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Gregor Gall\*

## **Multi-unionism and the Representation of Sectional Interests in British Workplaces\*\***

**Abstract** – Britain has been regarded as traditionally having had a ‘problem’ in its industrial relations by virtue of the presence of sectionalism and multi-unionism. This article suggests that this analysis of sectionalism and multi-unionism being a ‘problem’ is very much bound up with employer perspectives and the specific context of the 1960s and 1970s. By contrast, in a period of retreat for labour unionism since 1979, sectionalism can be viewed in a different and more positive manner, whereby its resilience allows distinct, occupational interests to be more effectively represented. The case of journalists, when contrasted with that of finance workers, is used to highlight this.

### **Gewerkschaftspluralismus und die Vertretung von Partikularinteressen in Großbritannien**

**Zusammenfassung** – Gewerkschaftskonkurrenz und -fragmentierung gelten als traditionelles Problem der Arbeitsbeziehungen in Großbritannien. Dieser Aufsatz versucht klarzustellen, dass Spartengewerkschaften vor allem aus Arbeitgebersicht ein „Problem“ darstellen, zumal unter den spezifischen Bedingungen der 1960er und 1970er Jahre. Im Gegenzug nährt er eine andere, positivere Sicht der Dinge für die Periode seit 1979, die durch einen allgemeinen Rückgang der Gewerkschaftsbewegung gekennzeichnet ist: Hier erlaubt die Spannkraft von Berufsgewerkschaften eine wirksame Interessenvertretung. Diese These wird durch die Gegenüberstellung von Journalisten und Finanzdienstleistern verdeutlicht.

Key words: **Britain, Labour Unions, Journalists, Finance Workers**

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## Introduction

One of the traditional and dominant hallmarks of labour unionism in Britain has been that of *trade* unionism, whereby different groups of workers – defined by their specific skills, jobs, occupations or professions – have established and maintained their own separate and distinctive forms of collective workplace unionisms which have, in turn, been aggregated into separate and distinctive national labour unions. The first labour unions formed were by craft or skilled workers in first half of the nineteenth century, with labour unionism for unskilled and semi-skilled workers not emerging until the end of the nineteenth century (Pelling 1992). These labour unions were first organised by sub-national spatial units like regions or cities reflecting the localised nature of the labour markets then. But at the same time ‘trade’ was the greater and more important division, underlying geographic and spatial dimensions. An example of how the two aspects evolved together can be found in the Scottish Union of Power Loom Overlookers, Northern Carpet Trades Union or the Sheffield Wool Shear Workers’ Union which all existed until the early 2000s. Consequently, the historical synthesis of trade and geography resulted in there being 1,323 unions in Britain in 1900 which reduced to 732 by 1960 and 438 by 1980. Part of the explanation for the reduction concerns the formation of conglomerate national unions, whether of single or multi-occupational dimensions, for certain or allied trades resultant from the coming together of extant regional unions for specific trades. One example was the formation of the Transport and General Workers’ Union in 1922 from fourteen different unions (Coates/Topham 1994). But, and despite union merging, labour unionism in Britain towards the end of the twentieth century was still marked by trade divisions and its manifestation in the workplace, namely, that of sectionalism. For the moment, sectionalism can be defined as competitive and highly differentiated workplace labour unionisms based on *trade*. It has conventionally been regarded seen as problematic for both employers and workers, albeit for different reasons. For employers, sectionalism was primarily viewed as inefficient in productivity terms, thus hindering profitability, and a challenge to the managerial prerogative. For workers, sectionalism was viewed in the medium- and long-terms as preventing the unity, and thus strength, required to collectively realise better terms and conditions of employment as well as the attainment of workers’ power at societal level (see Hobsbawm 1981).

This article, through the examination of two case studies of different groups of workers, provides an alternative, and materialist, analysis of the issue of sectionalism and multi-unionism in British workplaces. It suggests that the analysis of sectionalism and multi-unionism being a ‘problem’ is very much bound up with employer perspectives and the specific context of the 1960s and 1970s. By contrast, in a period of retreat for labour unionism since 1979, sectionalism can be viewed in a quite different and more positive manner, whereby its resilience allows the distinct, occupational interests of workers to be more effectively represented. Put succinctly, the deployment of in-group identity to construct and/or maintain sectionalism has proven to be a productive tool for certain instances of labour unionism. The case of journalists, when contrasted with that of finance workers, is used to highlight this. The article begins by laying out the thematic concerns in both historical and contemporary contexts before

providing an analysis of the way in which journalists have used sectionalist representation based on their profession to defend and advance their interests. Following this, the case of finance workers is considered. A penultimate section draws out the lessons of the comparative exercise while the final section suggests what appropriate generalisations may be made from the case studies.

### Themes and issues

Britain became known as the 'sick man of Europe' in the 1960s and 1970s, in large part, because of the attribution of lower productivity and economic growth (compared to its competitors) to the so-called 'British disease' which consisted of externally combative and internally competitive labour unionism. For employers, the problems associated with a huge multiplicity of sectionally-minded unions revolved around destructive competition between unions, complexity of bargaining processes and arrangements, and thus the attendant high level of consumption of their time and resources (see, for example, Brown 1981: 59; Bryson et al. 2005; Dobson 1997; Donovan 1968; Metcalf 1993; Metcalf et al. 1993). These features, aided by *de facto* or *de jure* workplace level bargaining, led to pay 'leapfrogging', demarcation disputes and constant tensions over wage differentials between different groups of workers (see, for example, Dobson 1997). Not infrequently, such competition between unions for increasing workers' remuneration led to industrial action such as unofficial action and 'wildcat' strikes (albeit there were also other contributory factors). For some mainstream observers, the situation was even worse than this because workers *within* individual unions could be in conflict with each other over demarcations. In a system of largely voluntarist industrial relations, the state – in the form of cross-party political consensus – was generally unwilling to employ legal means to ameliorate these 'problems' until the turning point of 1979 with the election of the neo-liberal Conservative government, led by Margaret Thatcher. Indeed, the conclusion of the Royal Commission – usually known as the Donovan Commission (1968) – in 1968 was to seek formalisation and regularisation of industrial relations through voluntary means at the company level. Previous attempts under the Wilson Labour (the 1969 *In Place of Strife* White Paper) and Heath Conservative (the *Industrial Relations Act 1971*) governments to compel change through legal means failed and did so dramatically (Blyton/Turnbull 2004).

