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British trade unionism in the 1980s reassessed. are recurring assumptions about union membership and strikes flawed?

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ABSTRACT

This article questions the hypothesis, put forward by several historians and IR academics, that the 1980s decline in British union membership and strike frequency, was driven by major industrial defeats, a cultural shift away from collectivism, and the adverse effects of the Conservative Government's anti-union legislation. In contrast, this paper argues that international economic developments, most notably the globalisation of manufacturing production, along with the British Conservative Government's economic policies, which resulted in mass unemployment in heavily unionised areas of the economy, were the principal reasons for the declines in union membership and strike frequency during the 1980s. In support of this theory, my article draws upon extensive contemporaneous research, which I conducted when I worked in the Industrial Relations Research Unit at the University of Warwick in the late 1980s. This research illustrates how strike frequency and union membership fell in the early and mid-1980s, before membership stabilized, and the frequency of strikes relative to the number of unionised workplaces increased, during the short-lived economic upturn of the late 1980s.

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Introduction

In charting and analysing British trade unionism in the 1980s, many historians and industrial relations scholars have focused on the marked decline in membership and the heavy defeats that several unions experienced in major industrial disputes. They further note how the decade saw a dramatic fall in the number of strikes, although not in the number of working days lost (Ackers & Payne, 1998; Bacon & Storey, 1993; Bassett, 1986; Bassett & Cave, 1993; Beckett, 2015; Cohen, 2006; Colling & Terry, 2010; Edwards, 2003; Fairbrother & Yates, 2003; Gospel & Wood, 2003; Jackson & Saunders, 2012; S. Jenkins, 2006; Kelly, 1998; Kelly & Darlington, 2015; Lyddon, 2007, 2008; Lyddon & Ralph Darlington, 2015; McSmith, 2010; Sandbrook, 2019; Stewart, 2013; Turner, 2010; Vinen, 2013). In seeking to explain these events, several authors have suggested that political, legislative, and cultural factors caused a substantial and permanent alteration in both British trade unionism and the industrial relations landscape (Ackers & Payne, 1998; Bacon & Storey, 1993; Bassett, 1986; Bassett & Cave, 1993; Beckett, 2015; Colling & Terry, 2010; Gospel & Wood, 2003; Howell, 2005; Jackson & Saunders, 2012; McSmith, 2010; Sandbrook, 2019; Stewart, 2013; Turner, 2010; Vinen, 2013; Howell 1999).

Although scholars disagree over what factor was primarily responsible for these alterations, there is broad agreement that the decade did witness a fundamental and enduring change in British trade unionism, specifically a permanent decline in membership and industrial action

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(Ackers & Payne, 1998; Bacon & Storey, 1993; Bassett, 1986; Bassett & Cave, 1993; Beckett, 2015; Cohen, 2006; Colling & Terry, 2010; Edwards, 2003; Fairbrother, 2000; Fairbrother & Yates, 2003; Gospel & Wood, 2003; Howell, 2005; McSmith, 2010; Sandbrook, 2019; Stewart, 2013; Turner, 2010; Vinen, 2013). There is further debate among historians and industrial relations scholars as to whether this 'transformation' was broadly necessary and welcome (McSmith, 2010; Sandbrook, 2019; Stewart, 2013; Turner, 2010; Vinen, 2013), or undesirable and destructive (Cohen, 2006; Fairbrother, 2000).

Informing this discussion is a broad consensus that the 1980s Conservative Governments' changes to employment legislation, specifically their prohibiting of compulsory unionism and restrictions on industrial action, adversely affected union membership and drove downward levels of strike activity (Ackers & Wilkinson, 2003; Baccaro & Howell, 2017; Bassett & Cave, 1993; Beckett, 2015; Cohen, 2006; Fairbrother, 2000; Gospel & Wood, 2003; Howell, 2005; S. Jenkins, 2006; McSmith, 2010; Sandbrook, 2019; Stewart, 2013; Turner, 2010; Vinen, 2013). Several scholars take the view that these changes are indicative of the power of the State to significantly affect trade union autonomy and their industrial strength, not only in Britain during the 1980s but also across other 'advanced capitalist' economies over a broader time-frame (Baccaro & Howell, 2011, 2017; Howell, 2005). Howell (2005) goes on to observe that there has been a tendency by scholars to overestimate the autonomous strength of British trade unionism, while underestimating the power of the State to mould union policy through legislation (Howell, 2005).

A number of other authors state that during the 1980s there was a not only a seismic political change that curtailed union membership and their industrial strength but also a wider 'cultural shift' within British society that saw employees embracing individualism, which led to trade unions and industrial action becoming largely outdated (Bacon & Storey, 1993; Bassett, 1986; Bassett & Cave, 1993; Beckett, 2015; McSmith, 2010; Sandbrook, 2019; Stewart, 2013; Turner, 2010; Vinen, 2013). As part of their argument, these writers point to the British electorate's endorsement – in the 1983 and 1987 elections – of an avowedly anti-collectivist Conservative Party, who introduced tight controls on industrial action, picketing, and compulsory unionism. They also note how unions sustained dramatic membership falls throughout the 1980s, including in the latter half of the decade when British unemployment levels were falling. Finally, they link the decline in the number of strikes across the decade, to the defeat of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) 1984–85 strike (Bassett, 1986; Bassett & Cave, 1993; Beckett, 2015; Gospel & Wood, 2003; S. Jenkins, 2006; McSmith, 2010; Sandbrook, 2019; Stewart, 2013; Turner, 2010; Vinen, 2013).

In reaching these conclusions, many authors assess the 1980s as a single entity, rather than focusing on any specific year, or years (Howell, 2005; Jackson & Saunders, 2012; McSmith, 2010; Stewart, 2013; Turner, 2010; Vinen, 2013). Their historical approach is often sweeping, in many instances encompassing politics, economics, and cultural events, as well as trade unionism (Beckett, 2015; Jackson & Saunders, 2012; Stewart, 2013; Turner, 2010; Vinen, 2013). Even in those works that do not deploy such a broad historical canvas, but instead undertake a more detailed analysis of specific period during the decade, there is the adoption of a similar methodology. Works such as Beckett's (2015) examination of the events of 1980–82, and Sandbrook's (2019) analysis of 1979–82, focus on cultural developments as well as politics, economics, and industrial relations. In their works, both men are open in stating that their aim is to highlight a period when a significant alteration occurred in British society. In Beckett's own words:

A profound change came over Britain in the early 1980s. It was a change as wide-ranging and abrupt as any since the Second World War. (Beckett, 2015: xviii)

In both Beckett's and Sandbrook's studies the conclusion is drawn that during the period they consider fundamental cultural, economic and political changes took place, leading to a seismic alteration in British industrial relations, including permanent union membership decline, and a drastic reduction in the number of strikes (Beckett, 2015; Sandbrook, 2019).

A number of scholars have questioned the proposition that such a dramatic change occurred in the British economy, industrial relations and societal values in the first two years of the 1980s (Blissett, 2014; Brown, 2008; Brown & Towers, 2000; Coates & And Topham, 1986; Kelly, 1998). However, the hypothesis that the early 1980s wrought radical alterations to British society, including a rejection of trade union collectivism in favour of individualism, is advanced by several scholars (Sandbrook, 2019; Stewart, 2013; Turner, 2010; Vinen, 2013) and is frequently, approvingly, cited by journalists and broadcasters, including in two prominent B.B.C television series (Leith et al, 2016, Granlund & Series Producer, 2007)

This article questions whether these assertions, and other similar findings about trade unionism in the 1980s, are correct. In doing so, it explores an alternative explanation, which suggests that the declines in union membership and strike frequency were primarily caused by national and global economic factors, that occurred over a considerably longer time frame than a decade, let alone the first two years of the 1980s. The paper goes on to assess the hypothesis that many trade unions, throughout the decade, also struggled to make good 'strategic choices', which could have allowed them to adapt their policies and recruitment approaches more effectively to deal with a hugely changed industrial and economic landscape, in which manufacturing employment was decimated and there was an exponential rise in, often low paid, part-time, insecure, service-sector employment.

In assessing the reasons for the decline in the number of strikes and union membership during the 1980s, this article seeks to carefully examine the relevant union membership and strike action figures, while also drawing upon primary empirical data gathered during the 1980s. This research was conducted by myself and other colleagues, who were employed by the University of Warwick's, Industrial Relations Research Unit, in the late 1980s. Some of the research was commissioned by Coventry City Council, while other elements were undertaken on behalf of the International Labour Organisation (ILO), and the European Economic Community's (EEC), Development of Unions in European Society (DUES) project. Finally, the article also draws upon interviews I conducted with trade union officers and shop stewards in the mid-1980s for my own undergraduate and Master's theses.¹

Combined together, this extensive body of research covers the period from 1975 to 1990. Specifically, the Coventry research focused on industrial relations in the city's 100 largest employers and encompassed interviews with HR and operation managers, as well as shop stewards and full-time union officers. Importantly, Coventry, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, was a good example of a major British City (at that time it was Britain's seventh largest) whose economy, like that of the nation, was dominated by manufacturing. The dramatic economic, industrial relations, and employment changes that affected Britain in the 1980s are clearly evident in Coventry, hence its inclusion in this study.

