

Macmillan's children: Young workers and trade unions in the early 1960s

Glynne Williams and Martin Quinn

Glynne Williams: gw67@le.ac.uk

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Introduction

The decline of trade union membership over the past three decades has prompted a sustained evaluation of strategies and methods. There is now a substantial body of literature on recruitment and organising, focusing in particular on how unions attempt to attract young workers and make unionism relevant to those who have not been members before (Payne, 1989; Waddington and Whitson, 1997; Waddington and Kerr, 2002; Simms et al., 2013). In 1983, when union density in the UK stood at 43%, membership levels for the 16-19 age group were 21% and 24% respectively (Payne, 1989). With current aggregate membership of 26%, just 9.3% of men and 7.1% of women aged 16-24 belong to a union (BIS, 2013). These young people now account for only 4% of total membership. The re-thinking of union strategy has therefore been infused with a sense of crisis (Heery et al., 2000): a realisation that today's young non-members may be tomorrow's 'never members' (Bryson and Gomez, 2005).

The scope for reversing decline depends on how we categorise the problem. If young people are fundamentally similar to previous generations in their attitudes and 'propensity' to unionise, then the problem is the lack of opportunity for them to join, and the solution lies with unions themselves. The alternative, that a shift in outlook between generations has reduced the potential for unionisation, would seem to support a view of union decline as long-term and possibly irreversible.

The evidence seems to support the former view. Demand for unionisation appears to be relatively buoyant. Unions certainly face new and harsher challenges, but these are

economic, legal and organisational ones; they have little to do with underlying demand for unionisation or with generational changes (e.g. Tailby and Pollert, 2011; Peetz, 2010). This is fundamentally an optimistic thesis, since it allows scope for union agency (Mason and Bain, 1993), and the current debate on union organising tends to take this conclusion as its starting point (Vandaele, 2013). This is also a historical analysis, though one whose history rarely needs to be spelt out: one that stresses continuity of worker interests in a context of political and economic discontinuity, and takes 1979 as its 'year zero' (Smith and Morton, 2001; Beynon, 2010).

The problem is that a focus on the contemporary and the specific, which is a feature of much research on union organising, has real limitations in opening the 'backstory' to interrogation. A longer view is necessary, but the scarcity of comparable evidence makes this difficult. In the context of economic growth, a relatively supportive legal environment, and particularly before closed shop arrangements were made impossible (between 1982 and 1990), there are good reasons why one struggles to find any sustained discussion of recruitment before 1980. Such references to non-membership as exist before this are typically to be found in accounts of union 'growth'.

This article is an attempt to take such a long view. Our analysis is based on rediscovered data from the early 1960s of a kind not previously available, and we use this to build a tentative reappraisal of the challenges facing unions at this time. This study is important in its own right: a - possibly unique - insight into young people's relationship with their unions during this period, but also as a means of interrogating competing explanations of union growth and decline over the intervening fifty years. We begin with two contrasting narratives of growth and decline. First, union growth can be seen as following demand. Workers may be ready to join, and this readiness may not change appreciably over time, but they are only able to do so when a union

establishes a workplace presence. Alternatively, high union density may not always have been based on actual demand; in this view, decline may be partly attributable to the release of workers from compulsory membership with the demise of the closed shop (see Wright, 1996). We interrogate these possible explanations by asking two key questions. First, to what extent were young workers' attitudes to unions at this time influenced by patterns of union organisation? Second, where opposition to unions existed, to what extent was this associated with compulsory membership? After an overview of how the discussion on organising young workers has developed, we profile our respondents from fifty years ago, showing how differences in workplace organisation were associated with distinct patterns of membership and attitudes to unions at the time. We go on to suggest how this analysis may have wider implications for the way in which we understand union decline and resilience.

Union decline and the young worker

Research has repeatedly suggested the most common reason for non-membership is that workers have no union in their workplace to join (e.g. Spilsbury et al., 1987; Bryson and Gomez, 2005). According to this view, young workers are just as likely as ever to join when given the choice, but the combined effect of employer hostility, employment insecurity and anti-union regulation has been to make it more difficult for unions to establish and maintain a workplace presence (e.g. Tailby and Pollert, 2011). Since these factors are not easily challenged without existing strength, unions need to look to themselves. By some analyses, young workers tend to be more positive than their older colleagues about unions (Freeman and Diamond, 2003). If so, the fact that they are less likely to be in membership needs to be attributed either to the fact that

they have no access to a union at work, or that unions do not present themselves as credible and effective. The problem “is thus not primarily with the current trade union agenda, but with the people who deliver it”. (Waddington and Kerr, 2002: 314).