In order that a materialist understanding of these inter-related phenomena is arrived at, it is essential to recognise the underlying dynamics of the salient situational processes. Before detailing these, however, a broader contextual point is in order. It is that the socially constructed notion-cum-actuality of differentiations between workers primarily has its material roots in the organisation of the capitalist labour process, where the division and sub-division of labour have been marked as a means of reifying and extending managerial control within the task of organising the production of goods and services for the pursuit of profit (see Thompson 1983). Thus, the seemingly dramatic divisions between workers were often fostered, if not created, by employers in conscious and unconscious ways for management by the method of 'divide and rule' was apparent and because labour unions are 'secondary organisations' (Offe/Wiesenthal 1980) established after employers have created the structures of employment. Yet, and consistent with this, a subordinate role also has to be attributed to the

means by which workers have sought best to organise within the labour markets with a view to maintaining or advancing their terms and conditions of employment (see, for example, Hobsbawm 1964). In terms of the explaining the specificity of the 1960s and 1970s in Britain, six factors are germane.

First, there was a period of rising employment demand due to the long post-war boom, consisting of overall economic growth and expanding product markets. The importance of this was that workers' substantial bargaining power was of a contingent nature. Second, employers did not object to sectionalism *per se* – rather what they objected to was competitive sectionalism which interrupted the production of good and services when there was market demand for these because this prevented the realisation of profit. In other words, strikes and industrial action at times of depressed demand would be looked upon in a different, that is, beneficial way, and strikes were sometimes provoked by employers in order to save on wages and operating costs in such situations. Third, 'indulgency' patterns of behaviour were operated by management whereby they were willing to concede to the demands of workers, in turn fueling these demands further, because they were desperate to get the goods and services to market to realise profit. In essence, management choose to pay its way out of these types of industrial relations problems – by passing the costs on to customers – rather than confronting the issues (see MacInnes 1987). By such behaviour, it was argued that problems were compounded. Fourth, the growth of workplace unionism which was capable of such sectional bargaining practice was also a reflection of the inadequacy for workers of the centralised nature of much of the institutional framework of collective bargaining (at the industry- or company-levels). Fifth, strikes over demarcation disputes were evidence of workers trying to protect their employment and market position and employers trying to reduce workers' control through deskilling and multi-skilling. Lastly, the nature of *trade* unionism was dominated by the trait of economism whereby the 'pounds and pence' of the wage-effort bargain was concentrated upon to the detriment of building levers of power to apply to issues of non-monetary value.

But the picture of competitive and sectional labour unionism being characteristic of all sectors of British economy was far from true. Whilst it predominated in printing, shipbuilding, engineering, construction and manufacturing, in other sectors, one union dominated and there was little evidence of competitive unionism and sectionalism such as in mining, postal services, telecommunications, and road transport. The obvious exceptions to this in the public sector were to be found in the national health service (NHS), teaching, and local government, where a large multiplicity of unions exist. By 2008, in the NHS there were still 14 unions (with memberships varying from 2,000 to 470,000), with seven in teaching and four in local government (despite a series of union mergers), stimulating the enforcement of single-table bargaining (see below). However, historically and contemporaneously little evidence has existed of competitive unionism and sectionalism in these three parts of the public sector compared to engineering or printing in the 1960s and 1970s. This signals the differences in available levers, like disruptive power, labour scarcity and political influence (Batstone 1988) across both space and time.

The overall point to take away from this brief overview is that the sectionalism was a rational deployment of certain groups of workers' specific – their skill or task-

based – and general – their leverage in the business cycle – bargaining power. It is only if a unitarist employer or government perspective of a conservative nature is deployed that the exercise of this bargaining power becomes to be seen as not just a ‘problem’ but one of deviancy and insubordination. Alongside this, recognition should also be made – whether from an institutional pluralist perspective (like Clegg 1976) or Marxist perspective (like Hyman 1975) – of the democratic right of individual groups to interest representation so that not all issues of representation are cocooned within the managerially determined agenda of efficiency and productivity. Of course, pluralists and Marxists would differ over the extent of this right, how it should be exercised and for what purposes.

Nonetheless, and recognising the dramatic turn in public and employer policy towards neo-liberalism since the mid-1970s in Britain and its subsequent domination of policy and practice, employers have generally favoured union mergers as a means of reducing the level of sectionalism and competitive bargaining. The prospect of mergers strengthening the hand of organised labour has not been one to concern employers given that the mergers have taken place in a period of slack labour markets and union marginalisation and retreat. Where mergers have not been forthcoming or have been slow to materialise, employers have taken their own initiatives by introducing ‘single-union deals’ and ‘single-table bargaining’ from the mid-1980s onwards. Under single-union deals, different unions would enter into a ‘beauty contest’ to win the ‘hand of marriage’ of the employer by offering preferable terms of gaining union recognition like ‘no-strike’ deals. Meanwhile, with single-table bargaining, employers compelled unions to negotiate as one common body rather than countenance separate negotiations with the different, individual unions. Regardless of progress made here on the three methods (mergers, single-union deals, single-table bargaining), employers also introduced measures to end skills divisions through so-called ‘deskilling’ and ‘flexible working practices’ (under which the technical divisions between skilled and unskilled labour and between skilled labour were reduced) as well as harmonise conditions of pay and conditions across their workforces through ‘single status’ programmes.

