

## THE CONVERSATION

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# Britain's battered unions have new battles round the corner

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Union City Blues. Activists join anti-Thatcher protests in 2013. Chris Beckett, CC BY-NC-ND

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We often hear about how “old-fashioned” trade unionism is in Britain. The popular image worldwide may even be that Margaret Thatcher had dealt the movement a body blow from which it could not recover during her polarising prime ministership.

However, when the UK Conservative Party recently announced that it would develop a scheme to allow employees three days per year of leave to encourage volunteering, the general secretary of the Trades Union Congress, Frances O’Grady, was quick to point out that trade unions are still the largest organisations of volunteers in the country. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this prompted a quick clarification from the Conservative Party explaining that trade union volunteering was not within the remit of the plans.

With 6.5m members in the UK, the trade union movement is still a force to be reckoned with, but there have been profound changes since the peak of the late 1970s when more than 70% of the workforce worked in jobs where the terms and conditions were negotiated by unions. Now that figure is around a third of workers and outside the public sector it is around one in six.

## Confrontation

So what happened? Well first off, there was a deliberate and sustained effort by both employers and the state to reduce the influence of unions in workplaces and across the economy as a whole. In other words, the decline of union influence was no accident. There was a series of high-profile confrontations; Thatcher gave no ground during the **Miners' Strike of 1984-5** and media baron Rupert Murdoch took the same line with the print unions during the **Wapping disputes of 1986**. It resulted in a gradual tightening of the regulations governing unions and the right to take collective action, the balance of influence slowly but emphatically turned back towards employers.



Maggie Maggie Maggie ... R Barraez D'Lucca, CC BY

The outcomes were highly predictable. Rather than collectively negotiating wages and other terms and conditions, most British workers now face a “take it or leave it” position from their employers. **Wage and wealth inequality has risen dramatically** – and trade unionism is often regarded as alien to workers and managers outside the sectors where it is still common; often, but not only, the public sector. As a result of the very organised challenge to the legitimacy of the unions, membership fell and companies in many industries withdrew from collectively negotiating terms and conditions of work.

Without the constraining influence of a strong collective voice representing the workforce, capital and managers have a renewed confidence to prioritise their own preferences. Previous writers have identified that companies, managers and policy makers have increasingly prioritised financial objectives in what has become known as the “**financialisation**” of decision making. This has profound effects for us all in many areas of our lives.

At work, the effects are widespread and include the rapid spread of employment contracts that guarantee few or no hours, but expect flexibility from the employee, the absence of organised pressure to increase wages, and no mechanism to discuss the problematic aspects of productivity that we have seen in the economy in recent years. Financialisation brings new challenges to trade unions in the UK

and elsewhere because it brings a risk that employees are increasingly seen as “costs” rather than “assets” in both company and national discussions.

## Labourers

This offers a gloomy view of the unions’ future perhaps, but there is bedrock for some stability. Unlike the US, where the meagre political influence of unions is a subject of much hand-wringing, in the UK, they do still have an important policy voice within the Labour Party. They still donate a large part of the Labour Party’s funds and provide activists and volunteers to help support candidates.



Labour leader Ed Miliband at the party's annual conference in 2014. Facundo Arrizabalaga/EPA

In this way, their influence is not only limited to collective bargaining about people’s terms and conditions of work but also visible in the political arena. Their voice in the political process, combined with the will of other Labour Party members allows a route for employment issues to be regulated beyond formal, collective bargaining. There are many rumblings that this link will be softened in the future, but in the current general election campaign it is clear that the Labour Party has a very strong message on issues related to working conditions such as the national minimum wage, regulation of flexible contracts and skills development.

British unions, however, have a difficult job to retain their influence and avoid the fate of their US counterparts. Overall, there has been an important shift away from the kind of joint mechanisms whereby employers and unions can regulate the labour market. That change is so marked that it would take time to rebuild even if there was a political will to do so.

## Inequality

These institutions are common in other EU countries. There you will find far greater co-ordination in skills policy, training, wages and other conditions of work all of which relies on these joint regulation mechanisms – take a look at Germany's collective bargaining system as an example. And the existence of the Low Pay Commission shows that they can be effective here when they are given an opportunity. Without them, the UK relies on labour markets to operate with very minimal regulation and the inevitable result is the growing inequality of wages and wealth.

Unions help to balance out the power of managers in the workplace and they continue to do an effective job in many of the workplaces where they retain a presence. In this sense, they remain as relevant today as they did 130 years ago when they started to become a general movement to represent workers across different occupations. But they face profound and continued challenges to their legitimacy, shrinking resources and a lack of institutional framework to represent workers. Without a political will to re-build those institutions, their influence will remain constrained and many workers will continue to suffer the brutality of poor working conditions and insecurity.

*This is part of an ongoing series on the waning power of organised labour. [Click here to see other articles in the series, which culminates on May 1, International Workers' day.](#)*



Work   Inequality   Unions   Margaret Thatcher   Labour Party   miners strike   Wealth inequality   Worker rights  
Labor power