Recent approaches have, in various ways, attempted to improve this means of ‘delivery’. Tactical responses have included the ‘like recruits like’ mantra, prominent in early organising approaches, and attempts to model union membership as an ‘experience good’ that calls for an appropriate ‘marketing’ strategy (e.g. Bailey et al, 2010). Both sorts of initiative make pragmatic sense, but the difficulties faced in recruiting and retaining members underline the fact that faith in young people’s unwavering, if latent, support is not sufficient. Research has repeatedly questioned any long-term shift in attitudes. Indeed, it can be argued that even to take this possibility seriously is to risk a self-fulfilling prophecy (Vandaele, 2013: 383). Nevertheless, given the cumulative effect of decline, it remains possible that the task has been compounded to the extent that unions are now attempting to recruit people who have quite different assumptions and priorities than would have been the case fifty years ago. Whereas the challenge for unions in the past may have been economic and political, it may now simply be that workers have “lost the appetite for unionism” (Millward et al., 2000: 151-2).

1979, the conventional start date for this narrative, was not only the high point of membership and the start of a concerted attempt to weaken unions (Smith and Morton, 2001), but also a period of changing economic aspirations for significant parts of the population. For Phelps Brown, for example, the sense of economic advance had consequences for how the new generation saw their place in the world.

Those who have some experience of moving into better jobs than their parents were able to hold are less likely to feel that they are the victims of the class system and are more likely to be receptive to a philosophy of private enterprise. (1990: 10)

By the 1990s, Rose found that, even in manufacturing industry, young workers displayed a 'sheer lack of interest' in trade unions (1996: 126). Although 'Thatcher's children' do not always conform to stereotype, there are certainly generational differences that have perhaps been more apparent to activists than to academics (Waddington and Whitson, 1997; Vandaele, 2013). Bryson and Gomez find that 'never-membership' had become "a common life event for the cohort of workers born after the mid-1960s, sharply distinguishing their transition to maturity from cohorts born only a decade or so earlier" (2005: 69). If union membership is an 'experience' good, one that can only be appreciated after joining, then the problem for unions is how contact with unions (or lack of it) moulds attitudes and how collectivism is learned or unlearned.

Useful attempts have been made to distinguish the effect of age from generational effects, both on membership patterns (Blanchflower, 2007) and on attitudes to unions (Gomez et al, 2002). The problem is that we cannot assume that the difference between younger and older workers is fixed. In other words, although young workers may 'grow into' union membership and activism, they may do so more or less quickly and enthusiastically. Shister (1953), for example, argued that young workers were more likely to join and to become active, because they are less likely to feel loyalty to their current employer and because they generally have less to lose. (We see the same logic in Beynon's (1973) stewards, who avoid mortgages, precisely because this is 'something to lose'.) On the other hand, Cregan and Johnson (1990) see a different

logic: workers who are less committed to their present employment are also less likely to commit to union membership. It is worth noting that these explanations start with different assumptions about individual rationality, but also about what unions *are* and what they *do*. We therefore need to be cautious, both in comparing data from different times and places, and also in comparing underlying reasons and motivations.

Recruitment of new members is self-evidently an integral part of the work of a trade union, but the specific focus on young workers is relatively new (Bryson and Gomez, 2005). The TUC Youth Conference, for example, was established in 1974 (TUC, 2004) and the recognition of young members as a distinct constituency, with their own concerns and priorities, is a product the 1990s. It is also worth noting that the ‘young worker’ is a recent sociological discovery, with academic interest growing in inverse proportion to the availability of work (Goodwin and O’Connor, 2007).

However, the idea that unions take young members for granted predates the current focus on arresting membership decline. Cole, writing in 1953, describes the “relatively scanty provision for the adolescent worker” as the “weakest spot for the movement” (1953: 75). The issue at stake here was the failure to inculcate a collectivist ethos among existing members.