The research for the DUES project charted the policies and structures of Britain's largest trade unions during the 1980s, while the fieldwork for the ILO focused on pay systems and labour flexibility in Britain's largest multi-national companies. In total, these three pieces of research encompassed just over 260 interviews with union shop stewards, full-time officers, and managers. These rich sources of primary data are extensively used in this article's efforts to explain the decline in both union membership, and the number of strikes, during the 1980s.

In what follows, the 1980s are broken down into three constituent parts: 1980–82, 1983–1987 and 1988–1989. These three periods have been selected as they correspond broadly with the economic performance of the British economy during the decade. In the period from 1980 to 1982, the economy went into a deep recession. From 1983 to 1987, the economy came out of recession, but unemployment remained at a very high level, particularly in certain areas of Britain, which had depended heavily on manufacturing employment. Finally, from 1988 to 1989, Britain enjoyed a, short-lived, period of economic growth that saw unemployment fall in most areas of the country. Strikes and union membership data for these three periods are considered, along with the interview evidence that was collected during the decade. The article then juxtaposes this evidence with the

different explanations that have previously been offered for the decrease in strike frequency and union membership, alongside this paper's own hypotheses.

1980–1982 trade union membership

At the beginning of 1980 trade union membership in Britain stood at over 13,000,000 members and, according to TUC figures (see [Appendix Table A2](#)), had continued to increase throughout the 1970s. This rise in membership continued during 1979, when high levels of industrial action and the election of a Conservative Government in May, did not halt the growth. Indeed, during 1979 TUC membership in Britain rose by 156,000 from 13,054,000 to 13,212,000, even though unemployment rose that year from 4% to just over 5% of the adult working population (Office for National Statistics, 2022).

What though closer scrutiny of TUC statistics for 1979 reveals is a marked change in union membership composition, with manual manufacturing numbers decreasing, while white collar, supervisory and public service membership rapidly increased. This trend had started in the early 1970s and then accelerated during the latter half of the decade (TUC directories; 1970–1980). This alteration in membership composition was clearly illustrated in Coventry, where severe financial difficulties at Rolls Royce, British Leyland, and Chrysler UK, along with a decline in employment in the machine tool and aviation industries, led to a considerable fall in manual union membership from 1975 onwards. However, union gains in the City's public sector, retail, and finance industries, along with the growth of white collar and supervisory membership, offset the losses in manual areas, prior to 1980.

In interviews with national and regional trade union officers, there were numerous examples cited of manufacturing companies closing plants and making large-scale redundancies during the late 1970s. These officers also stated that, at the same time, white collar and supervisory workers joined trade unions in substantial numbers (G. Bain, 1970; C. Jenkins, 1990). Furthermore, there was widespread acknowledgement that only direct Government intervention limited job losses in many major employers, with the creation and subsequent nationalisation of British Leyland, and the State's intervention to save Rolls Royce from bankruptcy, being two prominent examples.

When questioned about the reasons for this contraction in British manufacturing in the late 1970s many managers and union officials agreed that increasing overseas competition was the primary cause. As one employee relations manager, from a multi-national company based in Coventry reflected:

It was the late 1970s that marked the start of the cataclysmic decline in motor manufacturing employment and our workforce numbers. It was masked, to some degree, by Government intervention in the sector. But as soon as the Tories were elected, this [assistance] stopped, and we went into survival mode, which meant we had to lose large numbers of people.

Interviewees, from both sides of industry, were also clear that the considerable spike in the number of strikes during 1978 and 1979 was largely driven by the Labour Government's economic policy of national pay restraint, not local industrial issues. Specifically, the 5% pay increase limit, which was introduced at the start of 1978, became a source of intense conflict as inflation climbed to nearly 9% by the autumn of that year (ONS 2022). The result was a plethora of strikes as workers, who had already experienced two years of Government imposed pay restraint, now refused to accept the 5% 'pay norm'.

In May 1979, the Conservatives were elected, having stated in their manifesto that they would 'tackle union power' and stop supporting 'lame duck' companies (Conservative and Unionist Party, 1979). The Conservative Government also pledged to implement a very different economic approach to that adopted by successive Conservative and Labour Government's since 1945, with an emphasis on 'Monetarist' economic principles. Crucially, this approach rejected the Keynesian principles of the Government applying a fiscal and monetary stimulus to the economy when there was an economic downturn. The application of a Monetarist economic policy from May 1979 saw public spending cuts and tax increases introduced, which when added to the continued decline of Britain's manufacturing competitiveness, saw the economy enter a downturn, which was accompanied by high levels of

inflation and growing unemployment. Instead of then applying a fiscal and monetary stimulus, the Government made further cuts to public spending and increased both taxation and interest rates. The result was that the economic downturn quickly became a recession, which deepened through 1980 and 1981, with unemployment rising to over 11% by December 1982.

The effect on trade union membership was dramatic. By 1982 membership had fallen by over a million members to 11,744,000. Coventry provides a good illustration of the dramatic scale of the losses, particularly in the manufacturing sector. During that time Coventry's largest union, the TGWU, membership declined from 47,500 to 34,000. This rate of decline was exceeded by other unions some of whom, such as Association of Scientific, Technical and Management Staff (ASTMS), Association of Professional, Executive Clerical and Computer Staff (APEX), Amalgamated Engineering Union (AEU), Electrical, Electronic, Telecommunications and Plumbing Union (EETPU), National Union of Sheet Metalworkers, Coppersmiths and Heating Engineers (NUSMWCHE) and the National Society of Metal Mechanics (NSMM) lost over 25% of their Coventry membership in less than 18 months (Blissett, 1989).

As management and union interviewees agreed, these membership losses were driven by redundancies and unemployment not by members voluntarily leaving their unions. In major manufacturing cities, such as Coventry, the rise in unemployment was considerably higher than the national rate, with joblessness in the city increasing to 15% of the working population. The breathtaking scale of manufacturing job losses can be appreciated by focusing once again on Coventry. In 1975, 115,000 Coventrians were employed in manufacturing, by the end of 1982 this had fallen to 62,000, a reduction of 46.5%. While this decline was particularly dramatic in Coventry, it was also reflected nationally, with manufacturing employment across Britain falling from 6,700,000 in 1979 to 5,175,000 at the end of 1982 (ONS 2022). Importantly, this decline also encompassed the closure of tens of thousands of, unionised, manufacturing employers (ONS, 2022).

A personnel director for a major automotive manufacturer summed up the views of union and management interviewees on union membership:

There was no change in the unionisation of the workforce in the early 1980s, it remained at 100% for the hourly paid. What changed was that we had to let thousands of people go.

Trade union lay and full-time officers agreed, with a senior AEU officer for the car industry stating:

The cause of our huge fall in membership during the early 80s was simple – redundancies. We retained our closed shop agreements across all of my employers, but the problem was they were all making hundreds if not thousands of our people redundant.

The only slightly nuanced variation to this narrative came from a National Officer for APEX who in addition to concurring over the reasons for membership losses also added:

We suffered through the loss of activists. In some employers when they [the activists] were made redundant, we started to see our membership base erode, as new starters were not approached to join the union.

The consensus that union membership decline in the early 1980s was caused by unemployment rather than by any decline in membership density levels is supported by the employment statistics for 1980–1982 (ONS, 2022). These indicate that the decline in employment, particularly in manufacturing, was proportionately greater than the decline in overall union membership (ONS 2022). However, the agreement that existed between managers and union officers over the decline in union membership was not repeated when it came to explaining the reasons for the dramatic reduction in the number of strikes.

1980–82 levels of strike action

In considering the considerable decline in levels of strike action in the first three years of the 1980s trade union officers stressed the depressive effect of redundancies on their members' willingness to

go on strike. A senior shop steward at a Coventry car plant clearly articulated this view when describing his members' attitudes in the early 1980s:

Our people were frightened to death. They had seen their mates chucked on the scrap heap without even the merest sniff of another job. We all feared that the plant was going to be closed any day, so what our people did was keep their heads down and pray there'd still be a job and a pay packet at the end of the week.

The catalyst for strikes also changed, according to union officers. An officer of the TGWU summed up this view succinctly:

In the 1970s most of strikes were over pay. After 1980 it was all about trying to protect jobs. By their very nature, these strikes were almost impossible to win. How does the workforce going on strike hurt an employer who wants to shut a plant? I feared we were just pissing in the wind; but what else could we do?

The empirical evidence from the University of Warwick studies supports the assertion that there was a change in the cause of strikes in the early 1980s, with action taken, almost exclusively, in an attempt to stop closures and redundancies (Blissett, 1989). While there are no detailed data on the causes of strikes across Britain during the early 1980s, the evidence that exists strongly indicates that the overwhelming majority were called over redundancy announcements (Workplace Industrial Relations Survey, 1980, 1984).

There is no unanimity, from the two sides of industry, about the reasons for the overall decline in the number of strikes in the early 1980s. While management interviewees conceded that the economic climate played a part in inhibiting strike action, they stated that radical changes to company policies such as improved employee communication and alterations to working practices were more important. As one manager of a major engineering company suggested:

Our focus and that of the employees changed. They knew that if they were to retain their jobs, they had to help keep the business afloat. This meant working with us to save the company, rather than going on strike. The recession also forced us to 'grasp the nettle' and introduce changes to our working practices, and how we communicated with our workforce, involving them directly as individuals in our business. These were areas that in the 1970s we had allowed to drift.

