

The more unions try to push Ed Miliband, the more he is likely to resist. The UK's unions must become more adept at picking the battles they can actually win.

Threatening strike action in November over public sector pension reform, the UK's unions are flexing their muscles in a way not seen for many years. In the week of the Labour Party's annual conference, [Steve Coulter](#) writes that because of the unions' help in electing Ed Miliband to the Labour Leadership, he is now forced to continually demonstrate his independence from them. To achieve real policy concessions, unions must choose their battles.

Do unions still matter? We may be about to find out, the hard way. The lead up to the Labour Party conference in Liverpool this week has been shrouded in acrimony over the leadership's plans to curb their influence. The unions themselves are gearing up for open warfare against the government over pensions and are unimpressed with Labour leader Ed Milliband's tepid support.

Already facing years of economic stagnation, the UK now looks set to be hit by crippling public sector strikes beginning in the autumn. If the blood-curdling promises of some union leaders are realised, the country could be about to enter the worst period for industrial disputes since the late 1980s.

So, after years of being written off, UK unions are again flexing their muscles. True, the UK's un-coordinated style of capitalism tends to marginalise unions from the operation of labour markets, while its 'pluralist' political system, with a centralising, Westminster-dominated executive, also freezes them out of politics. It's also the case that, following sustained industrial decline, union membership is concentrated in a now shrinking public sector.

On the other hand this level of concentration is really quite pronounced (57% of public sector workers are unionised, compared with 15% in the private sector), endowing public sector unions, at least, with considerable industrial power. What they lack, however, is an effective strategy to bring this power to bear to secure genuine policy gains.

As UK unions lack the exalted 'social partner' status enjoyed by continental European unions they have fewer means of influencing labour market policy. These are often assumed to boil down either to industrial action, or manipulating their Labour Party allies, via their control of party funding – while hoping that doing this does not destroy the party's prospects at the ballot box.

Neither option is particularly effective. The strikes being planned are unlikely to shift the government's position on what is a major component of its parliament-defining deficit reduction strategy.

Before the election there was a tacit but water-tight assumption that the Conservatives, then on course for outright victory, assumed they had enough to deal with without picking fights with the unions. The Tory leadership felt a line had been drawn under industrial relations issues by the Thatcher and Major governments and, provided the unions behaved themselves, there was no need to revisit these. The [Hutton Review](#), recommending reform of public sector pensions, blew this apart.

Unfortunately for the unions, voters tend to agree with the government on the need for reforms. When they enjoy popular support for what will be unflinchingly portrayed as tough action against vested interests, Conservative politicians tend to do well politically even if the strikes make life uncomfortable.

Labour's position is a lot more difficult and complicated. When Ed Milliband was elected leader solely thanks to the vestigial power of the union voting bloc it was widely assumed he would be in their pocket. The reality is the opposite, as Milliband is forced to continually demonstrate his independence. Blair only needed one 'Clause 4 moment' to show the public he was not a union stooge – Milliband requires one almost weekly. The more unions try to influence him, the more loudly he will resist and the more political mileage for him in doing things to defy them.

But it needn't be like this. Since corporatism collapsed in the 1970s, unions have been able to extract meaningful policy concessions from the party only when they function, or are seen to function, as moderate and credible social partners in-waiting for a Labour leadership committed to the electoral centre ground. To avoid scaring Middle England, party-union contact on policy should ideally be monopolised by the good offices of the Trades Union Congress (TUC).

The TUC has a large policy-making directorate (useful for a cash-strapped party reliant on intern-researchers), a vested interest in getting on with employers, and formal independence from the Labour party. Deals made with the TUC can be done in private, behind closed doors, with no suggestion of cash being exchanged for policies.

Tony Blair is not fondly remembered by union activists, but during New Labour's first term (1997-2001) the TUC helped secure a national minimum wage (negotiated on a tripartite basis rather than being imposed on workers by Gordon Brown's Treasury), a statutory route to union recognition (infuriating the CBI), the EU Social Chapter and nods towards continental-style social partnership.

The second and third terms were scarred by some bad-tempered industrial disputes and rows over European employment legislation, largely bringing a halt to the productive earlier dialogue. When the unions resorted to bullying the party over money to get their way, relations deteriorated further and, aside from the fractious 2004 Warwick Agreement which the government largely declined to implement, got little else from New Labour.

It is dispiriting, therefore, that the TUC leadership is burning any bridges it has with the government by leading the strikes. Perhaps it has no choice. But the centre-left needs a Labour party that is not continually looking over its shoulder at what the unions might do, and a trade union movement more adept at picking battles it can actually win.