The *Workplace Industrial Relations Surveys* of 1984, 1990, 1998 and 2004 (Cully et al. 1999; Kersley et al. 2006; Millward et al. 1992, 2000) painted a picture of the continuing prevalence of multi-unionism in Britain where unions were present and recognised by employers albeit this was subject to some decline over time. In 1990, there were 2.7 unions per workplace, dropping to 2.4 by 1998 while in 2004 50% of workplaces contained two or more recognised unions (Millward et al. 2000: 200; Kersley et al. 2006: 123). Within this, the main characteristics were a separation of union representation for manual and non-manual workers and higher levels of multi-unionism in the public sector compared to the private sector and amongst non-manual workers compared to manual workers. For these reasons, the commentaries of the various *Workplace Industrial Relations Surveys* retained their relevance well after publication:

One of the distinctive features of British industrial relations is the large number of ... unions. Compared with most other European countries the number is enormous and the [associated] sheer complexity of bargaining arrangements in Britain is almost incomprehensible to Europeans. Millward et al. 1992: 77)



Compared to most other industrialized countries, Britain has long been known for its bewildering number of separate ... unions and [associated] bargaining structures. (Millward et al. 2000: 199)

And so, in spite of these overall processes to reduce the number of unions in Britain, aided considerably by the declining membership of unions which compelled amalgamations out of issue of financial necessity and viability, by the early 2000s there were still 283 unions. Of these, just over 50% were clearly still predicated on a trade, skill, professional or occupational basis. This suggests there is still a keenly felt need for such separate and distinctive collective representation. Moreover, even where general or industrial unions have been created in Britain from the amalgamation of existing *trade* unions, the need for separate internal means of representation has been prevalent with trade groups existing as in Amicus and the TGWU as well as when these two unions merged themselves to form Unite in 2007. Alternatively, when transfers of engagement take place – that is union mergers of a smaller union joining a much larger one – it has been common practice for the dominant union to cede considerable autonomy to the transferring union so that it becomes a section or branch of the new, enlarged but already conglomerated union. That said, the accession of many trade unions into conglomerate general unions has witnessed discontent on the part of some members who have felt that they have lost their specific identity and right to effective representation not only within union structures but also, as a consequence of this, when facing employers too.

Nevertheless, the continuation of such representative internal and external structures of labour unionism then testifies to not just the maintenance of manifest skill and task differentiation but also the basis of these differentiations for social identity *per se* and social identity as the most appropriate *modus operandi* under the system of still largely voluntarist employment relations in Britain for interest representation of differentiated workers. The establishment of the modern industry-wide union system by the British Trades Union Congress (TUC) in Germany in the aftermath of the ending of the Second World War or the creation of company unions in Japan with the support of the then occupying US forces in the late 1940s (after a ‘reforming conflict’ involving a provoked and violently suppressed general strike) highlight the sense in which such major changes in the structure of labour unionism are only likely at junctures of dramatic social and political turmoil. Otherwise, the living legacy of the past remains very strong.

Finally, and for the purposes of avoiding ahistoricism, if a commentator was to survey the contemporary industrial relations landscape in Britain for evidence of sectionalism within labour unions, say for the period of the 1990s onwards, he or she would probably conclude there was none. This would be a misreading of the situation because it would say more about the reliance upon open conflict in the form of strikes as the weathervane for judging this. Rather, sectionalism still exists given its historical legacy and is marked as much today by not striking where unions in the public sector have not worked together to resist a government wage policy of keeping pay rises below the level of inflation since 2003.

### **Case studies – journalists and finance workers in Britain**

The article now explores a number of the aforementioned aspects of the value and efficacy of sectionalism and multi-unionism for representing worker interest by way of examining the cases of journalists and finance workers in Britain. The rationale for using the examples of the journalists and finance workers is several-fold. In terms of the journalists, they have maintained a specific, individual collective interest representation organisation for the last one hundred years which has remained the dominant union despite many perilous threats to the existence of their organisation. Meanwhile, finance workers' collective labour union organisation began in a myriad of ways. Established in the main just after the First World War (FWW), there were independent 'industrial' labour unions for the separate banking and insurance sub-sectors as well as both single company-based independent unions and dependent staff associations in both sub-sectors. The staff associations were created and supported by employers as a means to oppose independent labour unionism in the immediate post-FWW period and then again in the early 1970s (as a result of changes in industrial relations legislation). Over a long period of time, the number of unions in the finance sector has been reduced through merger and amalgamation from sixty in 1970 to forty in 1981 and then to sixteen by 2007, with 60% of members now found within the finance section of the Unite union. Using these two cases provides a contrast of the continuing lineage of a small professional trade union set against the desire to establish a single 'industry' union in finance which was not realised, with the majority of union members in the sector now being part of a general union as a result of a defensive union merger strategy.

So whilst most extant research has been concerned with the economic consequences of multi-unionism and sectionalism – and from an employer and conventional perspective – this article will examine the salient social manifestations and dynamics in order to underscore that the former and traditional way of looking at the issues is far from the only way of doing so as well as emphasising that there are rational and legitimate social reasons for the existence of this form of labour unionism. However, more sophisticated notions of sectionalism and multi-unionism need to now be deployed for this task. Although the case of the journalists can be understood within the aforementioned framework of sectionalism, in the case of finance workers, the understanding of sectionalism and multi-unionism requires development. Whilst workplace sectionalism and multi-unionism existed in the majority of the main high street banks (NatWest, Barclays and Lloyds) and a number of large insurers until relatively recently – either by virtue of two unions being recognised or by an unrecognised union with a substantial presence attempting to gain union recognition alongside the recognised union – in the majority of the rest of the finance sector where either labour unionism was present or recognised by the employer, single unionism existed. Yet this did not mean that sectionalism was absent. The sectionalism that existed was of an inter-workplace and not intra-workplace nature, that is, between different workers in different companies. Thus, the mainstay of labour unionism in the finance sector was of a company-based nature (similar to that in Japan). Worker identity and loyalty was predicated on reciprocity of interests and outcomes with specific employers in compe-



tion with other individual units of employers and workers in the sector. Consequently, the way in which finance workers' collective interests were represented was configured created intra-sectoral labour force divisions which militated against the realisation and actualisation of the common interests of finance workers, whether through forums of multi-employer bargaining (MEB) or through pattern bargaining in a decentralised industrial relations sectoral system.

