions across the industry. They should instead agree skills development plans, initiatives to boost productivity and to share the rewards, and, in time, set pay scales and going rates for different jobs and roles for small, medium and large employers.

This approach would allow unions to maximise the benefit they bring to workers and afford them a more significant role in setting workplace standards by giving them a seat at the table. If unions can demonstrate their own commitment to a partnership approach, and government and business can get behind it too, workers across the UK could benefit substantially.

## The way forward

This new framework would allow unions a seat at the table on the big decisions being made that affect the workforce over the coming years. This representation will give unions the strength and credibility to go out and make the case to prospective workers of the benefits of joining a union.

Reversing the long-term decline of union membership in the private sector requires unions to collaborate with each other and work in partnership with government and business. Unions should do all they can to achieve this change in the UK's industrial relations framework.

However, policy change can be hard-fought for and then quickly lost through political change. Any improvements for workers can only be sustained through strong and sustainable trade unions. In order to strengthen and boost membership, unions need to undertake the internal reflection that this report recommends. By doing so, unions can demonstrate that permanent decline is not inevitable, and create a future where the next generation of workers will recognise unions as part of their day-to-day lives, rather than a distant historical reference point.

## ENDNOTES

- i Research was undertaken by Ipsos MORI between 10 and 23 June 2016 using CAPIbus, Ipsos MORI's computer-aided face-to-face in-home omnibus survey with 1,339 adults aged 18 and over who are in full-time or part-time work in GB. Data have been weighted by age, gender, region, working status, social grade, tenure and ethnicity to the known population profile of working adults aged 18+ in GB. This survey was specifically designed to match the sample and methodology underpinning the 2001 BMRB survey presented in Diamond, W and Freeman, R, *What Workers Want from Workplace Organisations* (TUC, 2001). However, there were some changes to question design to account for changes in best practice between the times the two surveys were taken.
- ii The focus groups were undertaken in Hammersmith in London; Coventry in the West Midlands; and Cwmbran in Wales to cover typical areas in regions with a range of different trade union densities (London has lowest density, West Midlands the median density, and Wales the highest density). We ensured all participants were not and had never been a member of a trade union, were employed in either full-time or part-time work in the private sector, and were between the ages of 18 and 35, the age group least likely to be members of trade unions. We also screened out people who disagreed with the statement 'working in a team is the best way to get things done'. We assumed people with strongly held individualistic views would be unlikely to join a trade union in any case, and may have been a disruptive influence on the groups.
- iii Freeman, R and Pelletier, J. *The Impact of Industrial Relations Legislation on British Union Density* in NBER Working Paper Series No. 3167. NBER, 1989. <http://www.nber.org/papers/w3167.pdf>
- iv ONS. *Public and private sector employment*. 14 June 2017. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/datasets/publicandprivatesectoremploymenttemp02>
- v *Timeline, Union History* on TUC Website. [http://www.unionhistory.info/timeline/1960\\_2000\\_Narr\\_Display.php?Where=NarTitle+contains+%27Anti-Union+Legislation%3A+1980-2000%27](http://www.unionhistory.info/timeline/1960_2000_Narr_Display.php?Where=NarTitle+contains+%27Anti-Union+Legislation%3A+1980-2000%27)
- vi Freeman and Pelletier, *The Impact of Industrial Relations Legislation*, 1989
- vii Metcalf, D. *British Unions: Dissolution or Resurgence Revisited*. Centre for Economic Performance, 2001.