“[The young worker] is usually given little chance of interesting himself in Union affairs ... there is still very little attempt to educate them in Trade Union or Labour matters...” (Cole, 1953: 75)

By 1957, union involvement in vocational training meant that young workers might be brought into contact with their union earlier than previously (Wray, 1957: 305). On the other hand, in poorly organised workplaces, a new entrant “might not find his way into the union until the late teens or early twenties” (Wray, 1957: 305).

In taking a longer view of young workers and their unions, then, it is important to contextualise the data in time and place, but there are obvious problems in doing so. Given the prevailing concerns of industrial sociology and industrial relations at the time, young workers are not a significant feature of academic writing (for example Zweig, 1961; Goldthorpe et al., 1968). Retrospective research is also restricted by the availability of datasets, notably the Workplace Industrial Relations Survey (from 1980), the Labour Force Survey (1973) and the Social Attitudes Survey (1983).

Data and methods

Our data is taken from a survey of young workers carried out in Leicester between 1962 and 1964. The purpose of this survey, carried out by a team led by Norbert Elias, was to examine the “Adjustment of Young Workers to Work Situations and Adult Roles”. Interviews were based on a schedule of 85 questions, covering a range of aspects of respondents’ lives, including a section on union membership. None of this data was analysed at the time (for reasons explained by Goodwin and O’Connor, 2010) and since the interview schedules were rediscovered in 2001 only those responses relating to the transition from school to work have been used (Goodwin and O’Connor, 2005, 2007). This is the first analysis of the data on trade unions.

Of the 882 schedules that were completed, 851 survive. Since the principle focus of the project was the school-to-work transition, the sample was stratified by length of work experience, rather than by industry. A predictably large proportion of interviewees worked in what were, at the time, the largest industries in Leicester: textiles,

shoemaking and engineering. Other major employers included the Cooperative and the utilities. Three quarters of interviewees were boys. All were aged 14 – 21 with the vast majority being between 16-18, and all had been in work for between one and two years. 43% had had more than one job since leaving school. The majority, unsurprisingly, appear to be in manual jobs (this question is not asked directly). The data derives from semi-structured interviews conducted in respondents' homes. For the discussion presented here, we draw on a section on trade unions, which we reproduce for reference:

31a) Is there a trade union?

31b) Which union?

31c) Have you joined it?

31d) Who asked you to join?

31e) Is everybody in it?

31f) What do you think of it?

31g) Is it useful?

This section forms a relatively small part of the schedule. Other sections tackle details of the working day, the relationship work and at home life and aspirations for the future. There is some variation in the way in which responses are recorded, due, no doubt, to the circumstances in which the interviews took place. The data does, nevertheless, provide a rich, and, to the best of our knowledge, unique, insight into young people's attitudes to unions, and more generally to collectivism at work.

It is important to note that although interviews were based on a highly structured questionnaire, they appear to have been much more discursive than this might suggest. Responses, even to seemingly ‘closed’ questions, are often long, touching upon many other aspects of working life. Given the primary purpose of the project, interviewees were encouraged to expand upon each point with little prompting or direction. For example, all respondents were able to express views on unions, whether they were members or not, and some of the examples below demonstrate that many of the anti-union sentiments arise from influences other than direct contact in the workplace.

This is qualitative data, recorded in a non-standardised format. It was therefore necessary to code responses in order to produce usable quantitative data on membership and attitudes. It is not possible to gradate these responses in an objective way, but it is possible to code for broadly positive and negative attitudes to unions, based on answers to question 31f (above): “What do you think of [the union]?” Coding was necessarily dependent on interpretation, fifty years after the event, of transcribed responses. There are several limitations and potential sources of bias involved in this (discussed more fully in O’Connor and Goodwin, 2010). First, the survey was designed for reasons different from our own; trade unions were not the central concern and the transcribed data may not fully capture responses to these particular questions. Second, interviewers appear not to have offered prompts in this part of the discussion to clarify vague answers. Interview notes are extensive, but there is some variation between interviewers. (Except when the wording would otherwise be ambiguous, quotes are presented as they appear). Equally, as we explain below, responses throughout the interview sometimes appear to be contradictory.