The research material for the two case study labour unionisms is derived from original, primary research carried out by the author. In the case of the NUJ and journalists (see Gall 2007 for an example as well as a list of the consequent publications), this was based on face-to-face interviews with union members and union officers between 1990 and 2000 with the same types of interviews conducted with the members and union officers for the period 1993 to 2002 in the case of the finance sector unions (see Gall 2008 for an example as well as a list of the consequent publications). In addition to this, extensive primary (union) and secondary (media) documentary sources were also utilised.

A more obvious comparator case study to that of the journalists may appear to be that of print workers. With an extremely strong sense of occupational identity and a large degree of control of entry to their respective labour market and then subsequent regulation therein through apprenticeships and the pre-closed shop in their heyday, print workers were divided into many different specialist labour unions representing particular skills and jobs found within the production process until the 1960s and 1970s. From 1982, there were two print unions – one for skilled printers (NGA) and one for semi- and unskilled print (SOGAT) workers (Gennard 1990; Gennard/Bain 1995). However, these two unions subsequently merged into a single union for the printing industry in 1991 called the GPMU. These print unions existed alongside small number of members of the electricians' and engineers' unions in the industry. Merging was a response to rapidly declining membership and power which, in turn, reflected increasingly aggressive employers, the deployment of new technologies within the industry and allied communications industries, and transferral of work abroad. The rationale for print workers not being a useful comparator is four-fold. First, the tasks, and thus jobs, of large swathes of print workers were made redundant by new technologies. Second, new technology has been used by employers to restructure the skills requirements for the industry so that widespread *de facto* deskilling has occurred. Third, cataclysmic (sic) strike defeats were suffered by the print unions, most notably in 1983 (Warrington/Eddie Shah) and 1986 (Wapping/Rupert Murdoch), and these deleteriously affected their collective psyche and strength. As a result print workers went from being one of the strongest, if not the strongest, organised group of workers in Britain to being amongst the weakest organised. And fourth, a significant proportion of non-newspaper typesetting and printing work was increasingly moved abroad as a new international division of labour emerged.

By contrast, the finance sector workforce has grown in size throughout the period under study with new technology not displacing finance workers *per se* (Gall 2008) and finance workers' collective organisation has not experienced the body blows that print workers' has. Moving work abroad – now called 'offshoring' – has had a limited impact on the finance sector overall. Moreover, comparing two groups within the

printed media sector would make it difficult to disentangle the influence of the specificity of the industrial and power relations of that industry, thus, limiting the extent to which generalisation may be made. And, furthermore, both labour unionisms of the journalists and finance workers matured in the post-1979 period which allows for a standardised basis for comparison. So the case of the finance workers is a more appropriate and illuminating contrast with that of journalists because the two groups share a sufficient similarity and difference within a wider parameter to make comparative analysis viable and rewarding.

### **Journalists**

Journalists have three separate unions; the Institute of Journalists (IoJ), the British Association of Journalists (BAJ) and the National Union of Journalists (NUJ). The latter is by far the biggest and currently represents some 31,000 journalists in Britain and the Republic of Ireland, and claims to be the biggest independent journalists' union in the world. It was created in 1907 as a breakaway from the employer-dominated IoJ with the BAJ established in 1992 as a breakaway from the NUJ following a dispute over the sacking of the incumbent general secretary. The rationale of the NUJ is as both a *trade* union for journalists – defined as those who earn at least a certain proportion of their income from journalism – and the leading representative of the profession of journalism in the British Isles (Gall/Murphy 1996). This means that it represents its members on issues of terms and conditions of employment as any conventional labour union seeks to through both individual and collective means like legal representation and collective bargaining. But it also acts as a professional body which tries to regulate the profession in terms of entry to it and the conduct of journalists. The means to regulate entry to the profession have been through accredited training in conjunction with employers and universities/colleges while the NUJ has sought to regulate the conduct of its own members' professional conduct through codes of conduct and ethics as well as the environment its members operate in and what is asked of them by employers through collective bargaining and public policy work (particularly in the state television and radio broadcast services). The NUJ has been able to operate here by seeking to fashion the extant notion of journalism as a profession, rather than create the notion for both journalists and media employers subscribe publicly to the ideals of journalism, particularly those of a worthy cultural and intellectual exercise (as opposed to journalism as a mere business or another product). This task has been made easier by virtue of the more identifiable boundaries of what is and is not journalism, where journalists fulfilled a small number of tasks and the process of origination (writers, photographers) and manipulation (sub-editors) of material and images did not unduly separate journalists from each other.

In these two regards, the NUJ is distinct from the IoJ because the latter is more of a professional association than trade union while the BAJ is essentially a single company-based union without much reach or leverage and an organisation which is not particularly 'unionate' (Blackburn 1967). By contrast, the NUJ is unionate for it declares itself to be a union and is registered as such; regards collective bargaining and the protection of its members' interests (as workers rather than as consumers or citizens) as its main function; is prepared to use all forms of industrial action, including

strikes, to pursue these aims; is independent from the employers; and is affiliated to the TUC (see Blackburn 1967: 18f.). It is, however, not affiliated to the Labour Party and does not have a political fund because its membership has deemed that it must maintain its professional independence and integrity at all costs.