This latter point was a common theme in the explanations put forward by managers for the decline in the incidence of industrial action. Their belief is perhaps not surprising given that they were often the instigators of policies such as quality circles, team briefings and the introduction of employee share ownership schemes. Whether a causal relationship existed between the introduction of such policies and falling levels of industrial action is difficult to measure, given that they were introduced during a period of recession and high unemployment, which were the key factors cited by trade union officers for the decline in strikes. What is though worth noting is that employers and union officers did agree that the 1980 and 1982 Employment Acts, which restricted the right of unions to take 'political' and secondary strike action, played a negligible role in the decline of strike action.

1980–82 conclusions

In summary, there is a consensus between both sides of industry that the fall in union membership between the start of 1980 and the end of 1982 was caused, almost exclusively, by closures and redundancies that were themselves driven by a deep economic recession, increased global competition, particularly in manufacturing, and the refusal of the Government to either provide aid to struggling industries, or to implement a fiscal and monetary stimulus to the economy. Management and union interviewees also agreed that the economic recession hit areas of the economy which were heavily unionised particularly hard, which explains why percentage union membership losses outstripped the rise in British unemployment during the period. The Government's own sectoral employment figures, and the detailed data collected for the Coventry study and the ILO project, all provide empirical evidence to support the assertion that it was redundancies, rather than rejection of trade unionism by either current or prospective members,

which led to the unions sustaining such large membership falls. These findings challenge the thesis of those authors who assert that during the early 1980s there was a cultural shift away from collectivism and towards individualism, which contributed substantially to union membership decline (Bassett, 1986; Bassett & Cave, 1993, Beckett, 2015; Sandbrook, 2019; Turner, 2010).

Turning to the reasons for the decline in the number of strikes during the 1980–82 period, there is no unanimity between employers and union officers over the reasons for the fall in the number of strikes, nor is there a body of well-defined empirical evidence that details the causes of all strikes. Union officers and shop stewards were clear that the fall in the number of strikes was directly coupled to the deep economic recession and resultant large-scale redundancies. Managers tended to prefer to attribute the decline to their company's actions, as well as the economic environment. It is though significant that most managers conceded that the reduction in strikes was linked to employees' recognition that the economic recession had put their jobs in peril and that strikes could result in further redundancies. These opinions are supported by the evidence that is available, which indicates that most strikes in the period were linked to trade unionists' efforts to stop or limit redundancies.

Overall, the contemporaneous interview evidence, along with the relevant statistical data, strongly suggests that between 1980 and 1982 the decline in union membership and the reduction in the number of strikes was not linked to any cultural shift away from collectivism, nor to the suppressive effects of Government legislation. While there are no specific empirical data available on whether there was a growth in 'individualistic' attitudes in the early 1980s, the British Social Attitudes (BSA) survey, which was first published in 1983, does indicate that there had been little change in working-class affiliations, or in attitudes towards trade unions, over the preceding three years (BSA, 1983). Instead, the decline in union membership can be tied directly to the dramatic rise in unemployment caused by an acute economic recession, (which was exacerbated by the Government's fiscal and monetary policies) and increased global competition. These factors particularly affected the manufacturing sector, where trade unions historically had considerable membership density and where there had previously been high incidences of industrial action.

1983–1987 trade union membership

The period from January 1983 to December 1987 saw union membership continuing to decline from 11,744,000 in 1983 to 10,598,000 in 1987 (see [Appendix Table A2](#)). In assessing this fall, several commentators highlighted the fact that while British unemployment levels stabilised in the mid-1980s union membership continued to reduce. They then assert that this phenomenon provides further evidence of a societal shift away from trade union collectivism towards a more individualistic society (Bassett, 1986; Bassett & Cave, 1993, Beckett, 2010; Sandbrook, 2019; Turner, 2010).

At first glance, the statistical data seems to support the assertion that there was a decoupling of union membership decreases from rises in unemployment during the mid-1980s. By the end of 1987 British unemployment had plateaued and then slightly fallen from the peak of 11.9% in April 1984 to 9.5% in December 1987 (Office for National Statistics, 2022). Yet the simple assertion that if unemployment and union membership both reduce then there must be a societal shift away from trade unionism is highly questionable. A closer examination of the unemployment statistics for the period shows that in many areas of Britain unemployment did not fall, and in some instances continued to rise. These areas included parts of the English Midlands, North-West, and North-East, the Scottish central belt and South Wales, all of which had been heavily reliant on the highly unionised manufacturing, engineering, shipbuilding, and mining industries (Office for National Statistics, 2022).

A clear example can be found in Coventry where unemployment peaked at 15% in 1982 and stayed broadly at that level until 1988. Importantly, in Coventry, and towns and cities with a similar historical reliance on manufacturing, the only employment growth was in areas such as hospitality and retail, which were not strongly unionised. The consequence was that union membership continued to fall in Coventry and other areas with similar labour market characteristics (Blissett, 1989; Office for National Statistics, 2022).

The statistics also reveal that the small overall fall that took place in British unemployment during the mid-1980s was driven by a considerable reduction in joblessness in London and the South-East (Office for National Statistics, 2022). Here, the finance, retail and service sectors grew more rapidly than the rest of Britain, in part owing to the Government's deregulation of the finance sector which culminated in 1986 with the so-called 'Big Bang', when the London stock market was de-regulated. Even though manufacturing continued to contract just as rapidly in London and the South-East as in the rest of Britain, this decline was more than offset by the growth in the finance and service sectors (Office for National Statistics, 2022).

Significantly, in those parts of the finance industry where trade unions had historically enjoyed a presence, specifically retail banking, union membership rose substantially. The Banking Insurance and Finance Union (BIFU) grew from 156,000 members in 1983 to 175,000 in 1987, (BIFU, 1989) while other, non-TUC, finance unions also grew, as retail banking expanded. This growth took place even though BIFU – along with the other non-TUC unions and staff associations – did not possess a large number of compulsory union agreements, high membership density levels, or substantial numbers of lay activists. Similar increases also occurred in the retail industry with the Union of Shop Distributive and Allied Workers (USDAW) expanding as employment in their sector, and more pertinently in employers where they had recognition, grew between 1983 and 1987. These examples demonstrate that in growing sectors of the economy, which had only modest levels of union organisation, trade unionism expanded, a fact which does not support the hypothesis that there was an anti-collectivist shift in employees' attitudes during the 1980s.

However, as several authors point out, as employment shifted away from manufacturing and the public services towards the service sector, unions struggled to organise workers in employers in which they had no historical organisational structures, or current recognition agreements (Blissett, 2014, 2018; Gall, 2004; Heery, 2002, Heery Simms & Delbridge 2003; Heery, Simms, Delbridge, Salmon, et al., 2003 Kelly & Badigannavar, 2004, 2005). The statistical evidence supports these scholars' assertions, with trade unions making little recruitment headway in companies where they had no collective agreements or organisational structures (Blissett, 1989).

Primary evidence, gleaned from interviews, helps to explain why this was the case. As a senior TGWU officer in Coventry stated in 1988:

From 1980 onwards we had been constantly firefighting. All our officers spent all day negotiating with companies over redundancies and closures. At the same time, we have been haemorrhaging members at a tremendous rate and our finances were tight. We were contacted by members who left well organised firms and found poorly paid jobs at companies with no unions. They told us how pissed off they were at being badly treated, but we simply had neither the time or resources to go and try to organise these firms.

Other officers tell a similar tale of incessant rounds of redundancy negotiations and consultations taking up most of their working lives and allowing little or no time for any other activities: As an AUEW officer commented in 1988:

We ended up chasing our own tails. It seemed like there was a new employer laying people off every day of the week. That's caused a vicious circle. We had no time for anything but redundancies: our membership fell dramatically, and we made cutbacks and redundancies. So, we ended up with no time and no money to address our falling membership numbers.

In addition to the problem of a lack of time and resources, unions also faced other recruitment difficulties. One of these was that many unions had become reliant, during the 1960s and 1970s, on their recruitment being efficiently undertaken by either pre-entry or post-entry closed shops.² While such compulsory union membership agreements were still legal in the mid-1980s, they were becoming increasingly difficult for unions to enforce, as progressively more restrictive legislation undermined the trade unions' and employers' ability to insist that employees joined or remained union members. Finally, in 1990, legislation was passed by the Conservative Government which prohibited all compulsory union agreements.

Significantly, interviewees from both sides of industry made it clear that legislation restricting the closed shop did not affect union density levels in employers who operated post-entry closed shops, although union officers reported that the legislation effectively halted the negotiation of new compulsory membership agreements. The detailed Coventry research supports these findings. It shows that the unions' inability to enforce the post-entry closed shop did not lead to members leaving their trade unions, nor did it stop new staff from joining (Blissett, 1989). This finding contradicts the hypothesis that there was a wide-spread spirit of anti-collectivism at large among employees during the 1980s. Indeed, union density levels remained at, or very near, 100% for many companies which had previously operated post-entry closed shops and then stopped doing so. However, the incidence of new compulsory union agreements declined, very rapidly, in the early 1980s, and totally disappeared by the mid-1980s.

Officers from unions that operated the pre-entry closed shop also stated that from the early 1980s onwards they had increasing difficulties in enforcing their agreements with new entrants to their industries, a statement which the DUES and Coventry research supported (Blissett, 1989, 2014; Gennard & Bain, 1995). These problems stemmed, in part, from the 1982 Employment Act which made it unlawful for unions to insist that employers only employed trade unionists. More importantly, there was also a growing realisation on behalf of employers that they no longer needed the craft skills that the trade unions' members possessed. These two factors had a considerable impact on union organisation in those industries which previously operated pre-entry closed shops, including newspaper production, general printing, film-making, television and radio broadcasting, the performing and visual arts, merchant shipping, and some skilled construction and engineering trades. In all these industries, employers rapidly moved away from recognising and operating the pre-entry closed shop in the 1980s.