Bearing these limitations in mind, we first define key groups of young workers of theoretical importance: according to union presence, membership and attitudes to trade

unionism. Using responses to a wider range of questions, we then explore the influences, contradictions and implications. Finally, we suggest some conclusions, both regarding the period in question, but also some rather more tentative conclusions about contemporary theory and practice.

Patterns of organisation and their consequences

The interviews were conducted between 1962 and 1964: a period framed by the 1961 ETU ballot-rigging trial and the 1964 decision in *Rookes v. Barnard*, which threatened to make both effective industrial action and the closed shop impossible. This was a time when the relationship between trade unions and the Conservative government became particularly uneasy. *A Giant's Strength*, published by Conservative lawyers in 1958, had presented the closed shop as a threat to individual liberty and questioned unions' legal 'privileges'. This theme, of tackling 'over-powerful' unions, particularly at the workplace level, became central to industrial relations policy. The Department of Employment began categorising strikes as 'official' or 'unofficial' in 1961 (Dorey, 1995: 4). Thus, national level cooperation with unions continued at the same time as unions' industrial role was publicly questioned.

It is also arguable that workers were becoming, if not more 'bourgeois', then certainly increasingly comfortable with the effects of economic growth. And this may be linked with changing attitudes to collectivism. In 1961, Zweig reported:

...very little sign of what is often called the "alienation" of the working man from his work ... He is bound no longer by the links of common hardships,

handicaps and injustices, and the common call to arms in class-warfare. (1961: 69)

Yet this was a decade of union growth: union membership reached ten million for the first time in 1963 and aggregate density increased, by one estimate, from 43% in 1960 to 48% in 1970 (Price and Bain, 1976: 340). Union ‘popularity’ also increased. 70% of Gallup respondents in 1964 agreed that unions were a ‘good thing’: the highest proportion in a decade and one not equalled during the steady growth up to 1979 (Heald, and Wybrow, 1986). This presents a puzzle. Both union membership and public approval of unions increased during a period of government and media hostility. Growth from 1964 went in parallel with falling approval ratings, and popular approval increased during subsequent decline. One explanation for this is the closed shop. McCarthy (1963) estimated that 38% of UK workers were covered by closed shop arrangements and this figure increased throughout the late 1960s and 1970s (Dunn, 1981). Similarly, Goldthorpe et al. claimed that 23% of members in their Luton study had been “coerced” into joining by the existence of a closed shop (1968: 97). If so, it is possible that compulsory membership masked both changing attitudes and also the fragility of workplace organisation.

41% of our young workers report that there was no trade union present in their workplace (NB not 41% of workplaces.) We should also assume that in some cases the union is present but ‘invisible’; this is certainly evident in larger workplaces where some respondents report a union presence and some do not. Equally, we might expect school leavers’ first jobs to be disproportionately in more weakly organised sectors. Nevertheless, Nickell et al. (2005) puts the figure for workplace collective bargaining coverage in 1960 at 67% and so our result suggests a far lower presence than might be expected.

Closed shops were typically built on existing strength of organisation and were self-organised, rather than relying on formal, negotiated agreements, which Turberville (2007) points out may account for the resilience of union density in the 1980s. 65% [144]/223] of union members answered yes to the question, “Is everybody in [the union]?” (31e). Whilst respondents might not know the true status of membership agreements, responses at least indicate when workers *believe* they are working in a union shop. A well-organised workplace has a more subtle effect in socialising, educating and exerting moral pressure on new entrants. For example, one respondent, who is not working in a closed shop, explains why he is a member:

Yes. In a way I've got to be. You get the help of union so you ought to be a member. That's what the reps said when [I] tried to drop out (Clothing: Q31c)

Members in 100% organised workplaces are just as likely to be pro-union as are members as a whole (see Table 1). Only seven individuals specifically complain that they were compelled to join (31c). The data certainly does not seem to suggest a significant undercurrent of reluctance.

Table 1: Workplace organisation and attitudes to unions

	Pro-union	Anti-union
Total members (n=223)	75%	12%

Members in 100% organised workplaces (n=144)	77%	11%
Total non-members (n=635)	65%	22%
Non-members in unorganised workplaces (n=351)	61%	22%

It seems, though, that because of the importance invested in 100% organisation, some interviewees see the *absence* of a closed shop as removing the need to join. Poorly unionised workplaces are referred to as “open shop”, “not entirely a closed shop”, or “not really a trade union shop”. So, when asked if she had joined, one shop worker says:

“Not up to now. At the Co-op I had to join because it was a closed shop”.