The NUJ began to gain union recognition workplace agreements with private sector employers from the late 1960s (Gopsill/Neale 2007). Chapel – the term of the workplace unit of organisation in the print, audio and visual sub-media sectors – power was developed, leading eventually to the attainment of industry-wide MEB as well as bargaining at the company and workplace levels. Employers acceded to MEB in order to present a united front toward the NUJ, and to prevent it from conducting pay ‘leapfrogging’ between different companies and sub-sectors. This helped cement the tangible sense of the profession and the national union across the industry in terms of the media industry’s sub-components and throughout the whole of the British Isles. However, from the mid-1980s onwards and following the ending of MEB as a result of the employers pulling out of these arrangements, the voluntary company-level agreements of representational and bargaining rights were ended by an act of ‘derecognition’ by the majority of employers, particularly in the printed media (provincial and national newspapers, magazines, books) as a result of a general offensive against organised labour in Britain. This left most journalists with no institutional means by which to co-determine or bargain over their terms and conditions of employment, leaving employers in a position to unilaterally decide on these matters, subject only to movements in labour markets. The key and defeated strike at News International’s Wapping plant was only the tip of the iceberg for the NUJ because it took prolonged strike action on a number of occasions to try to stop derecognition without success. The specific reason for the employer offensive against the NUJ was that the removal of ‘second keying’ technology following its replacement by ‘direct input’ technology put the journalists in the key strategic position whereby the employers feared that having just dislodged the print workers, they were about to see the journalists take up this mantle (Gall 1993).

It was in this context and under these pressures in the early 1990s and then again in the late 1990s that the organisational and financial viability of the NUJ as a singular, independent union was called into question. With falling membership, as a result of derecognition, widespread redundancy programmes amongst employers and with organising costly strikes, it ran up large financial debts, had few financial reserves and was compelled to shed staff. Internal disputes over how to deal with these problems led to the sacking of a general secretary and a deputy-general secretary. It was in this long, troubled period that the strong occupational identity of journalists was most visible, enduring and valuable. The first sign of the underlying strength of occupational identity was that the NUJ has resisted merger overtures from a number of unions in the 1980s in the printing, media and communication sectors (see Maksymiw et al. 1990). These different mergers were stimulated by falling membership, the removal of the existence of distinct trades as a result of the way that employers deployed new technologies, and a desire to retain a critical mass of union leverage. Despite various sets of negotiations during the 1980s and bilateral agreements to evoke a united response to employers, the NUJ membership rejected merger with the various print

unions on the grounds of dissatisfaction with the specific arrangements for proposed merger as well as an underlying feeling of wanting and needing to remain separate – of which some part of this feeling was due to historical antagonism and rivalry over job controls and job territories. The same process of inconclusive and unfruitful discussions and negotiations took place with the broadcasting unions, ACTT and BETA, as well as their merged successor, BECTU, which was created in 1991 (and compelled through falling membership). And again, this same pattern of behaviour was detectable in discussions with the communication workers' union, the UCW, and its merged successor, the CWU, which was created in 1995. In these processes of discussion and negotiations, the NUJ's national leadership, comprising the union's elected employed officers and lay national executive, has varied its stance depending on changes in personnel as well as changes in developments in industrial relations in the sector. But even when the national union leadership favoured the creation of a single media union, members have over-ruled this. The NUJ has also undertaken four sets of merger negotiations with the IoJ (Gopsill/Neale 2007) but none have been successful because of the historic tension between the two organisations over their respective purposes and practices. For example, the IoJ permitted employers to be members. Whilst BECTU and the CWU remain as independent, stand-alone unions, the GPMU was compelled to merge with the Amicus union in 2004 as it became clear that an industry union was not financially viable despite much resource put into union organising and recruitment. Moreover, Amicus was the creation of two unions coming together (AEEU and MSF) in 2002 and it then was compelled to seek merger as a result of falling membership with the TGWU to form the Unite union in 2007. But, it is worth noting that in 2008, the NUJ encountered its first financial deficit for over a decade, highlighting that despite overall growing membership, it remains not unaffected by redundancy of working members and that it provides a high level of costly services to its members.

The second sign of the persuasiveness and pervasiveness of journalists' occupational identity has been that despite the employers' derecognition offensive against it, the NUJ has survived and prospered as a very small union. As the proportion of members that were not covered by collective bargaining grew, the NUJ was forced to develop a strategy to deal with this in order to retain members and recruit new ones. The first part of the strategy was to focus on what individual services it could provide members with. Here, it developed skills in individual employment representation in terms of internal company grievances and disciplinaries as well as legal means like Employment Tribunals and court cases. In doing so, the NUJ was seeking to represent individual members by exploiting opportunities through any available means as well as to set precedents in order to provide *de facto* collective protection to all its members. This choice contrasted with that pursued by some other unions which emphasised the non-work, consumer benefits of union membership such as cheaper mortgages and forms of insurance (house, car and so on) as a result of the bulk consumer power. The second was the NUJ, along with the NGA and SOGAT, began a campaign to secure the right to statutory union recognition in order to reverse the derecognition it experienced. This campaign was ultimately successful when the *Employment Relations Act 1999* became operational in mid-2000 following the adoption of

the policy by the Labour Party which was elected to office in 1997. Underlying this survival as a small union is a key component, namely, that of the press card. The NUJ is the biggest dispenser of the *de facto* identity card for journalists that is universally recognised and facilitates entry to press conferences and public events. For this reason membership is retained by journalists even if they are out of work or they are forced to become freelancers.<sup>1</sup>

Third, the NUJ effectively positioned itself as the authentic and professional voice of journalists in regard of matters of press and media freedom where it attempted to maintain the purpose of the media as the upholder of truth, scrutineer of the rich and powerful, and representative of the interests of people without an effective voice. In other words, the union sought, using its members' expertise and networks, to enforce the notion of journalism as a key profession, imbued with integrity and wielding the 'sword of justice'. This meant campaigning against private companies and the state on issues of editorial interference as well as providing sufficient staff and resources to allow journalists to carry out their jobs properly. Two particular areas in terms of editorial policy were battlegrounds. In private media companies, the encroachment of advertisers' influence on editorial content was apparent while the government, in relation to state security, privatisation and general image management, exercised direct intervention as well as trying to 'buy-off' by bringing journalists 'on side' by preferential treatment and attitudinal restructuring.