In response, several unions made strenuous efforts to defend their agreements by taking strike action. The most notable of these was the National Graphical Association (NGA) which entered into a dispute with Messenger Group Newspapers in 1982–83 over the failure of the company to operate the pre-entry closed shop for their new Warrington production site. Critically, the owner of Messenger newspapers, Salem 'Eddie' Shah was able to deploy new printing technology in his production plant, that did not require the skills that were only possessed by NGA members. This allowed him to employ non-NGA labour, who were capable of running the new printing presses.

The NGA's strike was eventually unsuccessful, and its failure emboldened other employers in the newspaper sector to refuse to implement the pre-entry closed shop in new sites. Most notable was News International, whose owner Rupert Murdoch opened a printing plant in Wapping in January 1986 with a non-print union workforce. News International then dismissed its 5,000 unionised staff, who were employed at the company's other British sites, after they had embarked on strike action. After a year-long dispute, the unions were unsuccessful and remained derecognised at News International. These unsuccessful disputes proved to be the death knell of the pre-entry closed shop not only in the print industry but across the economy (P. Bain, 1998; Blissett, 2014, 2018; Richardson, 2003).

Importantly, in all these industries, technological change, often allied to global competition and deregulation, allowed employers to by-pass the control that unions had established over the supply of skilled labour, which employers had previously needed to operate in their respective industries. This meant employers could produce their product, be it newspapers, music or films, without requiring the skills that the unionised workers possessed. It was these changes, allied in many instances to employer antipathy, as opposed to the legislative prohibition of the pre-entry closed shop, which fundamentally undermined these unions' industrial strength and subsequently their membership density.

A number of unions, aside from those which relied on the pre-entry closed shop, also experienced difficulties in retaining membership density, during the mid-1980s. The clearest examples are found among unions that organised in what had been nationalised areas of the economy, which underwent large-scale economic, technological, and regulatory change. These alterations involved wholesale job losses, as the Conservative Government's downsized nationalised companies, prior to their privatisation, while also deregulating and outsourcing many areas of publicly owned industries.

The telecommunications and postal sectors are good examples of the negative effect these changes had on union membership density. The largest unions in these two sectors, the National Communications Union (NCU), and the Union of Communication Workers (UCW) both lost members through large-scale job losses in BT, the Post Office, and Royal Mail. They then struggled to organise the employees of companies who were then able to enter the freshly deregulated industries.

Both unions, whose histories had been of organising in what had become, broadly, one employer industries, had significant internal arguments over whether they should be attempting to recruit the employees of new entrant companies. The reason for this conflict stemmed, in large part, from the unions' opposition to deregulation. Those officers and activists who opposed recruiting employees of the new entrants argued that it was hypocritical to try to stop companies entering their industries, while attempting to recruit their staff. While official NCU and UCW policy was to organise these workers, there was little enthusiasm for doing so among many lay activists and officers. At the same time, union recruitment efforts were further hindered by new entrant companies using the unions' opposition to their presence in the industry to actively persuade their staff not to join. Combined together, these factors contributed to the largely unsuccessful efforts of the unions to build membership in the deregulated, and rapidly expanding, telecommunications and parcel delivery sectors (Blissett, 2014; Parker, 2009).

Along with redundancies and the introduction of competition and deregulation, there was another labour market development that had a significant, detrimental, impact on union membership in previously highly unionised areas of the public and private sectors. This change was the 'outsourcing' of what has often been described by managers and economists as 'non-core' company activities. There were three, closely related, employment trends that became prevalent in the mid-1980s, which have often been grouped together under the term 'outsourcing'. The first was the increasing use by employers of third parties to provide services such as cleaning, catering, maintenance, and security. Employees who had previously undertaken this work directly for their employer were either transferred to a contractor, redeployed, or offered a voluntary redundancy package. Second, employers increasingly used temporary labour to fill job vacancies, with the workers being supplied and employed by the employment agencies. Finally, in certain sectors of the economy, principally construction, there was a growing trend for employers to replace employees with 'self-employed' workers. In many instances, these 'self-employed' workers were the same individuals who had previously been employees and who undertook exactly the same work after becoming 'self-employed'.

The effect of these forms of outsourcing on British trade unions was considerable. Many unionised employees in what were deemed 'non-core' roles in both the private and public sectors found themselves either being made redundant; pressed into self-employment; or transferred to small facility management contractors.³ Many of these facility management companies, along with temporary labour agencies, did not recognise unions for collective bargaining purposes, nor did they provide union pay roll deduction facilities,⁴ which many unionised companies operated at that time.

Commenting in the 1980s on the effect these changes had wrought, union officers charted the difficulties that they had in dealing with all of these different forms of outsourcing. As a GMB officer for the gas industry explained, different forms of outsourcing of employment in that industry had a profound effect on union membership:

In the mid-80s we had thousands of members leaving the gas boards as redundancy packages were put on the table. In many instances lots of workers who had previously been gas board employees reappeared as self-employed contractors.

In addition all the canteen staff, the vehicle and machinery maintenance staff and the office cleaners were either made redundant or were transferred to other firms. Soon this outsourcing spread, and there were teams of contractors undertaking work that had previously been done by our members. While we retained our engineers in membership, it was much harder to recruit the thousands of contract staff who worked for companies where we had no recognition.

These sentiments were repeated by numerous stewards and union officers in large public and private sector employers.

Interviewees also outlined how companies who won the service and maintenance contracts and paid their workers low wages and employed them on temporary contracts, were very keen their employees did not join trade unions. As a TGWU officer from Coventry stated in 1989:

We found that a lot of the contract staff were told explicitly that their company didn't deal with unions, and local managers made it very clear that it would be in their best interest not to join. People were so desperate for work that this form of intimidation really worked.

At the same time as the unions were struggling with recruiting in facility management companies, they also had a growing problem with organising agency workers. As a senior TGWU officer explained:

By '83 a lot of employers were refusing to take on permanent labour. Instead, they'd fill vacancies with temporary workers. These staff were very difficult to recruit, as they were here one minute and gone the next. If they did join, the labour agencies wouldn't recognise us, and we couldn't represent them, even at disciplinarys. To be honest - unless loads of them joined - we had little to offer them.

While this opinion was not so bluntly expressed by other union officers, it was a widely held view that unions struggled to provide effective representation for labour agency staff.

In the utilities and construction industries, the use of 'self-employed' workers also adversely affected trade union membership. As was outlined earlier, many self-employed workers had previously been employees working for building and utility companies. The growth of self-employment in the construction and utilities industries also spread into other areas of the economy where it advanced rapidly in the mid-1980s, with increasing numbers of workers taking advantage of government incentives and income tax and national insurance inducements that encouraged self-employment. The result was that the percentage of those identifying as self-employed rose from the 8.05% of the British workforce in 1979 to 13.1% in 1989. Very few of this group of workers either joined, or remained in, trade unions (UCATT internal annual report, 1988).

The reasons why these alterations to the labour market, which caused considerable damage to union organisation in many areas of the economy, were not more vigorously opposed, was reflected upon by interviewees. One officer from Coventry summed up their views:

By 1983 we were firmly on the back foot. Mass unemployment had made our members scared stiff that they were going to lose their jobs. This meant management could introduce changes that they wouldn't have had any chance of doing in the 70's. That's why they were able to outsource jobs and use temporary labour. We opposed it: but our members were not interested in fighting it.

Another, older, AUEW officer made a comparison with the mid-1930s:

Just like when I was a boy, men were frightened for their jobs. This allowed the bosses to dictate terms, left, right and centre.

Coupled to this expansion in outsourcing, there was also a parallel rise during the mid-1980s in the number of companies with 10 to 50 employees (Blissett, 1989). The information gathered for the Coventry City study indicated that the vast majority of these companies had very low union memberships and did not recognise trade unions for collective bargaining purposes. The research also showed that there were two prime reasons for employees of these companies not joining unions; firstly, they were not asked to do so; secondly, if they were asked to join, they were persuaded not to by their employer (Blissett, 1989).

These effective employer attempts to hinder trade union organisation were not limited to small- and medium-sized employers who sought to keep unions from recruiting their workforce, or large corporations who actively decided to derecognise unions. Among many employers, who recognised unions, there was a drive to restrict the areas in which the unions organised, and, in some instances, to narrow union coverage by limiting union representation of white collar and supervisory grades of staff.

Two unions, BIFU and USDAW, who made significant membership gains in the mid-1980s experienced this type of hostility from employers. In the finance sector the then four major English clearing banks, Lloyds, Barclays, NatWest, and Midland, all went to considerable lengths to stop BIFU from recruiting in

their rapidly growing commercial and merchant banking operations. Similarly, USDAW faced numerous obstacles when they attempted to recruit staff in the finance and insurance divisions of major super-markets. Such hostility to unions expanding into new areas of an employer's operations were not limited to the finance and retail sectors. One example is the Ford Motor company, which placed obstacles in the way of union recruitment of the staff who worked for their British finance and credit division, during the 1980s. As trade union officers made clear, such antipathy towards attempts to gain membership and recognition for groups of workers not covered by recognition agreements were also present in the 1970s but became more apparent in the mid-1980s.