Similarly, asked if everyone is a member, a non-member in an engineering firm explains: “No. It’s not compulsory”.

On the contrary, a significant proportion reports that they have not been able to join. As the table also indicates, the majority of non-members express broad support for unions. Age is the main barrier to entry: five per cent of non-members suggest that

school leavers and apprentices are prevented from joining. Even if this was not a rulebook issue, a reluctance to recruit is evident.

Somebody told me had to be 18. Man asked me and I said don't I have to be 18 and he said wait until then if you like. (Trainee lighting engineer, 31g)

The effect of this approach seems to have been that even pro-union interviewees tend towards more instrumental assessments of membership. Asked if unions are useful, one apprentice replies:

Yes, when you're older. Pointless when you're a lad - pointless paying money when you can't strike or anything. (Apprentice Engineer, Q31g)

This voluntarism applies even in notionally closed shops. Asked if everybody was a member, one shop worker says, "Everybody over 18 has to be. Under 18 has a choice". An apprentice draughtsman explains, "You can be a member or a non-member".

Where no specific bar on membership applied, then, as now, a significant reason for non-membership was that young workers had not been approached. This is the case for a quarter of non-members in unionised workplaces. Although this survey can only hint at implications of such a lack of engagement, it seems reasonable to suggest that an enforced period of non-membership at the very least provided an incubation period for individualistic anti-union attitudes.

Nobody asked - I saw this lady come round every week - nosey - I asked who she was and this lady said oh she's the trade union ... and some went "Ugh", you know. And anyway, it's not worth it cos you're getting the same benefits as everyone. (Clothing: Q31d):

The significance of these responses depends on how they map on to patterns of membership and workplace organisation. If growth in the 1960s depended on a conscript membership, for example, then this would have real implications for the way we understand current challenges. In the remainder of this article, we categorise respondents into five groups, based on membership status, the availability of a trade union to join and their professed attitudes to unions. These are the ‘reluctant members’, the ‘contented members’, the ‘principled non-members’, the ‘would-be members’ and a group that we term the ‘unreachable non-members’.

The reluctant members

Our first group are the 12% of union members who express anti-union views. Almost without exception, these focus on the costs and benefits of membership and on the failings of the union in the workplace.

*I know it's of benefit if you get the sack for anything - they can help you then ...
But if you just leave and they've done nothing against you then you've paid all
those weeks for nothing. (Footwear, Q31f)*

Other assessments seem to rest on personal experience of union ineffectiveness at the workplace.

*Don't think much of it. (?) It is one of those unions where you can make a
complaint and it gets no further than the gaffer (Hosiery, Q31f)*

These views go along with a marked ignorance about what the union does. When asked “If there were a rise in wages where you work, why would it happen?” the union is largely absent from replies.

It'd come through the government, through the Whitley Council (Clerk, Hospital, Q42)

I don't know really. Our wages are always the same as everybody else in the boot and shoe (Footwear, Q42)

Coercion is not a factor here, but it is clear that solid workplace organisation requires that membership is seen as the norm. In these cases, persuasion and education play little part. In fact, some are unclear as to how (or indeed what) they joined “Some men came round. I don't know who they were” (Clothing, Q31d). High membership does not translate in these cases to high visibility.

The 'principled' non-members

We also identify a small group of young people who have actively rejected trade union membership. These are the individuals in workplaces where a union is present, who have been approached to join, but who have so far declined to do so. We can only apply this label to 17 individuals out of the 220 non-members in unionised workplaces. The true figure is probably higher, since a large number of non-members either did not or could not say if they had been approached.

It appears that free-loaders in our sample are not necessarily aware of being covered by collective bargaining arrangements:

We don't have trouble like big firms with shop stewards - we get a rise when the Engineering Union does so they're alright. (Sales, Clothing, Q32a)

[Asked: Why do pay rises happen?] *Probably because they threatened to go on strike again. I don't believe in strikes and never did and never will. I get 10/- rise on my birthday.* (Messenger, Railway, Q42)

For others the focus is very much on the performance of the union in the workplace. Again, some confusion about the nature of collective action is clear.