This three-pronged strategy allowed the NUJ to convince members to not only maintain their membership, but also become active in changing the hostile environment they were subject to and preparing them to take advantage of the change in the law with regard to union recognition (which was signalled from 1995 when it became clear the Labour Party would win the forthcoming general election and legislate on its policy). In the run up to the change in law and subsequently, the NUJ was able to win back recognition in something of the order of 70% of cases, and from that basis start to address issues of low pay, under-staffing and overwork through a series of strikes and campaigns. Table 1 shows NUJ membership and indicates the ebbs and flows in numbers which broadly reflected the state of the NUJ's bargaining power with various employers. The figures are based on working members and therefore exclude student members – for 2007, these amounted to 7,000 members.

**Table 1: NUJ membership, 1975-2007**

Year	1975	1983	1987	1993	1997	2003	2007
Members	26,000	19,000	18,000	25,000	19,000	23,000	31,000

Source: TUC Annual Directories (various).

Underlying these developments has been the notion that only a specific union for journalists can fully, properly and expertly represent the individual and collective interests of journalists. The fear of NUJ members has been that a being in an industrial

<sup>1</sup> Here, it is worth recalling that the NUJ has never operated post-entry *de facto* closed shops nor a job agency for unemployed members unlike the NGA or GPMU.



or general union – indeed any union which comprised more than just journalists – would lead to a loss of internal identity, the interests of journalists would be crowded out by the interests of other and larger groups within a merged union, and those ultimately representing journalists in the form of senior employed or lay officers would not be journalists and, therefore, would be unacquainted with the necessary skill and expertise to do so. By the same token, offers of both intra-union autonomy and sectional interest representation in a merged were not held to be sufficient to calm these fears.

Two other points are salient here. The first point concerns the labour market for journalists. Despite redundancies, the demand for journalists – particularly with the expansion of electronic media – has grown. Within this, however, the supply of journalists exceeds the demand because of the growth in universities and colleges providing journalism degree courses and the take up of these. What has tended to shield the NUJ against the conventional impact on a labour union of slack labour markets has been the professional role played by the union and the exercise of its voice as the protector of underpaid, overworked and exploited trainee and new journalists. The second point concerns that within the profession of journalism, the introduction of new technologies and multi-skilling has not lessened, much less dislodged, the basis for the NUJ to organise upon, because journalism and media are necessarily based on the creation of original words and images. Moreover, journalists still carry out the work of the manipulation and dissemination of these words and images, and much of the work of journalism is spatially delimited so that it is not amenable to offshoring.

### **Finance workers**

In contrast to journalists, finance workers previously had a plethora of labour unionisms representing their interests – company unions called staff associations set up at the behest of employers in two waves in the 1920s (banks) and 1970s (building societies), an aspirant ‘industry’ union for bank workers, a union each for indoor (clerks) and outdoor (field sales) insurance workers, numerous independent but single company based unions and a general white-collar union. The reasons for this maze of different, and often contending, labour unionisms were that the notion of a profession was much less developed than in journalism, and finance sector employers were more active in opposing the rise of independent labour unionism. In banking, the existence of the notion a profession was based on the tasks involved being strategically important to the operation of the economy, the use of discretion in lending decisions, and the high levels of trust and confidence in dealing with large sums of other people’s money. The social status accorded to those in banking was, thus, high. Moreover, an apprentice system of sorts existed for promoted grades through the sitting of professional exams and these were administered a professional body, the Institute of Bankers. This social system endured until the mid-1980 but its vestiges carried on.

Nonetheless, it was a far weaker system of professionalism than that which existed in journalism. There was no sense in which organs of staff representation had any control over entry to the ‘profession’ or ability to regulate it. Indeed, because of the high degree of assumed symmetry of interests between workers and employers by all forms of labour unionism in the sector, little need was perceived for a body for the



profession which was independent from the employers (see below on 'internalism'). There was also less room for bank workers to operate freely and independently because of the employer regulation that came with dealing with money. By contrast to journalism, the notion of prudent, responsible and sound banking practices as a foundation for the profession was not so prominent, being more determined unilaterally by the banks collectively and as individual organisations. Contemporaneously, this notion has been subordinated to a more commercially-driven approach emphasising risk taking and high returns. Moreover, the remit of bank clerks became widened as well as fragmented as banks grew and diversified their fields of activity. The bank clerk of the 1950s was a different creature to that of his or her equivalent by the 1980s for specialisation and routinisation of tasks took place as employers restructured work and the organisation of work, often using new information and communication technologies. The affect of this was to erode the sense in which all bank staff could meaningful seem themselves as generic bank workers, responsible for a range of key and strategic tasks. Outside of banking, in insurance and building societies, any notions of professionalism were much weaker than in banking. But what was common to labour unionism in all three sub-sectors of finance was that both paternalism and the absence of workplace unionism were predominant. This allowed the employers to dominate the articulation of the extant notion of the profession, shaping it in a way to support their particular interests. Here employer paternalism helped them cement the notion of mutual interests between employees and employers and the absence of workplace unionism prevented any critical currents amongst the workforce from being able to mount effective opposition to the employers.