- 
- viii Millward, N., Bryson, A. and Forth, J., *All Change at Work?* Routledge, 2000.
- ix Machin, Stephen. 'New Workplaces, New Workers: Trade Union Decline and the New Economy' <http://personal.lse.ac.uk/machin/pdf/Future%20of%20Unions%20Book%20Chapter%20June%202002%20Revised%20Second%20Time.pdf>
- x Disney, Richard, Gosling, Amanda and Machin, Stephen. 'What has happened to union recognition in Britain?' in *Economica*, 63, 1-18, 1995.
- xi Metcalf, *British Unions*, 2001
- xii Metcalf, *British Unions*, 2001
- xiii Disney, R., Gosling, A., Machin, S. and McCrae, J., 'The Dynamics of Union Membership in Britain' in *Employment Relations Research*, Report No.3. DTI, 1998 and Tomlinson, D. and Kelly, G. *Act now or shrink later: trade unions and the generational challenge*. Resolution Foundation, 2016. <http://www.resolutionfoundation.org/media/blog/act-now-or-shrink-later-trade-unions-and-the-generational-challenge/>
- xiv 'A disengaged Britain? Political interest and participation over 30 years' in *British Social Attitudes 30* NatCen Social Research, 2013. [http://www.bsa.natcen.ac.uk/media/38455/bsa30\\_politics\\_final.pdf](http://www.bsa.natcen.ac.uk/media/38455/bsa30_politics_final.pdf)
- xv Metcalf, *British Unions*, 2001
- xvi The research was undertaken for the Fabian Society by Ipsos MORI between 10 and 23 June 2016 using CAPibus, Ipsos MORI's computer-aided face-to-face in-home omnibus survey with 1,339 adults aged 18 and over who are in full or part time work in GB. Data have been weighted by age, gender, region, working status, social grade, tenure and ethnicity to the known population profile of working adults aged 18+ in GB.

- xvii Skinner, G. Trade Unions Poll published on Ipsos MORI website, 19 July 2013 (accessed 20 Sept 2017) <https://www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk/trade-unions-poll>
- xviii See, for example, Editorial. Return of the Dinosaurs in the Economist, 21 May 2015. <https://www.economist.com/news/britain/21651866-once-again-britains-biggest-union-may-foist-unsuitable-leader-labour-return>; Phibbs, H. Bullying Trade Union Dinosaurs Don't Decide Power - Voters Do in MailOnline, 15 Sept 2010. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-1311905/Trade-union-dinosaurs-dont-decide-power-voters-do.html>; or the content of the story in Wintour, P. Biggest Crackdown on Trade Unions for 30 Years Launched by Conservatives in the Guardian, 15 July 2015. <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2015/jul/15/trade-unions-conservative-offensive-decades-strikes-labour>
- xix The focus groups were held in Hammersmith in London, Coventry in the West Midlands, and Cwmbran in Wales in order to cover a range of areas with different trade union densities (the proportion of people who are members of a trade union is lowest in London and highest in Wales). Participants were aged 18 to 35 in order to include the working-age age groups with the lowest levels of trade union membership, and all participants were employed in private sector jobs (note self-employed workers were excluded but part-time workers were included). Participants came from social grades C1, C2 and D and were not and never had been members of any trade union. In order to screen out participants with a heavily individualised way of thinking (and therefore would be unlikely to join a union in any case), we only recruited workers who said they agreed with the statement 'working in a team is the best way to get things done' (in the quantitative survey 4 out of 5 workers agreed with this statement).
- xx A caveat to this is that we deliberately excluded workers with particularly individualistic views, which will have made it more likely the groups would be supportive of trade unions.
- xxi Simms, M. Is There an Organising 'Model'? An Empirical Critique. Paper for BUIRA Conference, 2008. <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.558.1063&rep=rep1&type=pdf>

- 
- xxii Simms, Is There an Organising Model? 2008
- xxiii Gomez, R. and Gunderson, M. The Experience Good Model of Trade Union Membership. LSE / Uni Toronto, 2002.
- xxiv Booth, A. and Arulampalam, R. Union Status of Young Men in Britain: A Decade of Change in Journal of Applied Econometrics, 2000.
- xxv Gill, K. New Evidence on the Good Unions Do, 6 October 2017. <https://www.tuc.org.uk/blogs/new-evidence-good-unions-do>
- xxvi Balaram, B., Warden, J., Wallace-Stepens, F. Good Gigs: A fairer future for the UK's gig workers. RSA, 2017 [https://www.thersa.org/globalassets/pdfs/reports/rsa\\_good-gigs-fairer-gig-economy-report.pdf](https://www.thersa.org/globalassets/pdfs/reports/rsa_good-gigs-fairer-gig-economy-report.pdf)
- xxvii Tait, C. A Good Day's Work: What Workers Think About Work, and How Politics Should Respond. Fabian Society, 2016. [http://www.fabians.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Fabian-Society\\_A-good-days-work.pdf](http://www.fabians.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Fabian-Society_A-good-days-work.pdf)
- xxviii <https://www.tuc.org.uk/join-union>