Never done anything since I've been there - that's why I haven't joined (Baker, Q31j)

This group reflects a paradox that has often been noted: the tendency to see unions in general as too powerful, while one's own union is too weak. Since individuals' own experience is local and limited, this contrast is not entirely illogical.

The original concept was quite good but now they argue about too much tea and sugar and I think they all ought to be shot. (Sales, Q42)

This dissonance is also a feature of pro-union attitudes (see below). Superficially negative, these views often suggest a sense of trade unionism that can be seen as rather more idealistic than the mundane reality of workplace bargaining.

The 'would-be members'

Our third group are those young workers who report that their workplace is not unionised, but who express pro-union views. As we show below, responses often appear self-contradictory, and our categorisation is based on attitudes to unions in the workplace, rather than more general views. These workers constitute the core of the 'frustrated demand' that has formed such a prominent part of subsequent analyses.

61% of those in non-union workplaces are pro-union. Of these, 54% are in their second or third job (compared with 43% for the entire sample). These responses are framed mainly in terms of the workplace, although there are also hints at the broader benefits of unions.

They can be a great help to the workers... they could get us more modern machines and improve our wages. (Lathe turner, Q31f)

... if it wasn't for unions we'd still be back in the 18th Century. ... In a non union shop there is no link between management and workers. (Clothing, Q37f/g)

Here, too, we see a range of influences, from family members and from the media, as well as the experience of their current, non-unionised workplace. Some identify a clear demand for union organisation at their workplace, but balance this against perceptions of the broader role of unions in society.

Can be useful - my brother has been helped - he smashed his wrist at work and they helped him a lot. But when they bring men out on strike for nothing they're no good (Window cleaner, Q31f)

The contrast of views that are strongly in favour of workplace organisation with equally strong doubts about the perceived power of unions often makes it difficult for these workers to summarise their opinion. The views expressed sometimes seem to owe very little to the individual's own experience at work. In these cases, endorsement of a rather minimalistic version of trade unionism clashes with popular caricature.

Good and bad. They do look after the workers - the office workers could do with one. What you see on TV you - don't know if it's true - but some of them go

on strike and just cause trouble for the country, or they go on strike on stupid things like 2/- a week rise (Typist, Q31f)

In other cases, a general approval mixes with a unitarism that makes an exception of their present employer.

Yes [They are useful], but you don't need one in a small place with no disputes.

You can talk everything out with the boss (Welder, Q31g)

Yes – [in] a factory more than a shop. Not many in a shop you see. Wouldn't be useful there. In a shop you know everybody, but not in a factory. (Shop

Assistant, Q31g)

We might expect the bulk of 'frustrated' demand to exist in workplaces without a union presence. The Leicester economy at the time was dominated by three main industries, textiles, footwear and engineering: all well organised and with a stable workforce. We might expect the scope for growth to be elsewhere. Yet most of our non-members work in notionally unionised workplaces and the proportion holding pro-union views is similar in organised and unorganised cases. We return to this below.

The 'unreachable non-members'

Our fourth group comprises those young people who say that their workplaces are non-unionised *and* who hold anti-union views. This group comprises 22% of interviewees in non-union workplaces. The views expressed range from narrowly instrumental to ideological. The former include those who are quite aware of freeloading:

[What do you think of it?] Lousy [Why?] The union's members pay while we get all the benefits - pay rises and shorter hours. (Apprentice electrician, Q31f)

Other responses set out an anti-unionism that is understood in political context.

In firms like Fords and ship building they want stopping because they are ruining Britain's industry. They are communist influenced. They are getting too powerful, they want telling where they are going wrong. (Engineering, Q31f)

The common factor is that these individuals have had very little direct exposure to trade unions and such knowledge as they have has been derived from a range of sources.

Not in favour of it - all them strikes you hear of - I can't see the point of it ... father is in trade union and he thinks like me. (Clerk, Garage, Q31f)

Strike over such silly things. Don't really understand them because I've never tried but I always avoid them if I can because I'm not altogether for them.

(Dressmaker, Q31f)

Between 1964 and 1970, women would account for 70% of union growth (Kirton, 2006: 31). At the beginning of this period, responses point to the influence of gendered assumptions about employment.