Trade union interviewees also stated that employers also took the opportunity to quietly 'remove' union organisation in white-collar areas of their business if they could do so. As a TGWU convenor at a Coventry manufacturing company observed in 1988:

During the late 70s a lot of white-collar staff and supervisors started to join unions. I know management really hated this and did all they could to persuade them not to join. However, in the end they were forced to concede recognition in late '77. As soon as there were redundancies in the 80s, I'm sure they targeted the white-collar union reps, and this effectively undermined their organisation.

Many other manufacturing shop stewards also stated how employers had 'hated' conceding union recognition for supervisory and white-collar staff in the 1970s and looked to undermine white collar unionism in the mid-1980s. This they did, according to union interviewees, not through active derecognition but instead by using redundancies to undermine white collar organisation. Full-time officers from two of the largest white-collar unions, APEX and ASTMS, corroborated this view. They further added that in many companies, where they lost their representatives through redundancy, their local organisation then 'withered on the vine'. These views are supported by the statistical evidence from Coventry. In the late 1970s APEX and ASTMS membership in the city grew more rapidly than the general and engineering unions, while in the 1980s membership of both unions fell far more sharply (Blissett, 1989). Importantly, it was targeted redundancy, rather than the Conservative Government's anti-union legislation, that was the primary cause of dwindling white collar union organisation in the mid-1980s.

Significantly, several senior HR managers of major multi-nationals were clear about the anti-union policies they implemented in the 1980s in relation to supervisory and senior clerical staff. One HR director of a company that recognised unions for both manual and white-collar employees stated:

We never felt it was appropriate for line management and supervisors to be unionised. As far as we were concerned that created a conflict of interest. They were privy to confidential information about employees, pay offers and our negotiating strategy with the unions, so it was totally inappropriate for them to also be part of the union. So, yes, we did try and discourage supervisory and senior admin' staff from joining.

Significantly, management interviewees also confirmed that they had held these beliefs during the 1970s, but that it was in the 1980s that their companies had the economic opportunity to effectively undermine white collar trade unionism.

Another factor that some scholars cite as potentially having had a detrimental effect on recruitment, was the loss of a series of major strikes during the mid-1980s (Bassett, 1986; Beckett, 2015; Jackson & Saunders, 2012; McSmith, 2010; Sandbrook, 2019; Stewart, 2013; Turner, 2010; Vinen, 2013). While the effect of these defeats on strike frequency is discussed in more depth later in this article, it is worth re-stating that in those areas of the economy which enjoyed growth during this period, such as finance and retail, there was an expansion in union membership. An increase that took place during and after the 1984–85 NUM strike and the 1986–87 News International dispute. Significantly, when interviewed in 1988 and 1989, officers, from a wide range of unions, stated that the effect on recruitment of the NUM and print unions strikes was negligible. A finding which is at odds with the hypothesis that these strikes lack of success had a substantial, detrimental, effect on union recruitment (Bassett, 1986; Beckett, 2015; Jackson & Saunders, 2012; McSmith, 2010; Sandbrook, 2019; Stewart, 2013; Turner, 2010; Vinen, 2013).

Strike action, 1983–87

The image that historians often portray of the mid-1980s is one of the widespread industrial confrontation, with trade unions engaged in long and bitter strikes against their employers, who are being actively supported by the Conservative Government (Beckett, 2015; Jackson & Saunders, 2012; McSmith, 2010; Sandbrook, 2019; Stewart, 2013; Turner, 2010; Vinen, 2013). Yet, the annual number of strikes in Britain between 1983 and 1987 remained at very similar levels to 1980–1982 (see [Appendix Table A1](#)). What seems though to have coloured the view of many commentators, is that there were a small number of major, long-running, strikes, which inflated the number of working days lost to levels last seen in the late 1970s. Principal among these was the NUM's year-long national strike in 1984–85, which, along with three other major disputes, accounted for the majority of working days lost in the mid-1980s.⁵

All these disputes shared several common features; they were all lengthy, continuous, and involved thousands of workers. They were also 'defensive' in that they were called to prevent redundancies, union derecognition or industrial deregulation (Blissett, 2014; Kelly, 1998; Kelly & Ralph Darlington, 2015). In each instance the unions enjoyed high membership densities, possessed sophisticated organisational structures, and had previously undertaken highly successful industrial action. During each dispute, the British Government assisted the employers, whether they were publicly or privately owned, through the provision of financial, legislative, logistical and police support. In all four instances the Government's support proved to be important in the unions' defeats (Blissett, 2014).

It is though often overlooked that strike frequency did not rise during the mid-1980s, nor did it then fall in the late 1980s, which casts doubt on the assertions of authors who state that the union movement became embroiled in an extensive, multi-sectoral, industrial battle with the Conservative Government throughout the mid-1980s, the loss of which led to union members no longer being willing to take strike action thereafter (Bassett, 1986; Beckett, 2015; Jackson & Saunders, 2012; McSmith, 2010; Sandbrook, 2019; Stewart, 2013; Turner, 2010; Vinen, 2013). The statistical and contemporaneous interview evidence paints a very different picture, with strike action remaining at broadly the same levels from 1980 to 1987. In assessing why strike frequency was lower in both the early and mid-1980s than during the 1970s, the research conducted at the time suggests that there were two dominant reasons: firstly, the deep economic recession of 1980 caused mass closures and redundancies, particularly in heavily unionised sectors of the economy; secondly, there was a rapid rise in long-term unemployment, which had a chilling effect on industrial action.

The late 1980s research, which involved interviews with over 200 union officers and shop stewards, clearly indicated that the combination of the recession and unemployment was what made union members less willing to take industrial action, not the loss of major industrial disputes. Critically, these interviewees also emphasised that in many unionised public and private sector employers, the fear of job losses did not subside as general unemployment plateaued in the mid-1980s, owing to employment in these sectors continuing to contract. As one TGWU regional organiser commented:

Across the public sector, nationalised industries, the NHS and manufacturing we continued to see big job losses up until 1988. Members told us they were frightened of taking action, and then losing their jobs.

Another TGWU national officer, interviewed in late 1989, gave a more nuanced view:

Look most members focus on their workplace, their job, and their family. What happens in the wider union movement is not a huge concern to them. They've not been willing to go on strike because they could see their friends and family losing their jobs, and they knew their employers were in trouble - so they just kept their heads down. Once things improved, there was then a time lag before they felt confident enough to take action again. I'd say this lasted until late 1988, or early 1989. As for the effect of the Miners' strike, well, the defeat hit officers and many of our activists very hard. We all put a huge amount of time and money into supporting the Miners and their loss was a huge blow to morale. But in all honesty, it really didn't affect our members willingness to strike.

This comment, and other similar views, does not imply that the loss of major industrial disputes in the 1980s had no impact on strike action. Far from it, as the statistical and interview evidence reveals, and my own first-hand knowledge corroborates,⁶ the British trade union movement responded by

abandoning indefinite strike action. Instead, British unions adopted rolling programmes of time-limited strike action, with strikes lasting only a few days, prior to restarting at a later, pre-defined, date. These rolling programmes of strike action have, on occasion, lasted for several years.⁷ The effect of this major strategic change in trade unions strike tactics was to see a sizeable reduction in the number of working days lost each year from the late 1980s onwards.

There were also other important factors that trade union officers and shop stewards felt had contributed to the low number of strikes in the early and mid-1980s. These included the decline in the number of manufacturing companies who, before their closure, had enjoyed poor industrial relations; changes in pay system practices (specifically the decline in piecework); and the growth in sectors of the economy where there had historically been low levels of strike action. Interviewees though agreed that these factors, while having had a depressive effect on the number of strikes, were not as important as the deep recession and sustained high levels of unemployment. Significantly, the effect of the Conservative Government's legislative restrictions on strike action seldom featured in union officers and shop stewards' explanations of the decline in strike action.

1988–1989 trade union membership

As has been stated earlier in this paper, in many books and articles concerning trade unionism in the 1980s, the decade is appraised as a single entity (Jackson & Saunders, 2012; McSmith, 2010; Stewart, 2013; Turner, 2010; Vinen, 2013). Even where authors do look in greater detail at constituent years, the emphasis is nearly always on the first two to three years of the decade (Beckett, 2015; Sandbrook, 2019) or on the period from 1984 to 1987, which was marked by the commencement of the NUM's national strike in 1984 and concluded with the ending of the print unions dispute with News International in 1987 (Bassett, 1986; Bassett & Cave, 1993). Detailed consideration is seldom paid to the final two years of the decade, save to characterise them as being similar to the preceding eight (Ackers & Wilkinson, 2003; Beckett, 2015; Colling & Terry, 2010; Gospel & Wood, 2003; Howell, 2005; Jackson & Saunders, 2012; McSmith, 2010; Sandbrook, 2019; Stewart, 2013; Turner, 2010; Vinen, 2013). One of the reasons for this portrayal rests on the fact that during 1988 and 1989 TUC affiliates membership levels continued to fall.