The other side of the coin to the relationship between capital and labour in the finance sector was that of 'internalism'. Constructed by the employers, and reified and operated through the creation of staff associations, the ideology was one which posited that not only did employers and employees have interests in common as per paternalism but that the particular form of this paternalism was that a particular group of an employer's workforce has interests in common with that particular employer and that this transcended any common interests with other groups such as other employees or other employers in the sector. Indeed, internalism stressed that while there could be cooperation between the employer and employees in different units of capital where there was an 'industry' interest, the relationship between employers and employees in one unit of capital and those in another was that of competition. The first independent labour unions were constructed on the basis that as distinct groups of workers, bank and insurance clerks had common interests from bank to bank and insurance company to insurance company. The Bank Officers' Guild (BOG) went a stage further by demanding from a very early stage that there be industry-wide MEB and by trying to kill off the non-independent staff associations (Blackburn 1967).

The construction of internalism as a form of work-based social identity by the employers cut across that of trade, occupation and profession found elsewhere. Indeed, one could go as far to say that it impeded the development of the consciousness of trade, occupation and profession and thus also attendant labour unionisms. Employers in this task were aided by the social conservatism of finance workers, who regarded themselves as an 'aristocracy of labour' and were not keen to, and saw no

need to, associate with other labour unions. Nonetheless, the employers were unsuccessful in extinguishing independent labour unionism in the finance sector (Allen/Williams 1960; Undy et al. 1981; Morris 1986) and although always in a minority position in both banking and insurance until the 1980s, both NUBE/BIFU and ASTMS fought hard to establish their own credentials and legitimacy. These independent unions were successful in doing so although not always on the terms they wished. NUBE finally attained industry-wide MEB in 1968 and ASTMS gained recognition from individual employers. This, in turn, helped cement these unions as meaningful players but without any positive impact on the development of the notion of professionalism in the sector. Indeed, the inorganic growth of ASTMS (later MSF) was based on an appeal to insurance workers as generic white-collar workers. Finally, the picture was not one of an abundance of strikes being driven by competition between different unions as was sometimes the case in engineering and the like. Rather, competition took place over bargaining agendas and union policies without much in the way of membership mobilisations.

Gradually over time, and often spurred on by mergers of units of capital, the myriad of different unions began to amalgamate into a smaller number of larger unions. The main pressure was that of providing effective representation in an increasingly hostile environment whereby employers became increasingly shareholder driven and union membership in absolute and relative terms fell especially from the early 1990s. Merger was often preceded by joint-working. This process culminated in 1999 with the creation of Unifi by the merger of the independent labour union, BIFU (the successor to the BOG and NUBE), the NatWest Staff Association (NWSA) and UNiFI, the staff union at Barclays. It was hoped that Unifi would become the pole of attraction for further staff unions in the sector so that it could gain a critical mass for financial viability and representational effectiveness. However, the very same pressures which compelled the creation of Unifi also necessitated its merging in 2004 with the general union, Amicus (Gall 2008). These were declining membership, an insecure financial base and poor bargaining leverage with employers. The proximity of greater numbers of finance workers together in one union through the coming together of Unifi and former-MSF members did not provide the boon that was hoped for either because Amicus merged in 2007 with the TGWU to form Unite.

The main issue for finance workers has now become identity as a means to organise collectively in order to defend and advance their material interests. In the process of amalgamation and merger since the 1970s, finance union members have increasingly associated with each other but this has been on a passive, defensive and instrumental basis. Meaningful unity, on the basis of enhanced consciousness, union-ateness and mobilisation, has not been forged in the heat of battle against employers. Consequently, many of the hallmarks in terms of difference of membership consciousness and outlook from constituent components have been carried over into the new merged unions. For example, the traditionalist elements in the Unifi from the NWSA and UNiFI voted against the creation of a political fund in 2000, which would have allowed political campaigning, and indicated the limitations to their unionateness. Also of importance was that the fundamental condition for the creation of Unifi was that each both the NWSA and UNiFI would have sectional autonomy in dealing with

their respective heartlands (see Morris et al. 2001). This reinforced the lack of coherence and singularity of the new union (and was also true of other amalgamations and transfers of engagements). Added to this was that Unifi did not exist sufficiently long enough for it to begin to form its identity with finance workers as the 'industry' union for finance and neither was their sufficient time for finance workers to form their bond with Unifi. Of course, both developments would have been dependent not just on length of time but also conducive events – based on successful mobilisation and collective resistance to prosecute their interests – whereby the union and members could prove their effective worth to each other and finance workers.

Thereafter, finance worker union members became members of Amicus and then Unite in swift succession. The problem for finance worker union members was that they were now a minority within much larger general unions and where these conglomerate unions had vastly different traditions and methods, essentially being more unionate in terms of membership participation and political campaigning. This situation was an acute one for finance worker union members even though they comprised the biggest single trade group in both Amicus and Unite. Consequently, the dominant feeling for the activists and employed officers, who play a major part in shaping union identity, was one of simultaneously being swamped in the new unions and having to find their way, searching for if and how common ground could be made with their fellow non-finance workers union members while also attending to the needs of finance worker union members (Gall 2008). The problem of creating a new, inclusive identity was exacerbated by the federalised structure of autonomous representation that existed in Unifi being carried into Amicus as part of the terms for amalgamation (Gall 2008). An internal union political battle will ensue over whether this should continue in Unite, with forces inside and outside of the finance workers section standing for ending the autonomy and making the constituent parts of the finance section of the union both accountable to the section executive and the overall executive of the entire union as well as obliged to act in accordance with union policy.

Although other reasons explain both the decline in union membership and relative labour quiescence in the finance sector, the new forms of labour unionism were weaker for the erosion of a stronger form of social identity between the workers-cum-members and the(ir) union. This was a complex situation for the high levels of identity were initially and traditionally based on internalism and paternalism, and not union-ateness and sectional consciousness. Over time, the latter began to dilute the hold of the former, whereby some lessening of identity took place but with this being offset by moves towards collective mobilisation (Gall 2008: chapter 4). However, both the sense of identity and ability to mobilise were fatally weakened by the emergence of aggressive employer strategies, which sought to increase competitive advantage and the level of labour exploitation through the deployment of partnership agreements. Whilst the partnership agreements stress common interests in terms of a 'mutual gains' agenda, this is not on the basis of paternalism or internalism as before. In fact, the sense of workers being compelled to sign up to a more demanding agenda from the employer or face redundancy or no further pay rises is palpable.