Don't like 'em. [They are] not so much for a girl as for a boy. A woman can do owt more or less can't she? She can be cleaning or summat ... I were in one when in book binding [was it useful?] Don't know just used to give them 9d
([Female] Factory worker, Q31f)

There are also some suggestions of resistance to unions that are run by men and for men. Although this is not a major theme in our data, it seems likely that this additional layer of marginalisation is significant.

And calling each other's Brothers and things like that I hate it. (Typist, Q31f)

This group have no direct workplace experience of unions and often display a degree of ignorance that seems incongruous, given the public prominence of trade unions at the time. Since the views expressed reflect a range of other influences, we need to see them as having a broader currency and influence.

The contented members: "Sick pay and dancing"?

Our final group is the largest: union members who express pro-union views. These represent 75% of members and 35% of all workers in unionised workplaces. As with our other groups, views are sometimes self-contradictory, but some common themes are apparent. First, they have a lot to say about unions. In some cases these views are touchingly naïve.

What do you think of [the union]? Pretty good so far. It is supposed to be the best in England. (Composer, Q31f)

It's quite a good union. [We] have sick pay and dancing (Shop Assistant, Q31f)

Whereas a common criticism made by 'principled' non-members is that unions capitalise on trivia, many in this group also focus on seemingly small issues, but see union involvement as positive.

One of the lads at our place lost his hammer and he had a new one got him.

(Carpenter, Q31g)

[You] don't get put on with trade union. Wanted me to make tea all time. Trade union man stopped it (Apprentice mechanic, Q31f)

Equally, others use evidence from their own workplace as the basis for broader assessments.

One man on own wouldn't stand chance against office. Shop steward put it forward proper way. (Machine setter, Q31f)

Only a very small minority of these – four individuals - indicate any active involvement with their union, but in the context of a relative marginalisation of young workers, the sense of empowerment in these cases is apparent.

I'm on the committee. I know that we've done good work. We have got a kitchen, lockers for clothes, a pay rise and now we don't work on Saturdays. (Typist, Q31f)

It seems to do quite an important job. It is democratic, we have our own office meetings and send representatives to the council. (Tax Officer, Q31f)

Young members often frame their views in parochial terms, but these rarely suggest the narrow, individualistic instrumentalism found in our non-members. Although we should be careful in attributing causality here, it seems that first-hand experience of unions makes a difference. However, these young people are not 'blank slates' (e.g. Freeman and Diamond, 2003). They reflect multiple influences and we should therefore be cautious of construing unionism too literally as an 'experience' good. As with our non-members, there is often a contrast between assessments of union power in

general and the experience of union weakness in the workplace (e.g. Goldthorpe, 1968: 113). Unlike non-members, though, our contented members are more likely to see union power as a straightforwardly necessary thing. Asked how useful unions are, one member sums this up:

They are all right if they are a strong union. A weak union is neither use nor ornament. (Cable Joiner, Q31f)

This is a theme that recurs with members and non-members alike, while the contrast between interpretations demonstrates how views are moulded by a range of influences.

Not much good. I'd have joined it though if their strike had been more successful. The union bloke won't speak to me any more now. (Carpenter, Q31j)

Well I think it is alright as long as everybody is in one. I mean ... you pay into a trade union so that you're a strong force together. (Typist, Q31f)

This is an example of the way in which non-members express fairly exacting standards of solidarity. Even superficially negative views sometimes seem to be prompted by a realisation that workplace reality does not match up to these standards. This also needs to be seen in the context of a push for 100% workplace organisation, which, we suggest, presents unionism as an all-or-nothing matter.

Discussion and Conclusions

Our data is presented primarily as an insight into young workers' relationship with their unions during this period. Young workers are largely invisible in contemporary accounts for various reasons concerning both union and academic priorities at the time.

This study goes some way toward rectifying this and is, we believe, worthy of attention for this reason alone. It also points to some rather more tentative conclusions about union strategy at the time and subsequently.