However, this statistic masks a significant change in union membership fortunes, with TUC unions in 1988 collectively reporting an overall loss of under 100,000 members, for the first time since 1980. Significantly, during the same year, a combination of non-TUC unions, predominantly but not exclusively in the finance and health sectors gained more than 60,000 members. Major contributors to this growth were the Royal College of Nursing (RCN), the British Medical Association (BMA), the Abby National Staff Association (ANSA), the Lloyds Group Staff Association (LGSU), the NatWest Staff Association (NWSA) and the Barclays Group Staff Union (BGSU) who all reported increases in membership (Blissett, 1989). At the same time, the expulsion of the 225,000 strong Electrical, Electronic and Plumbing Trade Union (EETPU) from the TUC in 1988 also distorted downwards the TUC's membership figures numbers for 1988 and 1989 (TUC, 1970-1995).

While precise measurements of membership numbers for both TUC and non-TUC unions are extremely difficult to attain, owing to the published figures being the unions own self-declared membership levels, it is probable that union membership⁸ stabilised and may have even slightly increased during the 1988–89 period (Blissett, 1989). The driving force for this change was a significant rise in membership in London and the South-East of England, while other British regions and nations, including both Scotland and Wales, stemmed membership losses, while several major cities, including Coventry, also saw membership increases (Blissett, 1989).

In terms of sectoral growth, the finance and the retail industries were important contributors to the rise, but so to were membership increases in aviation and automotive manufacturing. This was the primary reason why cities such as Coventry, which had a large automotive manufacturing sector, saw union membership increases in both 1988 and 1989. Offsetting these gains, there were continuing membership losses in areas of the country that had been heavily reliant on coal mining, steel production, shipbuilding, and engineering. These included the North-East of England,

Yorkshire, and North-West England, which all saw union membership continuing to contract and unemployment staying stubbornly high (Office for National Statistics, 2022).

Significantly, membership growth predominantly occurred in employers where the unions already had organisational structures and where full-time and lay officers were free to approach new employees (Blissett, 1989). Where unions failed to gain substantial numbers was in workplaces and industries where they did not have an organisational structure or where the employer was antagonistic. Research for the DUES project, which charted a cross-section of British trade unions in the late 1980s confirmed this trend, as did other research into union recruitment across Britain in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Blissett, 1989, 2014; Gall, 2004, 2005; Heery, 1996, 1998, 2002, 2003, 2005; Heery & Adler 2004; Kelly & Badigannavar, 2005, Kelly & Heery, 1994; Marginson et al., 1991).

Lay and full-time officers, from a wide range of unions, expanded on these findings in their 1988 and 1989 interviews. They stated that while they were gaining members in employers where they had a strong membership base, they were not doing so in unorganised firms, owing, they felt, to intense employer hostility. As was noted earlier in this article in certain areas of the economy, such as telecommunications and logistics, this antagonism took the form of new entrant employers actively using union opposition to the deregulation of their industries to dissuade employees from joining trade unions. Outside of these sectors, employers who sought to stop unions from recruiting their employees frequently refused to allow union officers onto their premises and informed their workforces that they would never collectively bargain with unions, nor allow them to represent their staff at disciplinaries or grievances, no matter how many employees joined (Blissett, 1989; Marginson et al., 1991).

What though is significant is that new employees, in unionised workplaces, were happy to join, even though there was no longer any compulsion for them to do so. Furthermore, in several industries, officers reported that there was an increase in the number of workers who actively sought out trade union membership in union organised companies, a phenomenon that I witnessed myself when I became a BIFU National Officer in 1989. Importantly, union officers and stewards, when questioned about barriers to recruitment, never raised the issue of workers being more hostile in their outlook towards trade unionism than they had been at the end of the 1970s, a view that BSA surveys for the late 1980s substantiated (BSA, 2023).

These findings directly challenge the theory that there was an anti-collectivist 'cultural change' among the British workforce which accounts for the decline in union membership in the 1980s. Instead, what the research undertaken at the end of the 1980s indicates is that the primary reason for union membership losses towards the end of the decade was still redundancies, which continued to disproportionately affect areas of the economy which were most strongly unionised. The field work and the statistical data also reveal that these sectors of the economy did not recover in the late 1980s at the same rate as the less unionised service sector. Furthermore, in some highly unionised industries such as coal-mining and ship-building, employment, and consequently union membership, continued to decline at a precipitative rate.

The reasons for the trade unions difficulty in recruiting in areas of the economy where they had no significant presence prior to the recession of the 1980s was not solely linked to employer hostility. Those unions who had extensively used compulsory unionism in the 1970s had by the 1980s a dearth of union officers and stewards who had ever had to persuade employees to join their union. This, as the late 1980s research disclosed, often led to a position in which officers found it extremely difficult to learn the skills, and the resilience, necessary to recruit effectively in companies which were hostile to trade unionism.

These difficulties, and many unions less than successful efforts to overcome them, led several unions to appoint dedicated recruitment officers in the late 1980s. This policy had mixed results. In certain areas of the finance industry, such as domestic retail banking, and in specific retail companies, most notably Tesco, the policy paid dividends for TUC and non-TUC unions alike. BIFU and many of the non-TUC staff unions/associations in domestic banking and building societies saw the employment of recruitment officers produce membership increases. The same result was achieved by USDAW, who regularly deployed recruitment officers in Tesco stores and warehouses (Blissett, 2014).

However, outside of these areas the picture was far less positive. Many unions who employed recruitment officers in the late 1980s failed to make any significant membership gains. In analysing why this was the case several senior union officers stated that their union's policy of recruiting officials from their own ranks proved to be a handicap. The reason being that these officers had no experience of recruiting without the assistance of compulsory unionism and a very strong workplace organisation. As one senior officer from a print union commented:

We recruited all our officers from our own ranks. None of them had any knowledge of recruitment because they were FoC's⁹ from employers who had operated the pre-entry closed shop. To be frank they did not know how to persuade people who did not have to join, to join. So, even though we had some of the best recruitment leaflets the world has ever seen – all of them beautifully typeset and printed – we barely recruited a soul.

Similar sentiments were expressed by several other senior union officers, particularly from those unions who had extensive pre-entry or post-entry compulsory union agreements. Given that in the 1980s most industrial and general unions, recruited or elected officers solely from amongst their own members this lack of knowledge and experience, and in many cases self-confidence, led to many recruitment officers being less than successful. Indeed, it was this lack of success that contributed, in the 1990s, to many unions deciding to change their policy of employing only their own members as recruitment officers and to instead support the creation of a TUC organising academy, whose purpose was to train potential recruitment officers for participating affiliates.

Even with all these very significant recruitment difficulties, the unions success in stopping their membership decline in the late 1980s undermines the argument that a major 'cultural shift' away from collectivism and trade unionism had taken place, or that the anti-union legislation of the Conservative Government had caused a decline in membership, as some scholars have suggested (Bassett, 1986; Bassett & Cave, 1993; Beckett, 2015; Howell, 2005; Jackson & Saunders, 2012; McSmith, 2010; Sandbrook, 2019; Stewart, 2013; Turner, 2010; Vinen, 2013). Furthermore, when it is considered that this halting of membership decline took place in a legislative and political environment where employers were able to derecognise unions, whatever their membership levels, and to prohibit them from representing their staff, either collectively or individually, this achievement should not be underestimated.

Strike action, 1988–89

As with union membership, the common perception concerning the frequency of strike action during the late 1980s is one of decline (Bassett, 1986; Bassett & Cave, 1993; Beckett, 2015; Jackson & Saunders, 2012; McSmith, 2010; Stewart, 2013; Turner, 2010; Vinen, 2013). Once again this conclusion seems to rest on the fact that the number of working days lost owing to strike action fell significantly. However, a closer study of strike frequency data shows a different story. The strike statistics reveal that in 1988 and 1989 strike frequency was only slightly lower than in the first three years of the decade (see [Appendix Table A1](#)). This is significant as it indicates that the major industrial defeats that were suffered by the trade unions in the 1980–1987 period did not have the instantaneous depressive effect on strike frequency, that several commentators have suggested (Bassett, 1986; Bassett & Cave, 1993; Jackson & Saunders, 2012; McSmith, 2010; Sandbrook, 2019; Stewart, 2013; Turner, 2010). Equally as important, the number of unionised workplaces in 1988, as compared to 1979 had declined by over 20% (Office for National Statistics, 2022). This meant that the number of workplaces in which a strike could occur had shrunk by 20%, so the similarity in strike frequencies at the end of the decade compared to the start does suggest a modest upsurge in strike action in unionised workplaces. Indeed, it was not until the economic recession of the early 1990s that strike frequency fell markedly (see [Appendix Table A1](#)) and subsequently never recovered to the levels that prevailed throughout the 1980s.

The late 1980s research also reveals a growing willingness of unionised workers to use the threat of strike action to achieve improved pay settlements during 1988 and 1989 (Blissett, 1989). When union officers, senior shop stewards and HR managers were questioned in late 1988 about the state

of industrial relations in their workplaces many commented that since the start of the year, when the economy began to grow strongly, there had been a notable alteration in the industrial relations atmosphere. As an experienced TGWU full-time officer commented:

Our members are now more confident about keeping their jobs and they are no longer willing to just accept anything that management decide to offer. They're also now more prepared to take action if management will not make them a decent offer.

Significantly these sentiments were echoed by lay and full-time officers from British craft, general, public sector, and white-collar unions. Those representing workers in major manufacturing companies, who had started to make sizeable profits by the late 1980s, were particularly bullish about their members willingness to take strike action. An AEEU officer encapsulated the views of many other manufacturing officials when he said:

For the first time in years, there is a growing trend for our members to be ready to have a go. This is driven by a growing confidence that their skills are in demand.