The salience of highlighting the decline or change in forms of social identity is that construction of a common internalised identity within a group of workers is a

prerequisite of interest representation through collective mobilisation of various industrial, political and social types. This mobilisation becomes that much more difficult where affinities and orientations amongst workers are varied and scattered for workers will not necessarily develop the required individually held attitudinal and behavioural traits that are needed to frame issues as common grievances upon which they can then subsequently act collectively (see Kelly 1998 on this and the other necessary aspects of mobilisation like attribution and opportunity to act).

### Overview

This section draws out the implications of the contrasting the cases of journalists and finance. Essentially, one has prospered by deploying a sectional (occupational) approach while the other has foundered as it sought an industrial or sectoral approach (before being compelled to join a general conglomerate union) in regard of identity and form of collective organisation. And, the fate of the finance workers has been similar to that of the print workers, and both may again face further difficulty given the merger of Unite with the United Steelworkers of America (USWA) to form the proto-transnational union, Workers Uniting. The cost/benefit analysis of the NUJ was that it had more to lose than gain by ceding its independence while the opposite was true of the various finance unions. The basis of the different conclusions heavily revolved around the existence of quite differing strengths and complexions of profession-alism with regard to interest formation and subsequent interest representation and attendant mobilisation. For the finance workers, other foundations and means of social binding and interest formation have not been readily available as alternatives to the weak nature of profession-alism in their sector. The example of the NUJ points to labour unionism in hostile environs being sustained by more just *trade* unionism. However, the ability to conduct interest formation is necessary for but not sufficient to explain effective interest representation for separate issues of mobilisation – essentially those of ‘moderation’ versus ‘moderation’ (Kelly 1996) – require analysis.

The type of model of labour unionism the NUJ<sup>2</sup> has followed contrasts with the small number of large general or industrial conglomerate unions. The NUJ model has been one of proportionately quite large number of employed officers (for a small union) being afforded by relatively high memberships subscriptions which are paid by a membership comprising several groups of relatively well paid workers. This does not imply that NUJ members are more inactive than those in other unions or that they are more serviced by employed officers than in other unions but that these employed officers are part of a union culture which also highly prizes union activism and seeks to support it. In this regard, the NUJ is similar to a large number of other very small, individual and highly specialised occupational-based unions in Britain for, *inter alia*, train drivers, maritime professionals, actors, prison officers, pilots, radiographers and probation officers. These unions had between 36,000 and 3,000 members each in

<sup>2</sup> In regard of its international dimension, the form of a specific, primary union for journalists (albeit it with several other specific subordinate unions for journalists in the same country) is the common pattern to be found through the western world. Germany is an exception where journalists are part of a much large service sector union (ver.di).

2007. The issue for the large conglomerate unions is to find a means of solidifying common interests and identity – with a view to mobilisation – at the cross-union or sectoral intra-union level given that occupational, trade or professional identities are no longer possible organising principles. Indeed, they have been forsaken for the simplistic belief that ‘bigger is better’ by virtues of strength in numbers and economies of scale. This is all the more apposite when at the workplace level, single unionism often now exists because of union mergers.

### **Conclusion**

Most studies of sectionalism and multi-unionism have been concerned with the economic impact of these phenomena upon efficiency and productivity, particularly from perspectives compatible with those of employers and government. (Indeed, the paucity of such concern in the last decade is testament to changed labour market situation so that neither is seen to be a ‘problem’ now.) By contrast, this article has been concerned with the issues of employee voice and mandate, rather than exit and loyalty, and how these two phenomena, under certain prevailing conditions, can often be best represented and articulated through the organisation of collective worker interest based upon sectionalism which, in turn, provides for, and necessitates, multi-unionism. It has been argued to constitute a rationale concerned with the use of occupational identity as an organising focus and mobilising tool because it comprises the most salient and immediate basis for the workers to relate to, as well as by which to pursue their employment interests. Although the historical and material foundations of sectionalism arise from the way in which employment, skills and divisions of labour are organised under capitalism, the social identity which reifies sectionalism is a social construction created by agency and not a mechanical and inevitable consequence of the way that employment is organised in divisions and sub-divisions. Thus, the divisions and sub-divisions are necessary but not sufficient for these sectional identities to emerge and develop. The case of the journalists was used to highlight how a strong sense of occupational identity existed by contrasting it with the case of finance workers.

Left-wing or radical critiques of sectionalism in labour unions (see Hobsbawm 1981; Kelly 1988) have tended to castigate sectional consciousness, organisation and actions as an obstacle to the creation of united interests and action of all wage-labourers in a general battle against capital and capitalism. Often, such critiques couched sectionalism in terms of ‘holding back the forward march of the struggle’. The evidence for this was stronger in periods of an upswing in working class industrial and political struggle immediately after the FWW and between 1968 and 1974. However, given the current and sustained period of retreat and disorganisation for labour unionism, the outlook upon sectionalism must be a contingent and contextualised. Therefore, sectionalism in the case of the journalists has helped sustain its form of labour unionism – and one that has been relatively combative – whilst the disintegration of existing and non-renewal of other forms of sectionalism in the finance sector has led to a weakening of labour unionism organisation and leverage. Looked at another way, as long as employers remain primary organisations (with therefore unions being secondary organisations), and without huge social turmoil which dramatically



changes workers' consciousness toward a class consciousness, then calls to general and industrial labour unionism will not have significant purchase for large groups of workers. In this sense, it is more apt to see sectionalism as a strength rather than a weakness, and the struggle of one group of sectional workers may have positive implications for other workers by virtue of a (positive) demonstration effect in the process of the project of trying to help to revitalise and regenerate extant labour unionism.

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