The views expressed by young workers do include striking points of principle, but 'instrumental' reasoning is at the foreground. Early critiques of the 'affluent worker' thesis argued that this instrumentalism was neither new nor surprising (Daniel, 1969; Westergaard, 1970; Rose, 1996: 68). In this analysis, subsequent union decline was a result not of a new individualism, but rather of a consistent instrumentalism: an instrumentalism that led to different conclusions in the 1980s than it had in the 1960s. One view, then, is that we should not equate union membership with intrinsic pro-union attitudes; individuals are simply weighing costs and benefits. As it became more difficult to maintain a critical mass of membership, non-membership became a rational option. Rather than frustrated demand, this argument would suggest a suppressed non-membership, which was 'released' after 1979.

Our data throw a different light on this. Far from reporting coercion, members in fully organised workplaces are more likely to be pro-union than are members as a whole. There are certainly also more hostile views, but not the undercurrent of resentment that one might expect from conscripts. On the contrary, given that an estimated 40% of workplaces were union shops at this time, the issue appears to be non-contentious.

A more important factor is the limited and uneven influence of unions on the previously uncommitted. Attitudes to unionism are influenced by factors 'embedded in the context of an individual's work history' (Lowe and Rastin, 2000) and, as such, present a difficult nut for unions to crack. Other factors, though, are more open to intervention, such as the conception of collectivism that unions themselves create.

Although we see a positive effect of contact with unions, this is uneven, does little to counter popular stereotype and often does not result in recruitment. Where a union is present, half of our interviewees are members and three quarters of these express pro-union views. On the other hand, two thirds of our non-members are pro-union and even in reportedly non-union workplaces anti-union views account for less than a quarter (our ‘unreachable’ non-members). This is the frustrated demand, the basis for subsequent union growth. However, the fact that these individuals remain non-members cannot be explained entirely by the absence of a union to join; almost half of them are in notionally unionised workplaces.

Since this time, membership has become far more concentrated – members are now found in just 23% of workplaces (BIS, 2013: 14) – and consequently the idea of reaching a whole generation may seem rather fanciful. Unions need to prioritise limited resources and so there are sound reasons for consolidating membership in already organised workplaces, rather than widening the net (Willman, 2001). Statutory recognition added weight to this argument (McCracken and Sanderson, 2004). But consolidation or expansion strategies have implications for the sustainability of union organisation, particularly when ‘organisation’ denotes little more than union density.

Strategy also rests on assumptions about why people join, and pessimistic assumptions may reinforce the reasons for pessimism. For example, the idea that union power needs to be defended by increasing the cost of non-membership has been an influential one, yet it suggests a degree of defensiveness that has only been partially borne out by history. It implicitly accepts that, in the absence of either incentive or compulsion, there is no rational motive for joining. In other words, it can be seen to play to the same instrumental reasoning encountered throughout our sample, accepting the logic of

freeloading and seeing organisation based on freely chosen membership as inherently unstable.

In our study the effect of the closed shop is, at most, only one small component in forming anti-union attitudes. However, the obverse of this focus on 100% organisation is the continuation of ineffective workplace organisation elsewhere. The largest source of opposition in our sample is found, not where membership has been forced upon unwilling workers, but where non-existent or vestigial workplace organisation allows received assumptions to go unchallenged. Union 'visibility' overall is lower than might have been expected: collective bargaining coverage is almost certainly higher than suggested by our sample. In workplaces without a visible union presence, two thirds of young workers are pro-union. Yet, as we indicate, many already benefited from negotiated agreements without being aware of it. Should we see these poorly organised workplaces simply as an indication of the scale of the task facing unions at the time, or as a consequence of the prioritisation of resources on 100% organisation? Either way, we see a large number of school-leavers effectively excluded from membership. Even in supposedly unionised workplaces, although most non-members are pro-union, they have not been asked to join.

Given the centrality of collective bargaining in the UK, there are good reasons for a 'union density bias' (Sullivan, 2010). But high aggregate density masks weaknesses that limit the sustainability of union organisation throughout the economy. The formation of collective orientations is an iterative process, and it seems reasonable to see our teenagers in the early 1960s as prefiguring the transformation of politics and industrial relations that began fifteen years later. We see here evidence not only of the 'never-member' phenomenon fifteen years earlier than previously suggested (Bryson and Gomez, 2005), but also of the way in which the workplace is only one arena where

unions need to influence perceptions. It may be palatable to believe that young people are the same always and everywhere and that the propensity to unionise is relatively stable, but this needs to be more than an article of faith. Young people's views are the product of history and the creation of a sustainable unionism is the work of generations.

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