Senior stewards and plant convenors also confirmed how in 1988 and 1989 an increasingly confident membership was becoming more willing to 'fight their corner', to use one steward's description. At one of Coventry's leading motor manufacturers, the senior stewards commented:

The calls for action are suddenly coming from below not above. Instead of trying to get the members to take a stand against job losses and sackings, in many cases senior stewards are now trying to keep things calm and in procedure.

Other union officers, particularly in the South-East of England, highlighted how skill shortages were having a very positive affect on wage levels particularly in trades and professions where the training of apprentices had ceased in the early 1980s (Blissett, 1989).

Significantly, senior HR managers also agreed that from early in 1988 there had been a change in the industrial climate in their workplaces with employees more inclined to press for higher wage settlements and to threaten industrial action if those claims were initially rejected. Several managers were also concerned that an inflationary spiral was occurring, with wage claims starting to chase rising inflation. Others though believed that the industrial and economic environment had significantly altered since 1979, and that the upturn in both the British economy and levels of potential industrial action were likely to be short-lived, as the nature of the economic boom, and the underlying health of many companies, was fragile (Blissett, 1989).

Union officials and HR managers also agreed that the breadth of union coverage had shrunk considerably since 1980 and that the stabilisation in union membership and the upturn in industrial discontent was occurring in a much smaller segment of the British economy than had been the case in the 1970s. Some of the more reflective union interviewees believed that a fundamental problem with trade union organisation in Britain had developed by the late 1980s and that the narrowness of industrial coverage boded ill if there was to be another recession (Blissett, 1989; Office for National Statistics, 2022).

1988–1989 conclusions

The observations of those interviewees who felt that the rapid growth in the British economy could be short lived, proved to be highly prescient. By the early 1990s the British economy was plunged, once more, into a deep recession, with unemployment rising from 6.9% in 1990 to 10.7% in 1993. Many highly unionised workplaces in the manufacturing sector closed, while areas of union membership growth in the late 1980s, such as retail banking saw a sharp decline in employment numbers.

Importantly for British trade unionism, when the economy started to come out of recession in the mid-1990s, the shift away from manufacturing and towards the service and retail sectors became even more pronounced. These developments led to a further increase in the replacement of many large, often unionised, workplaces by numerous small- and medium-sized private sector companies which had no history of trade unionism, let alone internal trade union structures or collective bargaining agreements.

The British trade union movement found these developments in the labour market highly problematic, and membership numbers declined rapidly in the early 1990s as unions struggled to address the organisational issues this shift in labour market presented (Blissett, 2014; Gall, 2004, 2005; Heery, 2002, 2003, 2005; Kelly & Badigannavar, 2004; Kelly & Waddington, 2003; Kelly & Heery 1994).

The fact though remains that in the late 1980s union membership numbers stabilized and the assertion of authors (Bassett, 1986; Bassett & Cave, 1993; Beckett, 2015; Jackson & Saunders, 2012; McSmith, 2010; Sandbrook, 2019; Stewart, 2013; Turner, 2010; Vinen, 2013) that the combination of the proscription of compulsory unionism, the loss of major industrial disputes, and a cultural shift away from collectivism, led to a continuous decline in membership throughout the 1980s is not substantiated. Indeed, where unions had previously had strong organisational structures, their memberships increased as employers recruited staff in the late 1980s economic boom (Blissett, 1989, 2014).

What though is striking, from the 1980s research, is that unions had great difficulty in dealing with the seismic structural changes that were then occurring in the economy, which saw a substantial growth in service-sector companies, which often employed workers at low pay rates and had high staff turnover levels, along with no history of union organisation. It was in these companies that trade unions struggled to find a strategy that would persuade employees to join a union in significant numbers (Blissett, 2014; Gall, 2004, 2005; Heery, 2002, 2003, 2005; Kelly & Badigannavar, 2004; Kelly & Heery, 1989; Kelly et al., 2003).

This paper's findings also contradict the assertions that various authors have made about strike frequency during the decade. The most arresting of these being the claim that the number of strikes in the late 1980s fell because of the unsuccessful prosecution of major industrial disputes (Bassett, 1986; Bassett & Cave, 1993; McSmith, 2010; Sandbrook, 2019; Stewart, 2013; Turner, 2010; Vinen, 2013). As [Appendix Table A2](#) shows, this assertion is incorrect as strike frequency in each year of the decade remained broadly constant, and that any small decline in strike frequency in the latter years of the decade is more than offset by the reduced numbers of unionised workplaces. What this paper's research has also shown, but which is not clearly indicated in the strike frequency data, is that when the financial position of many employers improved in the late 1980s, union members also became more willing to vote for industrial action than they had been in the previous 8 years (Blissett, 1989). These votes were then used to 'persuade' employers to raise wages and improve conditions of employment. This finding chimes with that of other scholars who found that unions successfully adapted their industrial action and negotiating strategies in order to use votes for strike action as a lever to gain improvements in pay and conditions (Undy et al., 1996).

There is also no empirical evidence that the number of strikes during the 1980s was affected by cultural changes in society, or the legislative restrictions on the ability to take strike action. Instead, the evidence suggests that the principal factors that lowered the levels of strike action in the early 1980s, and then kept them at a relatively consistent rate throughout the decade, was the deep economic recession and the subsequent decline in the number of large, unionised, manufacturing employers. It is also the case that this contraction of the heavily unionised manufacturing sector, offset the increase in union members willingness to take industrial action in the late 1980s (Blissett, 1989; Marginson et al., 1991).

Concluding thoughts

In undertaking this assessment of the reasons for the declines in union membership and the number of strikes during the 1980s, what became clear is that many accounts of industrial relations and trade unionism during the decade have been largely shaped by subsequent events. Specifically, the stabilization in union numbers in the late 1980s, and the manner in which strike action stayed at a broadly constant level throughout the decade – even though the number of unionised workplaces fell dramatically – are totally ignored in many of the accounts of the period (Ackers & Payne, 1998; Bacon & Storey, 1993; Bassett, 1986; Bassett & Cave, 1993; Blyton & Turnbull, 1994; Cohen, 2006; Colling & Terry, 2010; Edwards, 2003; Fairbrother & Yates, 2003; Gospel & Wood, 2003; Howell, 2005; Jackson & Saunders, 2012; McSmith, 2010; Sandbrook, 2019; Stewart, 2013; Turner, 2010; Vinen, 2013).

Part of the reason for this historical amnesia relates to the economic recession, and the decreases in union membership and strike frequency that followed in the early 1990s. This recession swept away many of the manufacturing workplaces still left after the recession of the early 1980s, and in which trade unions still enjoyed a strong membership base. The short-lived nature of the late 1980s economic upturn has led many historians and industrial relations scholars to ignore the period altogether and to instead characterise the whole of the 1980s and the early 1990s as a single period of continuous decline in strike frequency and union membership (Ackers & Wilkinson, 2003; Bassett, 1986; Bassett & Cave, 1993; Beckett, 2015; Gospel & Wood, 2003; Jackson & Saunders, 2012; McSmith, 2010; Sandbrook, 2019; Stewart, 2013; Turner, 2010; Vinen, 2013). These declines in union membership and strike frequency are often then attributed to 'Thatcherism' and the adoption of 'individualism' and 'hostility to unions' among the British working class (Bassett, 1986; Bassett & Cave, 1993; Beckett, 2015; Jackson & Saunders, 2012; McSmith, 2010; Sandbrook, 2019; Stewart, 2013; Turner, 2010; Vinen, 2013).

This paper has shown that these assertions are both crude and inaccurate and are lacking in solid empirical evidence. Instead, a closer interrogation of the statistical evidence and the use of the rich empirical data provided by the University of Warwick's British arm of the DUES project, and the Coventry City industrial relations study, suggests a more complex and nuanced explanation is needed. This article reveals that the fall in union membership in the period 1980–88 was overwhelmingly due to redundancies and closures, which were concentrated in areas of the economy where the unions had their strongest workplace organisations and highest membership densities. It also shows that while the union movement was able to stem the flow of membership losses in the late 1980s, when the economy started to recover from recession, it failed to regain the millions of members it lost. This was not because of an anti-union cultural shift, or because of the proscribing of compulsory unionism, but was instead driven by an inability of unions to adapt effectively in order to organise workers in a vastly altered economic landscape, in which manufacturing employment numbers had shrunk dramatically and there was an exponential rise in small- and medium-sized companies operating in the service sector (Blissett, 1989, 2014; Marginson et al., 1991; Office for National Statistics, 2022).

The reason for the collapse in manufacturing employment has also been established as having started earlier than 1980, with global economic changes allowing manufacturing jobs to be relocated from 'developed' economies, such as Britain, to lower waged, 'developing', nations. This had a profound effect on British union membership, which was centered in the manufacturing sector. This 'globalisation' of the world economy, when combined with the 1980s Conservative Government's fiscal, monetary, and industrial policies, adversely effected employment in manufacturing, mining, and the public sector. These were all areas where unions were strongly organised, and their contraction had, as earlier stated, a far greater impact on union membership and strike frequency than the Government's anti-union legislation or any, perceived, shift towards individualism. This assertion is further supported by the subsequent stabilization of union membership that occurred in the late 1980s, when the British economy, including manufacturing, experienced a, short-lived, boom.

These findings, partly, echo the assertions of authors who have linked both the success of trade unions, and the complexion of British industrial relations, to changes in the economy, particularly in product markets, rather than to political, legislative, or cultural developments (Brown, 2008). However, as this article has also shown, another reason why many unions struggled to adapt to a dramatically altered economic landscape was their inability to timeously adjust their organising methods. This inability was not repeated in relation to strike action, where unions proved to be more adept in altering their tactics, switching rapidly from undertaking continuous strike action, to discontinuous strikes, after the loss of major industrial disputes in the mid-1980s. This capacity for unions to make policy decisions that significantly shape their futures, supports the assertions of those scholars who have stressed that unions have the ability to make 'strategic choices' that fundamentally effect their success or failure as organisations (Blissett, 1986, 1988, 2014; Boxall & Haynes, 1997; Heery, 2002, 2003, 2006; Kelly, 1998; Heery Simms, 2008; Kelly & Heery, 1994; Kelly & Badigannavar, 2005)

In conclusion, the findings of this study, which crucially rests upon extensive empirical data, clearly shows how the impact of a deep economic recession and radical alterations to the structure of the British

economy, were more important external factors in determining trade union membership and strike frequency in the 1980s than the Conservative Government's legislative restrictions on compulsory union membership, and unions' ability to take strike action. Equally as importantly, this article has demonstrated how the hypothesis, put forward by a number of authors (Beckett, 2015; Jackson & Saunders, 2012; Sandbrook, 2019; Stewart, 2013; Turner, 2010; Vinen, 2013) that Britain in the 1980s underwent a 'profound cultural change' away from collectivism and towards individualism is fundamentally flawed.

Notes on Contributor

Ed Blissett (PhD) is Senior Research Fellow in Employment Relations at the University of Hertfordshire. Prior to taking up this post Ed was, for over 25 years, a lay activist and then a senior Regional and National officer for three of Britain's largest trade unions. His roles included 13 years as a GMB officer in the 1990s and 2000s, including four years as Regional Secretary of the London Region. He also spent five years, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, as a National Official of the Banking Insurance and Finance Union (BIFU). These positions granted him extensive first-hand knowledge of union recruitment and industrial action policy decisions. His background as a lay activist and a union officer in the 1980s also assisted him in gaining access, to British union officers, shop stewards and managers, who all contributed to this paper's empirical research.

Notes

1. Unpublished BA (Honours) theses entitled, *Which way forward Trade Unionism: A comparison of the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU) and the Electrical, Electronic, Telecommunications and Plumbing Union (EETPU)*; Blissett (1986).
Unpublished MA IR thesis entitled *Merging with the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU): An analysis of the mergers of the National Union of Vehicle Builders (NUVB) and the National Union of Agricultural and Allied Workers (NUAAW) with the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU)*. Blissett (1988).
2. Pre-entry closed shops involved an agreement between a union and an employer that only members of that union would be employed when there was a vacancy. Post-entry closed shops involved an agreement between an employer and a trade union that any individual who entered employment would have to join the appropriate union.
3. Staff transferring to a contractor were protected, to a limited extent, under the Transfer of Undertaking Protection of Employment (TUPE) 1981, legislation that Britain had to adopt owing to being a signatory to the European Community's directive on the safeguarding of employees' rights.
4. Pay-roll deduction is an agreement between a union and an employer to deduct an employee's trades union subscription directly from their wages. In many cases the trade union makes a payment to the employer to provide this facility.
5. These included the NGA's Messenger Newspaper strike in 1982–1983, the NCU's Mercury interconnection dispute in 1983, and the SOGAT, NGA and AUEW strike at News International during 1986–87.
6. As a former senior officer of two British trade unions, BIFU and the GMB, I had direct knowledge of decisions taken by British unions in the 1990s not to involve members in indefinite strikes, owing to the devastating consequences of the unsuccessful, indefinite, strikes that occurred in the 1980s.
7. The National Union of Rail Maritime and Transport Workers (RMT) undertook a programme of rolling strikes at South-Western Rail in 2017 which lasted over four years.
8. Trade unions in this context are those defined as such by the British Government's Trade Union Certification Officer.
9. Father of Chapel. The print unions name for a male, union workplace representative.

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Appendix

Table A1. Strike frequency.

Year	Month	Number of strikes
1975	January	239
1975	February	303
1975	March	302
1975	April	335
1975	May	339
1975	June	352
1975	July	330
1975	August	218
1975	September	207
1975	October	213
1975	November	158
1975	December	88
1976	January	184
1976	February	197
1976	March	252
1976	April	219
1976	May	213
1976	June	233
1976	July	219
1976	August	210
1976	September	237
1976	October	248
1976	November	249
1976	December	161
1977	January	262
1977	February	347
1977	March	349
1977	April	288
1977	May	317
1977	June	239
1977	July	217
1977	August	346
1977	September	395
1977	October	404
1977	November	340
1977	December	153
1978	January	228
1978	February	274
1978	March	287
1978	April	271
1978	May	281
1978	June	274
1978	July	209
1978	August	226
1978	September	313
1978	October	398
1978	November	369

(Continued)

Table A1. (Continued).

Year	Month	Number of strikes
1978	December	177
1979	January	251
1979	February	297
1979	March	314
1979	April	247
1979	May	204
1979	June	235
1979	July	245
1979	August	291
1979	September	274
1979	October	282
1979	November	202
1979	December	84
1980	January	177
1980	February	161
1980	March	185
1980	April	205
1980	May	189
1980	June	188
1980	July	111
1980	August	96
1980	September	132
1980	October	138
1980	November	115
1980	December	59
1981	January	133
1981	February	144
1981	March	197
1981	April	176
1981	May	136
1981	June	143
1981	July	111
1981	August	96
1981	September	142
1981	October	173
1981	November	164
1981	December	110
1982	January	166
1982	February	197
1982	March	200
1982	April	194
1982	May	177
1982	June	168
1982	July	123
1982	August	127
1982	September	136
1982	October	141
1982	November	163
1982	December	93
1983	January	109

(Continued)

Table A1. (Continued).

Year	Month	Number of strikes
1983	February	129
1983	March	182
1983	April	154
1983	May	153
1983	June	137
1983	July	146
1983	August	139
1983	September	159
1983	October	153
1983	November	195
1983	December	86
1984	January	158
1984	February	186
1984	March	175
1984	April	143
1984	May	134
1984	June	147
1984	July	126
1984	August	116
1984	September	129
1984	October	153
1984	November	119
1984	December	64
1985	January	77
1985	February	111
1985	March	104
1985	April	105
1985	May	109
1985	June	81
1985	July	105
1985	August	83
1985	September	108
1985	October	125
1985	November	93
1985	December	72
1986	January	96
1986	February	116
1986	March	91
1986	April	128
1986	May	99
1986	June	116
1986	July	100
1986	August	92
1986	September	102
1986	October	148
1986	November	107
1986	December	91
1987	January	111
1987	February	123
1987	March	120

(Continued)

Table A1. (Continued).

Year	Month	Number of strikes
1987	April	135
1987	May	95
1987	June	104
1987	July	93
1987	August	71
1987	September	84
1987	October	96
1987	November	108
1987	December	72
1988	January	93
1988	February	128
1988	March	99
1988	April	55
1988	May	78
1988	June	89
1988	July	71
1988	August	62
1988	September	63
1988	October	82
1988	November	85
1988	December	49
1989	January	61
1989	February	92
1989	March	75
1989	April	74
1989	May	100
1989	June	93
1989	July	89
1989	August	67
1989	September	78
1989	October	61
1989	November	55
1989	December	36
1990	January	55
1990	February	78
1990	March	95
1990	April	71
1990	May	71
1990	June	73
1990	July	67
1990	August	69
1990	September	59
1990	October	77
1990	November	62
1990	December	45
1991	January	32
1991	February	37
1991	March	46
1991	April	54
1991	May	65

(Continued)

Table A1. (Continued).

Year	Month	Number of strikes
1991	June	50
1991	July	57
1991	August	46
1991	September	40
1991	October	42
1991	November	38
1991	December	29
1992	January	35
1992	February	37
1992	March	40
1992	April	35
1992	May	24
1992	June	41
1992	July	39
1992	August	29
1992	September	26
1992	October	20
1992	November	24
1992	December	22
1993	January	28
1993	February	27
1993	March	37
1993	April	27
1993	May	29
1993	June	32
1993	July	24
1993	August	21
1993	September	22
1993	October	15
1993	November	18
1993	December	8
1994	January	12
1994	February	9
1994	March	22
1994	April	22
1994	May	33
1994	June	36
1994	July	28
1994	August	18
1994	September	19
1994	October	19
1994	November	19
1994	December	21
1995	January	15
1995	February	19
1995	March	17
1995	April	26
1995	May	29
1995	June	23
1995	July	29

(Continued)

Table A1. (Continued).

Year	Month	Number of strikes
1995	August	31
1995	September	35
1995	October	25
1995	November	34
1995	December	32

Table A2. TUC membership 1975–1995.

Year	Membership
1975	11,656
1976	12,133
1977	12,719
1978	13,054
1979	13,212
1980	12,636
1981	12,311
1982	11,744
1983	11,300
1984	10,774
1985	10,819
1986	10,598
1987	10,480
1988	10,387
1989	10,044
1990	9,810
1991	9,489
1992	8,929
1993	8,666
1994	8,231
1995	8,031

Source, TUC directories.